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thevedicpath@gkv.ac.in

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Meaning as Layered Evocation: The Use of *Dhvani* in Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*

Shivali Garg¹ & Rajesh Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English
Punjabi University Patiala
shivaligarg592@gmail.com

²Professor of English,
Punjabi University Patiala
sharajesh@gmail.com

Abstract

The research project, of which this seminar paper is a part, aims to study Amit Chaudhuri's selected fiction in the light of Indian philosophical and aesthetic theories, specifically those propounded in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (4th century), Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka* (9th century) and Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyañ"māsa* (9th and 10th centuries). The project is significant in Indian literary criticism in that it brings together three significant theoretical perspectives from the Indian tradition in order to understand and evaluate the writings of a major contemporary Indian writer in English.

This paper explores, on the basis of theoretical and critical possibilities offered by Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, the suggestive potentiality of the language used by Amit Chaudhuri in his novel *The Immortals*. It will particularly study Chaudhuri's use of *dhvani* as a literary device. Chaudhuri himself has acknowledged in an interview, "My writing is essentially eventless. I concentrate more on

the language and its nuances while I write” (“Aalap: In Conservation with Amit Chaudhuri”).

Dhvani may be defined as the power of suggestion which a language possesses when it is used in certain ways. It directs the readers to meanings beyond the stated at the level of denotation. There is room for exploring the gaps through what is not explicitly stated. Another term used for suggestion is *vyañjana*, which points the extraordinary significative power of literary art. It refers to the moods a work of literary art evokes. As a Chinese saying goes, “The sound stops short, the sense flows on.” Defining *dhvani*, Ānandavardhana writes that when conventional meaning renders itself secondary and the suggested or implied meaning becomes primary, the result is *dhvani* or suggested poetry (*Dhvanyāloka* 2). *Dhvani* literally means resonance or reverberation: what seems to cling to a work after the performance or recital is over. William Wordsworth’s famous lines from *The Solitary Reaper*, “The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more,” (31-32) also refer to resonance or reverberation. The feeling or sentiment called *rasa* too belongs to what is suggested, to resonance. The significance of *dhvani* is that it leads us to the unexplored realms of thought and feeling through suggestion.

In literary discourse, signification is not offered directly and unidimensionally but through *dhvani*. In the theory of *dhvani*, the existence of three types or levels of signification is recognized. This paper will explore those three levels of signification in *The Immortals*, namely, *abhidhā* (literal meaning), *lakṣaṇa* (contextual meaning) and *vyañjana* (suggested meaning). The paper will focus on the *vyañjana* function of language, where the suggestive power of words over and above their *abhidhā* and *lakṣaṇa* functions has principal importance.

Abhidhā refers to the literal meaning. The power of signifying the secondary meaning is known as *lakṣaṇa*. *Vyañjana* points towards the extraordinary significative power of literary art, which has the power to create impressions through language strategies. Ānandavardhana prefers the term *dhvani* to refer to this property of the poetic language. He classified *dhvani* into three types, *vastu dhvani*, *alamkara dhvani* and *rasa dhvani*. The first signifies the suggestion of an object or idea, the second a metaphoric suggestion and the third emotive suggestion. The paper will study how this emotive suggestion is depicted, inferred and transmitted through a work of art. What is suggested must be appealing and this appeal may be realized mainly through *rasa* which in turn can be expressed only through suggestion. The emotive suggestion includes *rasas* such as *adbhuta rasa* (wonder), *beebhatsa rasa* (disgust), *bhayanaka rasa* (terror), *hasya rasa* (comedy), *karuna rasa* (pathos), *raudra rasa* (anger), *shanta rasa* (quietism), *sringara rasa* (eroticism) and *veera rasa* (heroism).

The Immortals is a story of two families. One belongs to the corporate world and the other to the tradition of music. Music is the thread which ties the two families. The book is about three music lovers: a mother, her son and their guru who is a teacher of classical music. Mallika Sengupta, one of the central characters of the novel, is married to Apurva Sengupta, the chief executive of a large corporation. She is interested in learning music. Mallika's sensitive son Nirmalya also loves classical music. At the other pole of the narrative is Shyamji, a musician and tutor who instructs Mallika and later Nirmalya. In brief, Chaudhuri interweaves art and relationships and reflects on the conflict between art and commercial values in modern India swept by winds of globalisation.

