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## The Midnight's Grandchildren: Articulating the Postmodern Spirit in Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*

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The phrase Midnight's Grandchildren stands for the generation tending to take forward the remarkable accomplishments made by the Post-Independence era of India towards new dimension. In 1980, "Midnight's Children" was the name which Salman Rushdie gave to India's first Post-Independence generation; which was an echo of the words of country's first Prime Minister, on August 14<sup>th</sup> 1947, as the British Rule came to an end: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

Today, as Midnight's Children head into retirement, a new generation of Indians – the Midnight's Grandchildren are entering towards adulthood. Born in the reform era that started in the mid-1980s and then accelerated in 1991, they are, above all, liberalization's children.

Over the last two decades, a fresh stream coming from the Western world with the name 'postmodernism' has become a buzzword in numerous fields entering into the lives of this liberal generation of India. Earlier it was used as a cultural phenomenon; but now it has acquired a significant status in all realms. The emerging pop fictions are the best example relating to the postmodern condition in India. Pop fiction books, or 'mass market' books, are a mixed bag of college romances, cubicle battles and the odd mythology-inspired thriller. A good majority deal with urban relationships or life at the IITs and management schools, their plots clearly implying that they are aimed at the new English reader living in a metro with a corporate job (or aspiring to one), and looking for stories s/he can relate to. Instead, what it does offer for the most part is a bland affair called 'popular fiction'. Says Mita Kapur, founder of literary agency *Siyahi*, "We still have to learn how to churn out pulp. There are no Indian pulp fiction writers in English." While regional Indian literature boasts a wild and richly sordid tradition filled with gun-toting detectives, voluptuous spies and lovelorn ghosts, Indian English writing has very little to offer in comparison. There are very few contemporary authors doing serious pulp writing with the mixture of the contemporary trends and required tendencies for the Indian culture through their writings. Some of such authors are Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri, Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra, Shashi Tharoor, Tabish Khair, Jeet Thayil etc.

Amit Chaudhuri is one of India's most distinctive literary figures. While lesser writers obsess over the heat and dust, he charts the by-ways of the Indian soul. Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962 and grew up in Bombay. He read English at University College, London, before completing a doctorate on the verse of D.H. Lawrence at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1993. His dissertation was published belatedly as *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (2003), with a preface by poet and critic Tom Paulin.

Chaudhuri has written five novels, among them *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), which won the Betty Trask Award and Commonwealth Writers' Prize, *A New World* (2000), which received the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, *The Immortals* (March 2009) his first novel in nine years and, most recently, *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013).

He has also authored several collections of essays, poetry and short stories, and edited *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001). His criticism and fiction have appeared in *Granta*, the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New Republic* and the *New Yorker*. He is the first Indian on the judging panel for the Man Booker International Prize. Chaudhuri is currently Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, and divides his time between England and Calcutta. He is also an acclaimed Indian classical musician.

In *The Times Literary Supplement*, Ronan McDonald reviews *The Immortals* by Amit Chaudhuri (Picador):

There is an abiding notion that novels written from the postcolonial "margins" tend towards experimentation, magic realism, fabulism, the quirky and the avant-garde. In the case of Indian literature, the work of Salman Rushdie, with whom Amit Chaudhuri is most often contrasted, has come to embody this tendency. However Rushdie's dominance has been yielding to a new generation, heralded by Vikram Seth, and including Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Pankaj Mishra and Kiran Desai, as well as Chaudhuri. These writers, "midnight's grandchildren", have a less troubled relationship with realist forms and their fiction is less dedicated to the ebullient unmaking of history and nation. At the same time, their fiction often stages unexpected reversals of traffic between margin and centre, India and the West, vernacular and English languages. More explicitly than any of these others, Chaudhuri has rejected, or sought to reformulate, the "postcolonial" models through which modern Indian writing, in the shadow of Rushdie, is often understood.

The success of *Midnight's Children* had skewed a generation of Indian writing in English towards grandeur, whimsicality and pickle factories: Chaudhuri's slender, focused novels could not be more different. "Rushdie represents a kind of hallucinatory cliff behind which we cannot see," Chaudhuri observed in an essay lamenting the effect of Rushdie's big book on its smaller, quieter antecedents. For him, *Midnight's Children* embodied "all that was most unserious about India - its loudness, its apparent lack of introspection and irony, its peculiar version of English grammar." Chaudhuri's work is in a different Indian tradition (critics have most commonly compared him to RK Narayan.) As Ian Jack, the former editor of *Granta* magazine says: "You feel that he's not trying to describe 'India', but certain people in a certain place at a certain time. His books are about particularizing things and people. They're calm. Details of behaviour and scene are memorably well done. Domestic life is shown to be subtle and complicated."

