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## **Aporia: Philosophical Puzzlement and Ambiguity in Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals***

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### **Abstract:**

Amit Chaudhuri, is a very popular Indian writer his books have won several prestigious awards. His recent novel *The Immortals* talks Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* revolves around two families obsessed with music: Senguptean family, which is ready to pay for the music and Shyam Lal's family, which is ready to sell music for money. Mallika Sengupta, a talented singer, has never worked hard to become a professional singer. She is the one who hides herself under the cover of Mr. 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.

This paper attempts to focus on the philosophical puzzlement of Nirmalya and the ambiguity experienced by the characters in the novel *The Immortals*. The novel is analyzed from the Postmodern perspective.

**Keywords: Postmodernism, Aporia, Ambiguity, Paradoxes, Absurdity and Transcendental Identity.**

Amit Chaudhuri is the author of several award-winning novels, as well as being an internationally acclaimed poet, novelist, essayist, musician and also a literary critic who is interested in Indian classical music. He is one of the most distinctive literary figures in Indian English Literature. He wrote several novels including *Strange and sublime address*, *Afternoon Rag*, *Freedom song*, *The Immortals*, *A New World*, *Odysseus Abroad* and he also published a short stories collection, poetry and he's well known for his D. H. Lawrence and 'difference': postcoloniality and the poetry of the present. He's the recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 2002 for *A New world*. He also won several awards which include Commonwealth Writers' Prize for his first book *Strange and Sublime Address* in 1991 and Betty Trask Award, in 1994 he won Encore Award for *Afternoon Rag*, in 1999 he won Los Angeles Times Book Prize for *A New World*, in 2011, 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 Immortals* relates the stories of two entirely different families – different in terms of financial and social status, but tied by a common thread of music. The Sengupta family is the socially privileged one, and Mr. Sengupta being an important business executive of the corporate company whereas the family of Shyam Lal is alien to the concept of social affluence that characterized the Senguptas. On the other hand, Shyam Lal whose only left thing is his father Ram Lal's musical lineage, which he takes pride in.

The Boston Globe titled *The Immortals* as: "Evocative anthem to a changing India" (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*. The novel has autobiographical elements which Chaudhuri himself said in an interview as "Nirmalya is something like me when I was 16..." (Web). 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).

Nirmalya is the protagonist of the story. He's the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta, who has grown up to be a different, serious and somber child with a peculiar fascination for philosophy, much unlike of his age. At the age of sixteen, he carries the copy of William Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* and *Being and Nothingness*. In spite of being born into affluence, he is different enough to have an obstinate simplicity. The puritanical Nirmalya is the novel is slightly exaggerated, he criticizes his mother for not taking her singing more seriously, and pursuing his own love of North Indian classical music. He wanders the streets of Bombay in bohemian clothing and a goatee, angst-ridden, completely lost himself in Western philosophy.

The term Aporia derived from the Greek word *aporia* which means philosophical puzzlement. In literature, Aporia is a logical paradox, and it's an expression of insincere doubt which enables the readers to understand the dilemma in the characters, which the author clarifies or leave it open in a suggestive or hinting manner. Herbert Weir Smyth in his *Greek Grammar* defines Aporia as, "An artifice by which a speaker feigns doubts as to where he shall begin or end or what he shall do or say" (Web).

In *The Immortals*, Nirmalya is who's always puzzled about the meaning of life and the death, which fascinates his mind. The older he gets, the greater the friction between him and his life to which he'd been raised. He is with the "...adolescent Puritanism, he'd almost made it a point to boycott his parents' parties, or to appear in them with a premeditated nonchalance, in a disheveled state." (50) Even during festivals, unlike other boys, Nirmalya is the one, who enjoys the least. He dislikes Holi and Diwali as well.

The experience of the characters in the novel is ambiguous. There's no depth in the characters. The protagonist has moods of 'withdrawal and renunciation.' The 'representation' of Nirmalya is to find the reason for his existence, which Chaudhuri splendidly narrates as:



Nirmalya labored on the meaning of life; he wondered sometimes about the point of existence, the purpose of the universe's inscrutable journey; the universe seemed to him like a variety show on whose no single facet he could focus. He'd discovered a hollowness in the pit of his stomach; it made him feel exceptionally ancient, as if he'd been travelling for centuries. (111)

He (Nirmalya) ceaselessly searches for the meaning of his life and the reason for his existence in the universe. At one point of time, his quest reaches its height, where he says "I want to go to the Himalayas" (198). He tries the best to find the meaning of his in every possible way. Though his father is a big-shot in the business world, he never enjoyed being the only child of a business tycoon. He would always prefer to wear torn Kurta, like to be with unshaven beard, disheveled hair. The readers could find him having lost in some thoughts and he always possesses the copies of some philosophical books, which he carries with him everywhere. Chaudhuri describes it as:

He had bought a copy of Will Durant's 'The Story of Philosophy' he carried it with him on buses, occasionally reading or rereading a passage. He also possessed a copy of 'Being and Nothingness' he'd never read beyond three pages in the introduction – they had taken him a week to read, the dense paragraphs were at once numbing and vertiginous – but the words in the title – 'being' and 'nothingness' – echoed in his head; they seeped into his thoughts. (99)

The life of Mrs. Mallika Sengupta is as absurd as the life of Nirmalya. It's notable that her lifestyle is in no way different from the lives of other wives of businessmen. Chaudhuri's representation of Mallika Sengupta in *The Immortals* is what is called as 'realism' which is 'too horrific or too absurd.' Chaudhuri speaks to the readers from the mind of Mallika Sengupta and also says that how ambiguous she feels in the parties, which she exclusively attended for her husband Mr. Apurva Sengupta who "shaped her life, even as an artist" (117). The author narrates as:

Her own singing practice affected by the parties. She was being sucked into the vortex and extravaganza of the company Managing Dictatorship; swallowed almost willingly, by its current. She couldn't remember what she said at the parties; others' remarks lodged themselves in her brain, what she said herself she often she didn't know... (115)

She herself says to Nirmalya that, "I hate going to them. Your father says it is an important part of his job" (116). She had wanted recognition, that pure desire for a reward for her gift which was with her right from her birth. The only reason for being away from music is to preserve the dignity of Apurva Sengupta, as a dignified wife of a successful business executive.

