



## Postmodern irony and narrative in Amit Chaudhuri's *The immortals*

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### Abstract

The novel *The Immortals* primarily focuses on Mallika Sengupta an innate singer, who was born in North Bengal and settled in Bombay after her fortunate marriage with Apurva Sengupta and their teenage son Nirmalya who's interested in philosophy and music, he has all puritanical zeal and on the other pole it also narrates about their master and a classical musician Shyam Lal, whose father a lauded classical musician who never compromised his art for commercial values, on the other hand, Shyam Lal who spurned away his own interest for the sake of money.

*The Oxford Dictionary of English*, defines Narration as "The narrated part of a literary work, which is distinct from dialogues" (Web). The postmodern narration is unique, it cannot be avoided in the discussion of postmodernism, postmodernism is relied on the narrative techniques like paradox, fragmentation, parody and irony. The postmodern narrative said to have emerged after the World War II.

This paper attempts to focus the postmodern irony and postmodern narration and also attempted to analyse the narrative style of the writer. This paper has been analysed from the postmodern aspect.

**Keywords:** postmodernism, narration, irony, double self-consciousness, extended meaning, nostalgic return and parody

### Introduction

Amit Chaudhuri is the author of several award-winning novels, as well as an internationally acclaimed poet, novelist, essayist, musician and also a literary critic who is interested in Indian classical music. His works are *Strange and sublime address*, *Afternoon Rag*, *Freedom song*, *The Immortals*, *A New World*, *Odysseus Abroad* and he has also published a collection of short stories, poetry and his well known works are *D. H. Lawrence and 'difference': postcoloniality and the poetry of the present*.

He's the recipient of many awards including Sahitya Akademi Award in 2002 for *A New world*, Commonwealth Writers' Prize for his first book *Strange and Sublime Address* in 1991, his *The Immortals* had been short-listed for DSC Prize for South Asian literature, in 2012 he won Rabindra Puraskar Award for *On Tagore*, in 2012, he won Infosys Prize for Contemporary Literature and in 2015, *Odysseus Abroad* had been short-listed for The Hindu Literary Prize.

The New York Times reviewed this book as, "Chaudhuri is vivid about what is closest to him, and he's candid without being cynical. *The Immortals* confirms his reputation as a gifted miniaturist. Nothing much happens in this book, but its elegant sentences and dry, discerning portraits more than compensate" (Web). The setting of the novel is in Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s. This novel has been compared to Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.

Linda Hutcheon in her *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* says, "Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't, as well as in its targets and in what some people call it as 'Victims' (2). *The Routledge*

*Dictionary of Literary terms* defines Irony as, "Irony is a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from, and usually opposite to, the professed or ostensible ones" (123).

The irony fall into two main categories: situational and verbal. Situational irony can be social, moral and metaphysical irony, and it can further be classified as tragic or comic. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary terms* defines verbal irony as, "Verbal irony operates by exploiting deviations from syntactic or semantic norms; it depends upon the appreciation of linguistic, more general or moral context" (124).

Narrators in the postmodern modern fiction become either multiple or hard to locate. The Postmodern narrative, in short, is a contemporary narrative. A typical postmodern text refuses the omniscience and omnipresent of the third person instead engages the readers with the narrative voice. The nature of subjectivity is a constant challenge to the traditional notions of perspective, especially in the narrative, the perceiving subject is no longer assumed to coherent meaning-generating entity.

The author has employed third person narrative, the narrator in the novel is hard to locate. Chaudhuri employed dialogues of the characters in between the narration, this allows the readers to take a break from the long narration, the intention of the narrator is hardly uncovered in the novel. For example, "Tonight was a night of *upaas* and *jagran*, an absurdity enforced ritually by the women" (TI 03); this shows the misconceived view of the author/ narrator.

Nothing is narrated directly to the readers, which serves as the essence of postmodernism. In the words of Charles Russell, "An art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning" (277). For example, Death of Shyam Lal in *The Immortals* is not directly narrated to the readers. "... she cried in terror - 'Papa!' - as she used to

when... 'Hai Ram, hai Ram,' Sumathi said, 'Kuch samaj me nahi aa raha hai' She was lost" (370). From this context, the readers cannot understand the real condition of Shyam Lal, and it's not clear that whether Shyamji is seriously ill or he's no more. It's later informed to the readers in the next chapter as, "Shyamji's death had disoriented them – the intensely shy younger brother..." (378).

Like every other postmodern novel, this novel of Chaudhuri also tries to break away from the traditional conventions of what's already said and what's readily available. Ironically, *The Immortals* begins with the death of Shyam Lal's father Ram Lal, who's also a renowned classical musician, and who's been a teacher for many popular singers. Unlike Shyam Lal, Ram Lal never sacrificed his classical music for the sake of financial advancement and ends with the death. The title of the novel itself is an irony. *The Immortals* is compressed of mortality of Ram Lal, Mallika Sengupta's talent, People's interest in Indian classical music, Shyam Lal, 'Puritanical zeal' Nirmalya.

