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Religious and Cultural Conflict in Amit Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song*

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Abstract:

The term, religious and cultural conflict is defined as disagreements between religious beliefs and values by two or more sides. Religious conflicts take place in society because of the differences in values and norms of behaviour of people from different religious and cultural groups. A person behaves according to the values and training, he, or she gets in his or her religion and culture. Similarly, another person having different religious and cultural perception may express his or her behaviour from an opposite standpoint. Such kind of situation creates misunderstanding between two social groups which results into religious and cultural conflicts and violence. Amit Chaudhuri's third novel, *Freedom Song* (1998), is set against the backdrop of social and religious unrest growing due to political and communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims due to the demolition of Babri Mosque and the bomb blasts in Bombay as the repercussions. It depicts communal riots and religious and cultural conflict between the two communities. The novel gives a view of national politics through the lives of two Calcutta families and examines the aftermath of independence by representing Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. It gives a message that there is no place for fundamentalism in a secular country like India. If the fundamentalist forces, in the religious communities, are destroyed, our country will be free of communal tensions, riots and religious and cultural conflicts.

Keywords: conflict, religion, culture, fundamentalism, secular.

Amit Chaudhuri, a well-known Indian English novelist, explores religious and cultural conflict in his third novel, *Freedom Song* (1998). The novel is set against the backdrop of social and religious unrest growing due to political and communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. As it is set in Ayodhya period, the winter of 1992, the time of demolition of Babri Masjid and the bomb blasts in Bombay as the repercussions, it deals with the communal riots

that result into religious and cultural conflict. While commenting on the Hindu-Muslim religious and cultural conflict in the novel, Purvi Shah observes:

Chaudhuri's third book, *Freedom Song* (1998) offers a view of national politics through the lives of two Calcutta families, ... The novel examines the aftermath of independence by representing Hindu-Muslim tensions, communist struggles, and the influence of economic changes within people's lives. Readers witness Khuku's anti-Muslim sentiment even as she practises singing with a Muslim tabla player. ... Through the routine of his characters' lives, Chaudhuri represents the power of religious and economic tensions. Chaudhuri's writing shows the ways in which national and cultural politics affect the middle-class subjects. (33)

The focus of the novel is on Hindu-Muslim conflict arising out of two different sets of cultural values. Chaudhuri clearly states it at the very beginning of the novel. It is filtered through the consciousness of the two important female characters Khuku and her friend Mini. The novel opens with azaan, sung by a muezzin who calls the faithful Muslims to prayer. But Chaudhuri's important major and minor characters are Hindus, born and brought up in Hindu culture, having Hindu religious sensibility. "They feel beleaguered by Islam both religiously and politically" (Mars-Jones 29). In Muslim culture muezzin, the priest of the mosque, through azaan, gives call to the faithful followers of Islam to come to the mosque for prayer. The singing of azaan early in the morning on loud speakers is a welcome call for the Muslims, but it is a disturbance for the people belonging to other cultures. As the azaan is loudly sung on the loud speakers, it clearly reaches the ears of each and every person living around the mosque and disturbs their sound sleep. Though, Khuku lives more than a mile away from the mosque, the sound of the azaan clearly reaches her ear and disturbs her sleep. She gets up and meets her friend Mini, who has come to her house to stay with her, and expresses her anger against the singing of azaan in front of Mini. The narrator brings out Khuku's and Mini's anti-Muslim feelings and their consciousness about the azaan as:

"What, Khuku!" She (Mini) said with great surprise. "You're up already?" ... "I was woken by the azaan", complained Khuku. "And believe me, Mini, I had no sleep last night, I began to think about Bablu, and I lay wide awake with my head feeling hot."

“Really!” said Mini, ... “They are going too far! And,” she said, “it isn’t really Indian, it sounds like Bedouins”. (244)

Khuku and Mini represent Hindu sensibility, whereas the muezzin represents Muslim sensibility. Chaudhuri, through these two Hindu women characters and the Muslim muezzin, depicts religious and cultural conflict between Hindus and Muslims. A welcome call of prayer for one culture is a disturbance to the other. When the Hindus are in a sound sleep at dawn, the Muslim priest starts singing azaan loudly on loud speakers. It definitely disturbs the peaceful state of mind and sound sleep of others. If they are angry, they are not wrong. Through Mini, Chaudhuri wants to suggest that the Muslims are going too far in continuation of their traditions that are outdated. With the time, they should change themselves. It is undoubtedly not wise to disturb the peace and sleep of many for a few. Besides, Chaudhuri further wants to point out that the tradition of singing azaan loudly on loud speakers is originally not Indian. It is practised by the Bedouins, the members of Arab tribes that traditionally live in tents in the deserts. The Indian Muslims still follow this Arabic tradition and try to maintain their culture and identity. But they forget that it disturbs the peaceful life of other people belonging to different cultures. This disturbance leads to religious and cultural conflict between two different ethnic and religious communities.