In *The Immortals*, the theme of the deteriorating position of Indian classical music is pervasive. It is suggested through Chaudhuri's emotive and satirical descriptive passages. These passages might not appear to be about something, yet they reveal significant things about people and circumstances through minute detail. The following passage reveals a world where art has lost its exclusivity; it is being democratized as everyone wants to produce and consume it rather than just observe it. Shyamji's disciples are anxious to usurp the stage. They aspire to quickly become successful performers:

Their relationship with music had begun embryonically, in their prehistory as listeners; they'd hummed along in an undertone with the artists they loved best, or loudly, solitarily, to themselves; and then, at some point, they'd asked themselves the unimaginable, something that wouldn't have occurred to them six months before, or which they didn't have the courage to admit: "Can't I be a singer? Can't it be me?" Why should they only listen; why shouldn't they be listened to? (*The Immortals*8)

In such a world, what are the benchmarks to judge the worth of artists? Who are the real artists? For instance, *dhvani* functions at various levels in the description of four-stringed *Tanpura* as an aloof sentinel:

... its sound shocked you every time you heard it— like a God humming to itself, its vibrations difficult to describe or report on, the solipsism of the heavens; at another point, when Nirmalya is playing the same instrument, it is described with marvellous compression simply as "aloof sentinel." (132)

This passage hints at the diminishing popularity of classical Indian music; it evokes a sense of loss. Two worlds are juxtaposed, that of the older musical tradition and the current music scene in the context of predominantly consumerist culture. The apathy of people towards classical music is indirectly commented upon: *Tanpura* as “aloof sentinel” implies the complacent and passive attitude of people towards higher forms of art. The commodification of art is further suggested when Chaudhuri writes that with the changing reality the old ideals might seem out of place and morally dubious. The difficulty of those artists who struggle to find their place in the fashionable art culture is lamented by Shyamji: “A man who could play a western instrument would have a business in this day and age. On the other hand, the *Tanpura*, with its four strings, has lost its magic, it becomes more and more difficult to make time for it” (242). Chaudhuri compares the consumerist age artists to ‘mushrooms’ who appear abruptly and attempt: “... . not only to satisfy the middle class urge for music, but the relentless, childlike longing to become the musician (how simply the metamorphosis could be achieved); to move to centre-stage; at least for fifteen minutes, where the traditional musician previously was” (164). The paragraph clearly hints at the materialistic approach of such artists. By using the figure of mushrooms, Chaudhuri suggests the fragility of their quickly begotten fame. They aspire to achieve overnight glory without any sufficient work.

Chaudhuri produces layer upon layer of meaning with the help of the simplest details of places, things and events. For instance, Nirmalya’s parents have shifted to downtown Bombay, he is not at peace in the city. His seclusion in the city is drawn in a masterly manner and is full of suggestion. The incident below functions as *vyañjana* (suggestion).

I can't eat here, Nirmalya said, shaking his head slowly, the boyish face little more than a child's in spite of the moustache, full of inexplicable hurt, the eyes almost tearful. I can't eat here until Shyamji is able to eat here. His parents indulgently follow him out with a conviction that they were doing the only logical and admissible thing ... Mrs. Sengupta glancing tolerantly, without emotion, at the tray of cakes. (79)

The longing for home is also evoked in *The Immortals* without any direct reference to it; at the same time, however, the diasporic angst of the protagonist is revealed. It is home and home alone which is in the mind of the protagonist, Nirmalya, when he is in London. He suffers from nostalgia. Hence, he often has flashes of reminiscence in which he revisits certain incidents or events. The only speck of light, for Nirmalya, is reminiscing about his music guru and his mother singing, yet the fact that he is among many international students in a vibrant environment does not help. His alienation is thus hinted at in the following words:

Taking a tube from the strand, numb, like everyone else on the train, but vivid with a secret grief that made him, in his own eyes, separate from the other commuters, and suddenly immune to the awkwardness of exile, he got off finally at Tottenham Court Road, and wandered, as he often did without rhyme or reasons, among the crowds and theatres but this time to clear his thoughts.... (377)

The disappearance of a South Indian café also evokes the end of the old world; a ride on a suburban train turns into an odyssey; biting on a Ginster's pastry expresses all the confusion and alienation of a foreign student in London (102). Chaudhuri never writes at length: he just mentions

the disappearance briefly. But he accumulates impression of loss. The overall evoked mood is that of a profound and extensive loss.

Nothing is narrated directly to the readers, which serves as the essence of *dhvani*. For example, the 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, ‘*Kuchsamaj me nahi aa raha hai*’ She was lost” (370). From this context, the readers cannot understand the real condition of Shyam Lal, and it is not clear whether Shyamji is seriously ill or he is no more. The reader is later informed: “Shyamji’s death had disoriented them – the intensely shy younger brother...” (378). One has to search for the meaning. In this context, John Hospers has discussed the problem of locating the meaning in arts:

A skillful poet can evoke in a sensitive reader images and emotions of the greatest intensity and complexity by juxtaposing words of great evocative and associative power, and can evoke certain calculated effects more precisely than he could ever do if he tried by using language descriptively. The words of the poem are the objective correlative of the evocata. (*Meaning and Truth in Art* 13)

Sometimes, fictional characters, apart from their fictional role, may function as vehicles of *dhvani*. For instance, Mallika Sengupta does not have an identity of her own; she is identified as Mr. Apurva Sengupta’s wife who “shaped her life, even as an artist” (*The Immortals* 117). Chaudhuri gives details of her past, when she was a girl of aspirations; she wanted recognition and prestige. The contradiction between Mallika’s past and present is not nostalgic but ironic: it is based on the past expectations of Mallika and her present reality.