*The Immortals* starts like, "The Panditji wasn't there: he'd died two years ago, after his third cardiac seizure. They had rushed him to Jaslok Hospital... He had died in Jaslok..." (01). There are not many details about Ram Lal (Shyam Lal's father), the author has mentioned only about the death of his father and this is the beginning of the ironical narration in Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*, this irony continues with all the character as the novel progresses.

The novel progresses with Mallika Sengupta who's an affluent student of Shyam Lal, a classical musician. She inherited the talent of singing right from her birth, being a wife of a swamped CEO. She has no time to work hard to become a professional singer. Her talent is dead and buried deep inside herself. In the introduction of Mallika Sengupta, she's introduced as a student of Motilal (Shyam Lal's brother in law) who sings so well, and it's described by Chaudhuri as, "Her voice was full-throated, surprisingly melodious. 'Wah, didi!' said Shyam Lal after she'd finished..." (11). *The Immortals* narrates the death of her talent as:

In the morning, when she sang, she had trouble with her voice; it wavered, weak with underwork, wreaking vengeance for the neglect. She grew impatient and thought, 'I can't sing anymore. My voice has finally gone,' although she knew this wasn't true; that this was a justification, repeated to herself many times in the past, to escape a lifetime's obsession and commitment and seemingly useless labor. (TI 117)

The contradiction between the past and the present is not nostalgia, but it's ironic. Linda Hutcheon in her *Beginning to theorize Postmodernism*, says it's not a "nostalgic return" but "...it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past..." (244). The novel also has the narration of past expectations and contemporary reality. Shyam Lal's father Ram Lal as mentioned earlier, a reputed singer who has taught classical music for many popular cine singers, but on contrary, Shyam Lal who teaches ghazals to fulfill his extended family's financial needs.

Shyam Lal's music lessons are 'critical revisiting' of 'the past', because when Ram Lal is a prominent singer, people

believed in the greatness of classical musicians. Later, when Shyam Lal inherits his father's profession, the things have much changed. *The Immortals* has the ironic narration of the mortality of people's interest in Indian classical music. Amit Chaudhuri, being a musician himself narrates this disinterestedness as:

Shyamji, why don't you sing classical more often? Why don't you sing fewer ghazals and sing more at classical concerts? Shyamji was unimpeachably polite... 'Baba' (his tone was patient) he said 'let me establish myself so that I don't think of money anymore. Then I can devote myself completely to art. You can't sing classical on an empty stomach. (191 – 192)

It's not about the change in people's interest to ghazals but about the death of people's interest in classical music. Shyamji's lament is not for filling his stomach but about people whose interest is dead. Since the tastes and preferences of the people have changed, Shyam Lal forced himself to teach ghazals which makes Nirmalya to judge Shyam Lal being money minded. As Hutcheon in her *Beginning to theorize postmodernism* says: "It is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic 'return.' Herein lies the governing role of irony in postmodernism" (244). Ram Lal's contemporary is not 'nostalgic' but it's employed to 'rework' on the same idea in present modern society where interest has been changed which contradicts the past expectations.

There's no significant reference for the death of Shyam Lal, his death was quiet natural. He's been admitted in the same hospital where his father had been admitted, he never wanted to get admitted in the same hospital but ironically he's been admitted in the same hospital.

The protagonist of the novel Nirmalya, though he's born into affluence, he's different enough to have a stubborn "...adolescent Puritanism to boycott his parents' parties or to appear in them with premeditated nonchalance, in a disheveled state" (50). He always prefers to be in torn kurta, unshaved beard and uncombed hair. At the school level itself, Nirmalya was lost in his own world of mysticism. Towards the end of the novel, the reader could see a new Nirmalya whose puritanical zeal is dead. Chaudhuri splendidly narrates this as:

... before removing his spectacles he checked his reflection sadly in the mirror. 'Just a trim,...' he flashed his scissors and ran the comb through Nirmalya's hair as if stroking a musical instrument... Two weeks later, as if in penitence, and in a moment's hurtling recklessness, he shaved his moustache and his goatee; the face he saw... was completely 'normal', surprising pleasant-looking, almost certainly respectable. (365 – 366)

The past is being rethought and the author ironically differentiated the characters comparing it with the past. *The Immortals* have nothing to do with immortality but to do with the mortality, even the Indian classical music attained it's mortality in Chaudhuri's novel.

It's slightly similar to the example which Hutcheon has given in her *Theorizing the Postmodern* for irony as, "In Carlos

Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, the title has already points to the ironic inversion of biographical conventions: it is the death, not the life, that will be the focus" (276). In the same way, *The Immortals* is about the temporality, not about the state of being permanent. The title itself is ironically inverted.

### Conclusion

The ironies in the novel can only be understood with the presence of past. Just because it juxtaposes the past, it wouldn't be apt to call it as a Parody, as *The Immortals* neither imitates the past narration nor mocks at the past events. Instead, the novel has invert narration of the past events which are narrated in the beginning of the novel. To quote the words of Linda Hutcheon: "It is precisely this that is contested in postmodern parody where it is often ironic discontinuity that is revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity..." (277).

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