Besides azaan, Chaudhuri also explores other reasons that are responsible for religious and cultural conflict between Hindus and Muslims. The important among them are the issues like population control, demolition of Babri Mosque, racial riots and the bomb blasts in Bombay. His concern about the growing population of Muslims and some other orthodox, inhuman, religious rituals is expressed through the consciousness of Khuku and Mini as:

Each day at some point, they talked of the Muslims. They talked of how, by the next century, there would be more Muslims than Hindus in the country. Mini, being the teacher, had the facts and figures. She told Khuku that “population control” was meant for Hindus alone, and Khuku, listening to Mini, began to see Muslims everywhere. They grew excited about the azaan on the loud speakers, and about Muslim festivals in which people beat themselves with whips and cords. Once, when talking thus, and saying, “They should change as well, not just the Hindus”. (294)

Chaudhuri through Mini's views wants to point out that Muslim's customs and traditions like beating themselves with cords and whips and walking on burning fire coals while celebrating festivals are wrong and unreasonable. Such customs and traditions, instead of taking the society towards progress, become an obstacle in their way of progress. If any society wants to make progress, it should abandon such kind of inhuman and unhealthy practices. Mini and Khuku are bold enough to express their attitude towards Muslims in front of a member of Muslim community like Abdullah.

As the story of the novel takes place after the demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu fundamentalist, Mini and Khuku turn their discussion to the episode of demolition of the Babri Mosque. It is said that the fundamentalists who have participated in the work of demotion are the activists of the Bhartiya Janta Party. Khuku and Mini support the activists and praise them for doing such good work. The narrator brings out their feelings and support to BJP and the act of the demolition of the mosque as:

“BJP,” said Khuku, her eyes larger than usual. I might even vote for the BJP. Why not?”

“In fact, it was no bad thing that they toppled that mosque,” said Mini. She looked small and powerful, as if she had unsuspected energies within, and could have gone up to the mosque and toppled it herself, alone.

“No bad thing,” said Khuku, who agreed with everything that Mini said. (295)

The demolition of the Babri Mosque and support of Khuku and Mini to it clearly shows that not only Muslims are orthodox and fundamentalist but even Hindus like Khuku, Mini and the activists of BJP and other parties who have demolished the mosque are equally orthodox and fundamentalists. Such types of people not only become obstacle in the progress of human society but also are responsible for religious and cultural conflict between two religious communities. It threatens the integrity of the sovereign nation. Khuku and Mini's support to racial political party like BJP indicates that a biased person with particular religious sensibility will support the political party having similar biased ideology. Their support to such divisive forces leads to polarization of society and religious and cultural conflict that result into racial riots and violence which destroy lives of innocent common people from both the communities. It also shakes the secular base of our sovereign nation.

The fear expressed by Chaudhuri comes true as the racial riots and violence after the Ayodhya issue disturbed the socio-cultural set up of secular India. Due to the issue of the Babri Mosque, the city has been under communal tension for the past couple of years. In spite of assurances of the state government and the Union government that no damage will be permitted to be caused to the Babri Mosque during the 'Car Seva' programme at Ayodhya, Babri Mosque has been demolished on 6th December 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists. The minority Muslim community, angered by this act and instigated by Muslim fundamentalists, has developed hatred against Hindus because they think their Islam has been in great danger. As a result, the racial riots, in December 1992 and January 1993 throughout India, especially in Mumbai, have killed more than a thousand people and burnt down billions of property from both the sides including many innocent people. In addition to that, the riots have been followed by a series of bomb blasts in Mumbai in March 1993 and afterwards throughout India as retaliatory action by criminal gangs killing hundreds of innocent people belonging to all communities.

