

---

## Amit Chaudhuri's "The Immortals" as a Postmodernist Manifesto

<sup>1</sup>V. Tonia Pais, <sup>2</sup>Dr. M. Sagaya Sophia

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D., Research Scholar (PT), PG & Research Department of English,

Kalaighar Karunanidhi College for Women, Pudukkottai, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu toniapis@gmail.com

M.A, M.Phil., Ph.D.,

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor PG & Research PG & Research Department of English,

Kalaighar Karunanidhi College for Women, Pudukkottai, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu msagayasophia@gmail.com

---

**Abstract :** "Irony is duty" states Friedrich Schlegel in his 481<sup>st</sup> fragments of his 'Fragments Concerning Literature'. In this analysis irony is not simply a rhetorical figure rather it is an implication of the mind reflecting upon itself and conditions human consciousness, it is an evocation of modern mankind's emerging historical awakening within the growth of human race. Postmodernism depends on narrative techniques like paradox, fragmentation, parody and irony. The postmodern narrative is said to have boomed after World War II. Amit Chaudhuri is one of the new wave of Indian authors with deep roots in post emergency contemporary India, who came to prominence during 1990 by his first novel *Strange and Sublime Address*. He has written seven novels and *The Immortals* is his fifth novel published in 2009. *The Immortals* portrays the delicate sophistication of Chaudhuri's art and his thirst for music. The narrative voice itself is enrolled to create an ironical atmosphere pervading the whole work. This paper intends to propound on postmodern irony and also attempts to bring out the narrative style of the writer.

**Keywords:** irony, parody, fragmentation, narrative, nostalgia, quotidian sensibility

---

### Introduction:

Amit Chaudhuri is an internationally acclaimed novelist, essayist, editor, poet, singer and also a literary critic who is deep rooted in Indian classical music. He got his first degree from university college London on English Literature and his Doctoral Dissertation on D.H. Lawrence 's at Balliol College Oxford. He has contributed poetry, fiction and reviews to notable publications like *The Guardian*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* the *New Yorker* and *The Granta Magazine*. He has authored seven Novels. He pursued his passion with his first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* in 1991, his second novel *Afternoon Raag* Published in 1993 Followed by this he published *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), *The Immortals* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2015).

*The Immortals* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize (Europe and South -Asian Region, Best book) and DSC prize for South Asian Literature in 2011. Three traits that characterize his fiction are a narrative that lacks conventional plot, a sustained almost loving focus on quotidian activities in the lives of the characters; and a reposeful, meditative quality of prose.

*The Immortals* is a novel that shows how music reflects culture. It is the narrative of a family inclined to the corporate world and their travel with music on the other. Music is the thread that ties the two families. The novel is about three music lovers. Mallika Sengupta, one of the leading characters in the novel, is married to Apurva Sengupta, managing director of a huge company. She is an ardent music lover. The novel portrays India's transformation on globalization and its effects in India with interesting interwoven relationships through art and

values in the novel.

Before exploring the novel, it will be beneficial to explore the concepts of postmodernism. Postmodernism emerged as a cultural and intellectual movement in the late 20th century, gaining prominence in the 1960s and 1970s across various fields including art, literature, architecture, philosophy, and critical theory. This movement arose as a response to and critique of modernism. Postmodernism challenges grand narratives, universal truths, and the notion of objective reality. At its core, postmodernism is characterized not only by skepticism but also by a rejection of traditional boundaries and categories. It embraces plurality and fragmentation. Postmodernist thinkers argue that reality is constructed through language, social interactions, and cultural practices, rather than being an objective, fixed entity. In literature and art, postmodernism often manifests through various techniques such as metafiction, intertextuality, and the blurring of high and low culture. Postmodern works frequently break from conventional narrative structures, challenge the authority of the author, and invite multiple interpretations of the text.

Philosophically, postmodernism is closely associated with great thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, who questioned the foundations of Western thought and introduced concepts like deconstruction and simulacrum. Critics of postmodernism often argue that its emphasis on relativism and skepticism might lead to a lack of ethical grounding. Supporters, however, see it as a necessary critique of oppressive power structures. In the 21st century, the influence of postmodernism continues to be felt. "The grand narratives of modernity have collapsed, leaving a fragmented and pluralistic world" (Jean-François Lyotard's)". In the book *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean Francois shows how postmodernism emerged as a response to the failure of the grand, overarching narratives of modernity to adequately explain the complexities of the contemporary world. Postmodernism embraces fragmentation, diversity, and the rejection of universal truths. New cultural and technological developments have brought it to the forefront, and its legacy remains a subject of ongoing debate. Many cross-disciplinary studies have been conducted on this topic, and it has also gained popularity in pop culture.

Mainly three concept are explored in this paper. The first aspect explored is the evolution of irony from Schlegel's concept, and it is followed by Narrative Techniques and finally the role of music in creating irony and narrative style.