The present chapter tends to focus on the position of postmodernism being taken by Amit Chaudhuri through his novel *The Immortals* (2009). Chaudhuri negates the tendencies of postmodernism, by re-establishing the traits of modernism which is left incomplete in India. Most of the sociologists have argued that the Indians have been mistaken about 'modernity'; in fact, we are far away from modernity. In the word of Jurgen Habermas, "modernity is an

incomplete project in India”. For Amit, modernism is important because it has temperamentality. According to him:

As I understand Postmodernism, I feel very removed from it in some ways. For me, the difference between myself and a postmodernist is, in spite of the disregard for the linear narratives, that there is a kind of textuality and self-reflexivity about postmodernism, which as I understand it lends a very political touch to the very apolitical world we live in. In postmodernism, the artist’s connection to the real is always under question, always reminded of the textuality very consciously by the writer himself. The writer himself is a construction or the text itself is a construct. For me the ability of writing is to renovate our perception of the physical world, or the world we live in – something I’ve inherited from writers gone by. For me temperamentally, that is a very important thing. Modernism has that. Modernism in spite of its superficial similarities with postmodernism – fractured texts, polyphony of voices – has a great fascination for the real, for the physical world outside... In postmodernism, the idea of fullness and the idea of self-reflexivity and the constructedness of language exist in mutually exclusive compartments, so that if you are a true postmodern, you deny the idea of fullness. You throw it out of the window. For me these ideas do not exist in mutually exclusive domains. And nor do I think in Indian culture – if I can use such a broad word – the idea of textuality of a text and emotional fullness which a text can evoke can exist in a seemingly, according to the postmodernists, incompatible space. A. K. Ramanujan talks about a scene from the *Ramayana* where Ram does something and Sita tells him, ‘Don’t you know you can’t do that? Haven’t you read the previous *Ramayanas*?’ We can appreciate this comic self-reflexive moment or partake of the emotional fullness of what the *Ramayana* means. In postmodernism you can’t do that fullness is to use a word from the existential philosophers, ‘bad faith’. For me, this incompatible space does not need to exist where fullness becomes reflective of the polyphonic meaning in this globalized world under capitalism. I don’t feel that way myself. Secondly, the idea that postmodernism gives up, the idea that language has the power to renovate perception which is what poetry is all about, is difficult for me to accept. Maybe that is why poetry today has become such a secondary or tertiary form. In giving that up, one is giving up not only a deeply religious but also a deeply political idea that language can – as Rilke says, you must change your life – change the way you look at something. Modernism, for me, is important. It has this great feeling for words and things. For me also, words and things are important. Poststructuralism does not exist for me in that space in which aesthetics and emotion don’t play a part.

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 – by Rushdie. 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. *The Immortals* tells the story of three Indian musicians: a mother, her son and their guru, who is a classical music teacher. Set in Bombay during the 1970s and 1980s, it traces two families separated by status and circumstance, yet inextricably connected through the bond of music. Barbara Love in an article of *Library Journal* claimed this novel as – “The meditative musical odyssey ... seeking a deeper understanding of Indian culture.” The focus is primarily on Mallika, incipient professional singer, married to Apurva Sengupta, chief executive of a large corporation, and their sensitive son Nirmalya. The other pole of the narrative concerns Shyamji, musician and tutor,

who instructs Mallika and then Nirmalya in the intricacies of Indian classical music. Others who wing their way in and out of the text include the Neogis, old friends of the Senguptas, a domestic retinue of cooks and cleaners, and others from Shyamji's extended family, who also dabble in music.

Chaudhuri interweaves art and relationships, meditating on the conflict between aesthetic and commercial values in an India transformed by globalisation.

The writing of Amit Chaudhuri is suffused with the sounds and textures of everyday life: the rituals of a neighbourhood, of a family preparing dinner, of a music lesson. His minutely observed novels are quiet, almost uneventful, but far from complacent. Chaudhuri's polemics embrace the ordinary with courage, allowing moments of life—sometimes comical, but often tragically commonplace—to blossom.