It is notable that Mallika's lifestyle is in no way different from the lives of other wives of businessmen. She feels out of place in parties, which she attends for the sake of her husband. She says to her son, "I hate going to them. Your father says it is an important part of his job" (116). Chaudhuri evokes her inner struggle and the loss of selfhood thus:

Her own singing practices affected by 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 didn't know ... (115)

Mallika is not contented with her life, though she lives amidst plenty. "We are not rich, said Mrs. Sengupta. Infact, we are poor" (226). The phrase "we are poor" suggests that there is a lack of something vital in Mallika's life. She has abandoned her dream of becoming a professional singer; she has turned her back on music to maintain the dignity of Apurva Sengupta by acting as the dignified wife of a successful business executive. She no longer wants to work hard to become a professional singer. Her talent is now dead and buried deep inside her. Chaudhuri evokes this in the following words:

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 was not 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. (117)

Nirmalya is the protagonist of the story. He is the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta. A young dreamer who loves Indian classical music, he never liked being the only child of a business tycoon. Born into a rich family, he prefers a life of simplicity. For instance, he always wears somewhat tattered kurtas, remains unshaven and keeps disheveled hair. His characterization implies the use of *dhvani*:

Nirmalya puzzles others with his out-of-place image. The son of a successful businessman, he wears worn hand-woven kurtas and jeans, clothes. To the incongruousness of his clothes he adds a book of western philosophy, which he always carries with himself. (182-83)

Nirmalya might be viewed as a rebel against the commodification of art. His spiritual yearning seems real in a world of middle-class complicity and its mediocre materialist ambitions. He searches for the meaning of his life and the reason for his existence. Nirmalya's desire to find the reason for his existence is suggested by Chaudhuri in the following manner:

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)

Now, Nirmalya leaves India for England in order to learn philosophy. Chaudhuri's ironical portrayal of Nirmalya also evokes *dhvani*. For instance, towards the end of the novel, the reader can see a different Nirmalya whose zeal

has faded and who is preoccupied with his correct appearance:

... 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)

Chaudhuri draws an ironical portrayal of Shyamji with the help of simple *dhvani*. Shyamji pursues money and popularity by offering the spirit of an artist. He abandons classical music. His family entirely depends on him as he is the only breadwinner of his extended family. Nirmalya is disillusioned when he comes to know about his master's aspiration to earn fame as a sound composer in some Hindi film. He asks, "Shyamji, why don't you sing classical more often? Why don't you sing fewer *ghazals* and sing more at classical concert" (192)? Shyamji's reply stuns him, "I cannot devote myself completely to art. You can't sing classical on an empty stomach" (192). Shyamji's comments hint at a basic conflict. Is it possible to dedicate oneself wholeheartedly to art when one has to think about the basic necessities? Shyamji's words raise a large question about the economical organisation of the world.

Shyamji's lament is not for filling his stomach but for people. Their interest in classical art has faded, since the tastes and preferences of the people have changed. Shyamji's grievance is against the materialistic society which compels even genuine artists to adopt popular music for their livelihood. He is made to realize that "there's money in music

arrangement” (105). Shyamji’s attitude also provokes the use of *vyañjana*, “Here was a man in a loose white kurta and pyajamas; 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” (99).

Chaudhuri also uses settings and sounds as vehicles of *dhvani*. He imbues places with a flavour that is recognizable to his characters, who use these places for orientation and identification. The sounds are also a part of these places. There is a strong link between a place, its sound and the identity of the people inhabiting. Chaudhuri creates images and sounds of different kinds exceeding and subduing the literal meaning. Some sounds, like those of traffic (bullock carts, cars, buses and taxis) create anxiety-inducing discordant sounds. Changes in sounds often indicate a character’s dislocation and alienation. Nirmalya away from India to attend college in England, feels dislocated and alienated, that is conveyed by the change of place. He feels dislocated on account of the absence of familiar sounds. The sounds thus suggest lack of familiarity with the place; similarly, the silence upsets Nirmalya:”From the beginning, he was struck by the excess of silence; and he began to realize that his famous love for solitude was not real, that he loved company and noise much more than his own thoughts” (*The Immortals*8).