The German Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel was a key figure in developing a sophisticated philosophical conception of irony. For him, irony was not just a rhetorical device; it was the fundamental mode of philosophical engagement. He argued that true philosophical insight could only be achieved through an ironic awareness of one's own limitations. As he wrote, "Philosophy is the true home of irony, which might be defined as logical beauty" (Beiser). Irony allowed the philosopher to hold multiple, even contradictory perspectives simultaneously, resisting the urge towards systematic, univocal thinking.

The concept of irony, according to Schlegel's conception, is tied to the Romantic vision of art and literature as means of expressing the infinite. The ungraspable totality of human experience could never be fully captured in any single work or perspective. For him, irony was a way to gesture towards this infinity, to open up a work of art or philosophy that would multiply interpretations in many different ways.

While irony in postmodern literature is often seen as a means of creating distance and detachment from meaning, Schlegel saw it as a tool for philosophical self-reflection and an awareness of historical consciousness. Authors like David Foster Wallace and Don DeLillo used irony to create a sense of post-irony. This postmodern irony was frequently employed as a way of commenting on the pervasive irony and cynicism of contemporary culture. In Amit Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals* irony plays a nuanced role. It reflects elements of both Schlegel's philosophical conception and postmodern usage. Chaudhuri uses irony to create a tender, empathetic portrayal of his characters, particularly in his depiction of Nirmalya, the son of the wealthy Mallika Sengupta. Here, irony

serves not to create distance or cynicism, but to illuminate the complexities and contradictions within Nirmalya's character.

The discrepancy between the past and the present is not nostalgia, but it is ironic. Linda Hutcheon in her *Beginning to theorize postmodernism*, says it's not a "nostalgia 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. Ram Lal taught classical music for numerous cine singers, whereas Shyamlal teaches ghazals to satisfy his financial requirements.

Shyamlal's music lessons are 'critical revisiting' of 'the past', because when RamLal is a prominent singer, people adored invaluable musicians. But during Shyamlal's time it slowly diminished. The *Immortals* has the ironic narration of the morality of people's desire for classical music. Amit Chaudhuri himself, being a musician, himself narrates this disinterestedness as:

Shyamji, why don't you sing fewer ghazals and more classical concerts? Shyamji was impeccable 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)

There is a disfavour of people's interest in classical music. Shyamji's is concerned about the fading charm for classical music. Shyamlal forced himself to teach ghazals which makes Nirmalaya to judge Shyamlal being materialistic. 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). Ramlal's contemporary is not 'nostalgic' rather 'rework' on the same idea in the current modern world, interests has been transformed which contradicts the past prospects. There is no remarkable reference for the death of Shyamlal, ironically, he has been admitted in the same hospital where his father had been admitted.

At the same time, Chaudhuri's irony gestures towards broader cultural and historical tensions, such as the potential conflict between the quest for prosperity and the pursuit of art. The novel raises questions about the role of art and philosophy in a society increasingly dominated by material wealth. This use of irony not only reflects Schlegel's awareness of the limits of any single perspective but also resists simplistic resolutions to such complex issues. Without succumbing to detached postmodern irony, Chaudhuri creates layered, nuanced meanings. The author's irony is grounded in a Romantic sensibility that values the expression of contradiction and brings out the infinite complexities of human experience.

The next aspect is postmodern narrative techniques that explores the complexities of identity, art, and culture in post-independence India. One prominent technique is the use of paradox and fragmentation. The very title of the novel is paradoxical, suggesting timelessness and permanence while being firmly grounded in a specific historical context of the 1970s. This paradoxical sentiment is reflected in the fragmented structure of the novel, which resists linear storytelling and instead presents a mosaic of vignettes and impressions that resist easy synthesis. As literary critic Pankaj Mishra notes:

For a relatively short novel, 'The Immortals' contains a vast range of characters and locations from different classes and parts of Bombay. On each of them—a housemaid, a former babysitter with an uncannily beautiful daughter in films, a Malabar Hill penthouse, bohemian digs in Khar—Chaudhuri trains a gaze that can be dry but is always equanimous, and often tender; in one sense, this is the Bombay novel, denser with social implication and with broader egalitarian sympathies than such wrist-spraining claimants to the distinction as 'Midnight's Children', 'A Fine Balance' and 'Sacred Games'. (Literary Hub)

Chaudhuri also makes extensive use of parody as a postmodern narrative technique. The novel frequently parodies the tropes of traditional bildungsroman, as seen in the character of Nirmalya Sengupta, the sensitive young man

born between his artistic aspirations and family obligations. As one critic observes, Nirmalya's disdain for the trappings of wealth and attraction to philosophy is presented with a tender, ironic touch. This ironic distance prevents the novel from falling into sentimentality.

Chaudhuri's irony also extends to his treatment of the cultural and social milieu of post-Emergency India. The novel satirizes the nouveau riche corporate culture and their philistine curation of art and culture. The deadpan descriptions of social events, like the fake village wedding party hosted by a new tycoon, drip with ironic commentary on the vulgar display of wealth and power.