She doesn't have an identity of her own; she's identified as a tycoon's wife. Even when she sings for the so-called "expatriate Bengalis" in the welcoming party, instead of

appreciating her, they commented that "...the only reason she was singing on that day was because she was Apurva Sengupta's wife" (69). She's not contented with her lavish life. Though she lives amidst plenty, "We're not rich, said Mrs. Sengupta reminded her husband. In fact, we're poor" (226). There's some kind of nothingness in the life of Senguptas.

At the end, the author didn't give a clear picture of Mrs. Sengupta. Till the end, she didn't find the identity of her own. Lack of identity is the essence of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon calls it as 'Transcendental Identity', she writes in *Theorizing the Postmodern* as:

In writing about these postmodern contradictions, then I clearly wouldn't want to fall into the trap of suggesting any 'transcendental identity' or essence for postmodernism. Instead, I see it as an ongoing process or activity, and I think that what we need more than a fixed and fixing definition, is a 'poetics,' an open ever-changing theoretical structure... (280)

Chaudhuri is not biased in portraying the instability of the characters. Excluding Apurva Sengupta, the author is just in the treatment of each and every character in the novel. Shyam Lal is the music teacher of Mrs. Sengupta and her son, who adopts the modernity and starts to do away with classical music. Even Nirmalya judges Shyam Lal for selling out his art for the sake of money. Shyam Lal never achieved what he actually wanted to achieve even after becoming the music teacher of the celebrities. Everyone in his family financially depends on him as he's the only breadwinner of his extended family. At some point of time, he feels that he's teaching Ghazals without any interest. He teaches it as it's popular among the business-class women. When Nirmalya asked him why he's not singing more classical music, for which he said, "...let me establish myself so that I don't have to think of money anymore. Then I can completely devote to the art. You can't sing classical in the empty stomach" (192). Shyam Lal is not self-satisfied with what he's doing for his material needs.

This novel doesn't fixed on a center, instead, it focuses on various elements like music, family, relationships, emigrants, language, etc. Even the minor characters like Neogis have their own importance and contribution to the novel. In the words of Hutcheon, "The center no longer completely holds. And from the decentered perspective, the 'marginal' and what I will be calling the 'ex-centric' take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition..." (277).

Every character in the novel experiences ambiguity. Even the minor character like Nayana Neogi feels absurd and at one point of time, she says that there's no use in having born with some talents. Prashanta Neogi mutters as, "What is the point of having this ambition?" (44). In the end, the author didn't give a clear idea about Mrs. Sengupta, which is the essence of postmodernism. Nirmalya who goes abroad to study philosophy and ends with Nirmalya being melancholic for the death of beloved teacher Shyam Lal and his master's sudden demise haunts his mind. For which one can give countless meaning which Hutcheon says as "the impossibility of final meaning" (281).



Always one question hovers around Nirmalya's head and that question is "Why do I exist?" (261); it may be the beginning of the intellectual query. The novel is a perfect piece of postmodernism. The author philosophizes the meaning of life, he tries to prove that life is nothing but absurd. Linda Hutcheon quotes Lyotard's words, where he says the author plays the role of a philosopher. In his own words:

A postmodern artist or writer is in position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. (281)

Chaudhuri philosophizes the meaning of life, he tries to prove that there's no meaning for life. Though the Senguptas are affluent, they are lacking something in mechanical and absurd life. It's a fact that money cannot bring happiness in anyone's life. Chaudhuri tries to prove this to the readers and also proves that the mechanical life is ambiguous.

All the characters in the novel live a discontent life. Mallika Sengupta once says to her husband, "We're not rich, said Mrs. Sengupta reminded her husband. In fact, we're poor" (226). Albert Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus* says, "It drives out of this world a god who had come into dissatisfaction and a preference for futile sufferings" (122).

In real life, everyone is Nirmalya as one search for the meaning of life and purpose of one's existence in the universe and Apurva Sengupta as one wants to earn more. In *The Immortals*, the characters feel that the meaning of the life is lost. Pyarelal (Shyam Lal's Brother in law) feels about life as, "...life seemed to have become more real, less surprising, and somehow, less life-like" (188).

The portrayal of Nirmalya and Apurva Sengupta are the forms given to the nature of the human beings, they are like two sides of the same coin. Like Nirmalya, one may dwell on the purpose of their lives on Earth and arrive at the conclusion that life is absurd and there's no meaning in life. At the same time, having given the prior knowledge about life, one never restricts oneself from acquiring wealth. The characters by themselves give a meaning, by comparing and contrasting with others, it takes a philosophical turn. *The Immortals*, in the words of Philip Sidney, it 'teaches' as well as 'delights' the readers. The novel teaches the real meaning of the life to the readers, it also delights the readers with the eminent usage of Music, Khatak in this novel. Chaudhuri beautifully personified the *bhavas* in the khatak.

*The Immortals* is more than a fiction, less than a philosophy. The novel teaches that nothing is permanent in life; it would be apt to quote from *The Bhagavad Gita*:

...You need not have any regrets for the past. You need not worry for the future. The present is happening...What did you lose that you cry about? What did you bring with you, which you think you have lost?

What did you produce, which you think got destroyed? You did not bring anything... (Web)

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