

The number of rasas, or sentiments, on which the Indian arts are traditionally based: shringara (romantic and erotic), hasya (humorous), karuna (pathetic), raudra (angry), veera (heroic), bhayanaka (fearful): vibhatsa (disgusting), adbhuta (amazed), shanta (peaceful)

A strange and sublime sound

Amitava Kumar reads Amit Chaudhuri's new novel, in which scenes from the diminished world of classical Indian music serve as the backdrop for an examination of the relationships between talent, business, ambition and failure

Amit Chaudhuri's short story *White Lies*, published in *Granta* in 2001, tells the story of a music teacher who goes from flat to flat in Bombay, offering instruction to wealthy housewives. Although the teacher has an undeniable gift, he lacks discipline and has little ambition. When offered junk food in the homes he visits, he is unable to say no. As a result, he suffers from dyspepsia, and is increasingly prone to napping (at story's end, he is dozing on a wicker sofa in a student's home, a high-rise overlooking the Arabian Sea). His illness, however, has a cause beyond a weakness for *gulab jamun* and *jalebis*. "He suffered from tension as well, a tension from constantly having to lie to the ladies he taught – white lies, flattery – and from his not having a choice in the matter."

Chaudhuri's new novel, *The Immortals*, elaborates on this story. The memorable sentence I have just quoted does not reappear, but the tension it references is still there – the tension between, to put it crudely, the practice of art and the practice of commerce. But there are other, more complicated, tensions as well. Over the course of the novel (which, incidentally, is twice as long as any of Chaudhuri's previous books), we are introduced to several other characters who participate in the making of classical Indian music in Bombay. Their stories trace the relationship between not only talent and business, but also ambition and failure (or its gentler sibling, resignation).

In *White Lies*, the Senguptas, a Bengali executive and his wife who takes lessons from the music teacher, are childless. In *The Immortals*, they have a young son, Nirmalya, a serious-minded teenager who dresses in a torn kurta and jeans and carries a copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* with him on the bus. Nirmalya is drawn to Hindustani music, which he has seen his mother learning, somewhat lackadaisically, for years. But he is also drawn to the teacher, Shyamji, whom he endows with a mysterious, attractive aura.

Part of the appeal is purely aesthetic: Nirmalya finds Shyamji's musical phrasings "delicate and transient" and thinks his singing is "like a spray of rainwater". But Nirmalya is also intrigued by the way the teacher challenges his idealistic, even naïve notion of art a wholly pure, refined search for meaning. In his mind, a guru and his skills belong more to the street than the parlour. It puzzles him that Shyamji is "a man who obviously mastered his craft, and who knew he was one. But not ill-at ease among the furniture, the mirrors, the accessories to luxury; quite in his element, almost unconscious of his surroundings." Similarly: "Here was a man in a loose white kurta and pyjamas; a man who put oil in his hair. And, although his music sometimes sounded inspired to Nirmalya, a man who seemed to have no idea of, or time for, inspiration. A man who undertook his teaching, his singing, almost as – a job."

Shyamji must similarly challenge those whose sense of Indian art or culture has been shaped by what they have encountered in the country's most celebrated fiction. He is not a talkative chronicler of his nation's birth; he has not risen from the ranks of the illiterate to seek violent revenge; he is not a fertile carrier of the germ of globalization; he doesn't struggle with his identity in a confrontation with the West. And while we are certainly familiar with the figure of the writer-manqué from the works of several young Indian novelists, we have not before met an artist with little or no anxiety about his art – with, instead, solidly mid-



A Rajasthani musician performs while Britain's Prince Charles tours Nagaur Fort in the Indian state of Rajasthan. Emmanuel Dunand / AFP Photo

dle-class habits and aspirations.

In Shyamji we find an unprecedented mix: the artist as part-genius part-*grihaswami* (domestic householder). He has no real ancestors in India's Anglophone fiction except for a similar teacher in an earlier Chaudhuri novel, *Afternoon Raag*. But members of Shyamji's family of middle-class artists abound in Hindi literature and, I'm ready to speculate, in stories written in Bengali, Malayalam, Gujarati and other vernacular tongues. I suspect this is so because these literatures, unlike India's Anglophone fiction, are the domain of writers who aren't necessarily drawn from the elite. To make this point clearer you need only consider Shyamji next to the vaunted creative strivings more commonly on view on the country's literary stage. How different is Shyamji's practice as a singer from the earth-shaking shenanigans of the rock star Vina Apsara in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*? Where Apsara is "intensely famous, fabulously photogenic, overwhelmingly sexy and great good fun", Shyamji hopes to get well enough to travel to Dongri to sing ghazals at a wedding for money.

The Immortals is narrated in what the critic James Wood calls the "free indirect style": the narration is in the third-person, but we still see events unfold from the viewpoint of key characters – most notably Nirmalya, but also his mother and Shyamji. A crucial advantage of this style is what Wood calls "authorial flagging": even in hearing what a character has to say about the world, we hear the author's own descriptive voice. In the middle of the novel, Nirmalya attends a recital by a singer named Pandit Rasraj. The performance begins with an invocation of Lord Shiva in a raga, the first notes sung in almost in a whisper, introducing drama and suspense. We watch and listen along with Nirmalya: "Behind his rapturous awareness of the raga was a shrewd assessment of the microphone; for Rasraj, the microphone was the main deity; without anyone becoming conscious of it, it took on preternatural properties. This happened despite, or because

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of, Rasraj's closed eyes; it was as if the microphone, his real interlocutor, was invisible."