The narrative also reflects on the post-Emergency context. *The Immortal* can be seen as a response to the turbulent social and political changes during the Emergency period of 1975-77. The fragmented, paradoxical structure of the novel mirrors the sense of disorientation and uncertainty that pervaded the country during this time. Chaudhuri's use of parody and irony also reflects a broader shift in Indian literature away from the grand postcolonial gestures of writers like Salman Rushdie. As a member of the new wave of Indian authors, Chaudhuri eschews the magical realism and sweeping historical narratives of his predecessors. In this way, the postmodern narrative techniques in "The Immortals" can be seen as a way of grappling with the social, cultural, and political upheavals of post-Emergency India. By embracing paradox, fragmentation, parody, and irony, Chaudhuri encourages the reader to engage with the complexities of identity, art, and tradition in a rapidly changing nation.

Amit Chaudhuri's thirst for music is a central driving force behind the narrative style and ironic sensibilities of the novel. Music serves as much more than just a thematic element; it is deeply woven into the very structure and language of the text. Chaudhuri uses musical references and structures to create a sense of rhythm, cadence, and improvisation in his prose. The musical quality of his writing mirrors the ebb and flow of Indian classical music that is so central to the novel's themes.

Chaudhuri's musical approach also contributes to the pervasive irony that suffuses the novel. The novel's fragmented, nonlinear structure jumps between different characters, time periods, and narrative perspectives. Chaudhuri resists linear storytelling, instead presenting a mosaic of vignettes and impressions that resist easy synthesis. This fragmentation mirrors the cultural and social upheaval of post-Emergency India.

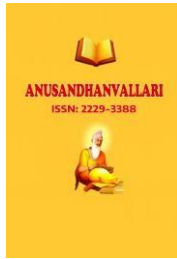
Music also serves as a means of cultural commentary. Chaudhuri uses it to explore conflicts between art and commerce in the postcolonial Indian context. The novel satirizes the nouveau riche corporate culture, as seen in the depiction of the fake village wedding party. At the same time, Chaudhuri presents a tender, empathetic portrait of his characters' struggles. Through the interplay of irony and musical motifs, Chaudhuri crafts a novel that resists easy answers and invites the reader to engage with the complexities of identity, art, and tradition in a rapidly changing world. The novel's postmodern narrative techniques, grounded in Chaudhuri's deep appreciation for music, allow him to grapple with the cultural upheavals of the post-Emergency era.

## Conclusion

Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* stands as a testament to the power of postmodern narrative techniques in exploring the complexities of post-Emergency India. Through his masterful use of irony, paradox, fragmentation, and parody, Chaudhuri creates a nuanced portrait of a society in flux, grappling with the tensions between tradition and modernity, art and commerce, spirituality and materialism.

The novel's approach to irony, rooted in both Schlegel's philosophical conception and postmodern sensibilities, allows for a deep exploration of characters and cultural phenomena without resorting to cynicism or detachment. Instead, Chaudhuri's irony serves to illuminate the contradictions and complexities inherent in human experience, particularly in the rapidly changing landscape of late 20th-century India.

Chaudhuri's innovative narrative techniques, particularly his fragmented, non-linear storytelling and his use of musical structures in prose, reflect the disorientation and uncertainty of the post-Emergency era. At the same time,



these techniques invite readers to engage actively with the text, piecing together meaning from a mosaic of impressions and perspectives.

The central role of music in the novel not only drives the plot but also serves as a metaphor for the cultural transformations taking place in India. Through the interplay of classical traditions and modern influences, Chaudhuri explores the evolving nature of Indian identity and artistry in a globalizing world. *The Immortals* represents a significant contribution to postmodern Indian literature, moving away from the magical realism and sweeping historical narratives of earlier postcolonial writers. Instead, Chaudhuri offers a more intimate, nuanced exploration of everyday life and art in contemporary India, using postmodern techniques to capture the complexities of a society in transition.

In conclusion, through its sophisticated use of postmodern irony and narrative techniques, "The Immortals" not only tells a compelling story but also invites readers to reflect deeply on the nature of art, identity, and cultural change in the modern world. Chaudhuri's novel stands as a prime example of how postmodern literary approaches can illuminate the intricacies of human experience and societal transformation.

#### Works Cited

- [1] Beiser, Frederick C. "Friedrich Schlegel." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, 19 Mar. 2007, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel/>
- [2] Chaudhuri, Amit. *The Immortals*. Picador, 2009.
- [3] Hutcheon, Linda. "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism." *Textual Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987, pp. 10-31.
- [4] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- [5] Mishra, Pankaj. "Pankaj Mishra on the Eternal Present of Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*." *Literary Hub*, 10 Aug. 2018, [lithub.com/pankaj-mishra-on-the-eternal-present-of-amit-chaudhuri-the-immortals/](https://lithub.com/pankaj-mishra-on-the-eternal-present-of-amit-chaudhuri-the-immortals/)
- [6] "Friedrich Schlegel." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, 30 Nov. 2022, [plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel/](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel/)