For Nirmalya, Bombay is not just a city. It merges into the image of mother through the evocation of a sense of belonging. The suggested sense is only more graceful and beautiful than the ordinary sense, though the ordinary sense is also conveyed. The narrator feels extremely lonely. He longs for his homeland and the company of parents. Nirmalya’s mother’s letters telling the happenings in the home

country make him associate many things that take place in England. The evoked sense is that of separation from Bombay.

The Immortals exemplifies what Ānandavardhana terms as *rasa dhvani*. It means emotive suggestion producing an affective experience. *Rasa* to be communicable has to be evoked in the reader, which can be done only through the power of suggestion contained in the words. Ānandavardhana states, “the works of a poet endowed with unequal *pratibha* brim with *rasa*” (73). The theory of *rasa dhvani* cannot be applied straightaway to a modern text and in particular to the Indian novel in English, but it serves to identify certain emotions and their predominant traits, which find artistic expression in contemporary novels. The concept of *rasa dhvani* helps to explain the way emotions get transferred into art.

One of the instances that we see in the novel is when Nirmalya leaves India, and his mother has tears in her eyes, separation is there. Thus we could see *karuna rasa*. Another instance is the image of *tanpura* described as ‘aloof sentinel’. It also evokes sorrow or *karuna rasa*.

The following incident implies *bibhatsa rasa* (disgust). Ram Lal has been a true devotee of classical music who never compromised his art, yet his son Shyamji abandons classical music for material gains. Ram Lal’s picture travels with Shyamji’s family to every new apartment they move into, where it looks “severe, predictably incongruous with the constant enchantment, the enlargement of life and its prospects for the executives, the businessmen, Shyamji” (162). With the phrase “incongruous with the constant enchantment,” Chaudhuri evokes *bibhatsa rasa*, though only mildly. It suggests alienation of traditional art in a consumerist age.

Another incident can be cited that arouses *karuna rasa*. The grandson of Shyamji ‘accidentally’ plays classical music thinking it was a cassette of film songs. He says, “*Yeh to dadaji ke gaane hai*” (135). Here the single word “yeh” functions as the vehicle of *karuGa rasa*. Nirmalya, who emerges as a rebel against the materialistic attitude of his guru, stands up for his own beliefs, his courage producing *v’ra rasa*. The main focus is on the human aspects of the situation. In such instances, the emphasis is on sentiments. Although the denoted sense is significant, the total effect is the result of *bhĀvas* (emotions).

There are numerous instances where *rasa* is used. For example, there is *roudra rasa*, but the fury is understated:

The tape recorder made the process of teaching and learning less messy, more compressed and expeditious, for both the time-passed guru and his undecided disciple, shackled to the modern life that had formed him, eager to learn, but within the secret, exploratory rhythms of his day. (178)

The passage suggests a mechanical teaching-learning process. In addition, Chaudhuri employs a number of stylistic devices and techniques as vehicles of *dhvani*. For instance, the title, *The Immortals*, is charged with suggestion. It is ironical because nothing in the novel is immortal: ambitions, passions, desires and aspirations. The novel is a long meditation of human failings, on the ineluctability of our moral condition.

Chaudhuri makes ample use of music, foods, and clothes to produce *dhvani*. He celebrates music in all his works, which is used to convey various shades and nuances of life. Indeed, the novel is a celebration of music and various Hindustani

rĀgas. Incidentally, the different shades of human's character and behaviour, through various *rĀgas* sung in different situations, are suggested. For instance, Pyarelal offers to Nirmalya the traditional elucidation of the nature of *rĀga*. "Every *rĀga* has a *roop*. It has a *chehra*, a face. When you sing *Yaman* properly, for instance, you can see its form. *Yaman* comes and stands beside you" (185). Further, music serves different objectives in the novel, as a vocation, a status symbol, a pretension, an aspiration, a way of life, and a means of livelihood.

The present attempt summing up the practical application of *dhvani* to a modern text has immense potential. Modern text with its complex meaning, distorted structuring, illogical sequencing, symbolic expressions and gaps, is easily viable for *dhvani* analysis. *Dhvani*, here, is not used for interpretative purpose but as a way of seeing the text and the world anew, setting new philosophical grounds. However, the application of *rasa dhvani* to *The Immortals* is questioned rationally. *Rasas* cannot be aroused in every work of art to the highest degree. *Rasa* theory, in the sense in which it has been used in ancient literature, has undergone certain modifications in the modern context. The theory can be amplified and clarified according to the modern literary sensibility. The tools of interpretation need to be employed discreetly. There should be a negotiation between these ancient theories and a modern text.

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