Who is speaking here? Not Nirmalya, whose critical eye is still youthful and immature. It is true that in him, unlike his other amateur students, Shyamji encounters both resistance and engagement. As the teacher admits at one point: "He is my biggest critic. He keeps a stern eye on me." But Nirmalya's "criticism" is usually just a romantic idealism about the arts. Piqued that bhajans and ghazals are sung in a "cheap way these days", he high-mindedly asks his teacher: "Why don't you sing classical more often?" (Shyamji's patient response: "Baba, you cannot practice art on an empty stomach...")

No, in these canny descriptive passages, the voice we are hearing is the voice of Chaudhuri, who is not only a novelist but also an accomplished musician and critic. Like Nirmalya, Chaudhuri grew up watching his mother singing; later, he trained under a guru; in recent years, he has cut records and presented concerts worldwide. And in the explosion of Indian writing in English in the last few decades, he is one of the few writers whose work as a critic (he frequently contributes review-essays to the *London Review of Books* and elsewhere) rivals his fiction. I mention this here not to record an achievement, but to underline the pleasures of reading *The Immortals*.

When, for instance, we read a sentence about Shyamji's relationship with his students and how it differs from the one that existed in the time of his father, it is easy to recognise the intermingled notes of fiction and critical insight: "This was the difference between the age in which he lived and the one Ram Lal had inhabited and taught in; not the age of patronage, this one, in which the landlord and the cognoscenti had, at once, cherished and dominated and learnt from and humiliated the musician. This was the age of democracy; the ordinary person, everyman, was supreme."

The Immortals doesn't carry a heavy burden of plot. We are introduced to Shyamji and his extended family of

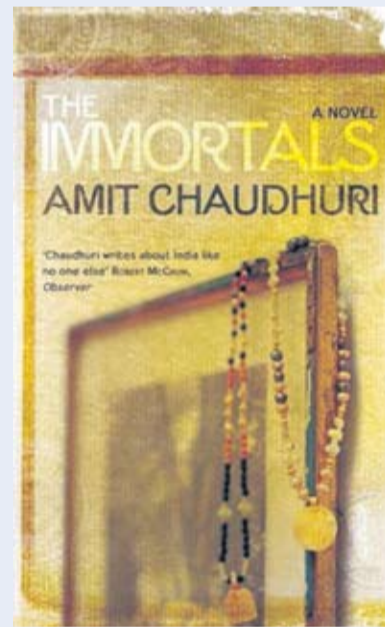
flections introduced through a deft use of punctuation. His phrases, hedged by outgrowths of commas, enclose shades of ambivalence. The commas vary in what they convey or introduce: a hesitation, a stutter, a thoughtful inquiry, a touch of colour, a contradiction. These sentences sometimes invite incomprehension, or even dismissal. A friend of mine, a novelist and editor, once repeated to me something another friend had said to him: "Amit Chaudhuri is the writer who could spend a thousand pages describing saris drying on a line." It is common to read reviews of Chaudhuri's books in which praise is mixed with the complaining that the writing lacks a plot or that nothing much happens.

It is true that readers of *The Immortals* will find no real conclusion. We are left only with possibilities. At the last meeting between Shyamji and Nirmalya, the teacher sings into a Panasonic tape recorder that the boy will carry with him to London. We are told that Shyamji had probably misunderstood Nirmalya, just as the youth had, in turn, misunderstood his teacher. Nirmalya is wearing a kurta torn near the pocket. Shyamji has often found this affectation of poverty odd, but over the past few months he has grown more indulgent toward the boy. Maybe, Shyamji thinks, he has mistaken his disavowal of his parents' affluence as a genuine act of renunciation. Or perhaps such things are a rite of passage among the children of the rich. There are still other possibilities, and the chapter ends with the following suggestion (which could also describe Chaudhuri's sentences): "Or maybe he'd taken all those ambiguities into account and still decided that, in his eyes, Nirmalya was an unusual and uncharacteristic sort of young man."

Towards the end of the book, Nirmalya opens his college mailbox in London: "Along with an invitation to join a discussion on the second coming of Christ by members of the New Church, a scribbled note on the back of a scrap of circular from Mr Dickinson, asking whether the time of the next tutorial could possibly be changed, a terse pamphlet, full of exclamation marks and a smudged picture of Winnie Mandela, exhorting the reader to become one of the many who no longer ate South African oranges, there was, in Nirmalya's pigeonhole, an aerogramme, a silent traveller from India, its blue peering out from amidst the white and yellow."

Despite the Mandela reference, this is no vulgar anthropology, where the writer takes up something in the news and paints it in lurid stripes; we are afforded no false intimacy with evil or, for that matter, with anything as grand as history. The letter that has arrived from India is from Nirmalya's father, and it carries news of Shyamji's death. The news leaves him tearful and hard with judgement at his teacher. Surrounded by students in the common room, Nirmalya reasons to himself that his teacher must have been in a hurry to leave this world. Perhaps. Note the strange and sublime list of things in which the letter was buried. The world arrives, uninvited, in one's mailbox, and with it comes the muted intimation of a private life. It can all be rather quiet sometimes, but only in the way of approaching earthquakes.

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The Immortals
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musicians, which Nirmalya tentatively enters. We learn about his discovery of music and his engagement with the mystery that is Shyamji, whom he reveres as much as he misunderstands. We follow him to university in London. At book's end, we find him studying metaphysics and reflecting that "the embrace of poverty" is much less attractive in London than it had been at home.

But such plot sketches are reductive, even irrelevant, in discussions of Chaudhuri's fiction. There are two Indian writers who are quite unlike each other, but whose sentences are immediately identifiable. If just a few words of their prose are read out to you, you will confidently call out their names – one is Rushdie, the other is Chaudhuri. Rushdie has been an undeniably liberating influence, allowing younger writers to postpone the period: the writing pours out without pause, making things, depending on the writer and your viewpoint, either dynamic or diarrhetic. Chaudhuri proceeds differently: his sentences are musical, perfectly modulated, marked by in-