'Chaudhuri's sentences often seem to take on the style of the taan, reaching different notes within the raag of thought looping back, surging forth, touching upon an idea here, half a thought there. His sentences are like an ustad's expansive improvisations; embroidering sentences with soft suggestions, clear asides ... Chaudhuri dignifies the ordinary.'

- Antara Dev Sen, *Hindustan Times*

*The Immortals* set in Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s, mainly traces the history of two families, one soaked in corporate affluence and the other enduring on its musical legacy. Mallika Sengupta, married to a high-flying executive, has never strived for a career in music but her musical fascinations are more than the nonchalant hobby of a woman living in the lap of luxury.

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 she hadn't wanted to dirty her hands in the music world; she's is wanted to preserve the prestige of being, at once, an artist and the wife of a successful executive. (68)

Another character is Shyam Lal, the son of a famous singer, now a teacher supporting an extended set of relatives. He becomes the guru of Mallika Sengupta, "knew she could have been famous", but less interestingly "opted for the life of a managing director's wife".

Mallika's son Nirmalya is interested in teenage philosophizing and playing the harmonium. 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. He is also more than a little naïve and spoiled:

Nirmalaya has 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)

But then, not much of moment happens: Mrs Sengupta gets old, Mr Sengupta gets pushed out of the company, Shyamji's fortunes wax and then wanes quite precipitously, and the novel ends with Nirmalya moving to Britain to study philosophy. The novel becomes an ordered tabulation

of their unremarkable existence, the words on the page like the “agglomeration of notes” on a music sheet.

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, his writing is best embodied in – 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”. 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* feels too small a production (and everything in it, in fact, is unshowily miniature: “people who were half-hidden, small-scale” and so on) to warrant our extended attention.

We sense that the purpose of the novel is to testify to no more than the “untidy ebb and flow of life” in the author’s own tidy fashion. As a result, the prose has a proliferation of pallid qualifiers, reflecting the impossibility of eventual definitiveness: “a sort of”, “slightly”. And, on almost every page, “almost”: “he was almost – not quite, but almost – a nobody”; an “almost meaningless” smile. A description of “almost meaningless” is, in fact, itself meaningless.

This gets to the central difficulty of *The Immortals*: precision about the blurry banalities of life is self-defeating. Chaudhuri is forced to rely upon oxymorons, those concrete examples of descriptive confusion: “He was modestly shocked”; “mumbled fulminations”. It is as if the author does not trust words to mean more than they say.

Such writing can be no more than serviceable, steady but unmemorable. We might recall that the novel begins with an epigram from Heraclitus, who apparently said: “*The mortals become immortals; the immortals become mortals.*”

Not only is this like a sentence from the novel itself (balanced, but indicative of nothing much), it points to one lesson learned by its characters: that the pursuit of artistic improvement is no guarantee of fame or success. This is almost intriguing; but almost, as the novel proves, is not quite enough. *The Immortals* is, like the characters it describes, not destined for immortality.

At a basic level, *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 masterful, especially because it refuses to moralize. The novel also charts the growth of a commercial megalopolis – Bombay expands malignantly in the background, its tentacles reaching out to grab every scrap of empty land.

Ultimately, 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 deflate Nirmalya's more pompous thoughts, but never questions the importance of the young man's fundamental concerns.

The narrative is a mosaic of small events and beautifully observed details, but Chaudhuri is not just a miniaturist. Rather like Nirmalya, whose mother laughs at his penchant for converting "simple things" into "portentous adventures", Chaudhuri draws layer after layer of meaning from the simplest acts and events. The disappearance of a South Indian café evokes the end of the old world; a ride on a suburban train turns into an odyssey; biting on a Ginster's pasty expresses all the confusion and alienation of a foreign student in London.

The tone is often elegiac but never maudlin, and Nirmalya, for all his adolescent brooding, remains fascinating and likeable. Once he moves to London, though, Chaudhuri seems unsure about what to do with him and the novel ends rather too abruptly. That one quirk apart, *The Immortals* is a capacious, multi-faceted but intimate work; it is Indian to the core but universal in its implications. Chaudhuri's prose has a luminous, unforced elegance which is consistently engaging and wholly delightful, though readers unfamiliar with the trappings of Indian life may regret the absence of a glossary. If *The Immortals* reaches no dramatic conclusions, its spheres of enquiry — a young man's coming of age, his parents' acceptance of the perimeters and possibilities of the lives they have made for themselves — possess universal appeal which resonates beyond the confines of this accomplished and absorbing novel.

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