Though Bombay has been the centre of racial riots and violence, it spread throughout India, especially in the Metropolitan cities like Calcutta. In spite of curfew, the incidents of killing have been taking place. The fears of riots and police firing have affected the life of common people, especially the women. It becomes difficult for them to come out of their homes and join their duties to earn daily bread. Jochna, the young maid servant of Khuku and others like her become victims of religious and cultural conflict and violence caused by racial riots. During racial riots and cultural conflict, a smaller group of one community, which resides in the locality of a bigger group, is always in danger. Same thing happens with Jochna and other Hindus living in the basti of majority Muslims. Fortunately, their lives are saved because the police shift them before the procession of furious Muslims reaches the basti. Khuku, this time, is not angry at Jochna for not coming to work but has sympathetic attitude towards her. She knows the true cause of her inability to join her duties. She is of the opinion that Jochna will resume her duties after the communal tension is released, and the curfew is lifted. The government, as well as some social workers and communist activists like Bhaskar, the protagonist, are trying to establish mutual harmony and amity between the two communities. But Khuku and Mini think that the Muslims are never appeased in this country, and they shouldn't have made a fuss about one mosque because hundreds of Hindu temples have been destroyed in the past. Their conversation clearly brings out their feelings about the mosque and temple issue as:

"When do you think it'll end?" asked Mini, ... For the signs of upheaval were still there, the daily killings, for here was a billboard coming up proclaiming Hindu and Muslim amity.

"You mean ..."

"I mean you will never be able to appease them," said Mini. What if one mosque had gone - for hundreds of temples had been destroyed before. She could not understand what the fuss was about. ...

Promises, always promises. No sooner had the mosque gone down than the government had promised that it would be built again.

"Who will rebuild those temples?" She asked.

"That's right", said Khuku. "No one talks about them." (322)

Chaudhuri, through Khuku and Mini, satirizes the government's and politician's policy of appeasing particular community to achieve their political gains. To win elections, political parties make various sorts of promises. Rebuilding mosque is one of them. Mini is right in asking the question about the rebuilding of the temples toppled down in the past. But the government is not at all interested in it because it is not a current issue and it will not give them any political gain. As a result, the opposition party supported by Hindu fundamentalists raises the issue of building the temple of Shri Ram. They promise that at least they will build one in the place of the demolished Mosque and thus succeed in grabbing power. As building temple is an emotional issue, so also the demolition of the Mosque. The fundamentalist Hindus have celebrated the demolition of the Mosque openly. Similarly, the fundamentalist Muslims have felt happy after the bomb blasts in Bombay as the retaliatory action to the demolition of the Mosque. It is clearly brought out by the narrator through dialogues between Khuku and Mini as:

Mini phoned Khuku.

"Mini?" said Khuku. "You have come to school?"

"Let's see what they do!" she said. "They won't be able to harm me," ...

She said then, conspiratorially.

"Suleman came yesterday ... He looked quite pleased."

This mood lasted all day. (392)

The Hindus like Khuku and Mini instead of expressing their repentance after the demolition of the Mosque, they challenge the communal forces to do violence. The Muslim fundamentalists

like Suleman too, instead of condemning bomb blasts and violence, feel pleased thinking that the lesson is taught to Hindus. But the bombs not only kill fundamentalist Hindus but also innocent people from all castes, creeds and religious and ethnic groups. It does not make any difference between criminals and innocents or members of this religion, and that. It destroys whatever comes in its range. In addition to such feelings of hatred, resentment and self-appeasement, it leads to further religious and cultural conflicts that may, in the future, turn into disastrous results and may lead to another partition of our country. Hence, there is a need to find out solutions to avoid religious and cultural conflicts in the future. Chaudhuri not only raises the problems but also suggests some solutions to it. The narrator suggests some of the solutions as:

The word “Fundamentalism”, travelling everywhere and belonging nowhere: people tried to understand what it meant. They appealed for the razed site to be left as it was, as a memorial to an event. Let the rubble stand. In one newspaper, a Muslim writer said, “The heart of the parrot of the Hindu fundamentalism beats in the giant of Muslim fundamentalism. Kill the giant, and you will have killed the parrot”. (323-324)

Thus, according to Chaudhuri in a secular country like India there is no place for fundamentalism. If it is not controlled at the right time, it will flourish and go beyond control of the governments and political leaders, like the temple-mosque issue in Ayodhya. The government and political parties should stop the politics of favoritism to achieve their selfish goals of grabbing power. As the Muslim writer says, the government should kill the giant of Muslim fundamentalism so that the parrot of Hindu fundamentalism will die naturally. Chaudhuri feels that we need young person like Bhaskar, who are trying to work for bringing unity and harmony among the communities. They are the real reformers who will help our country to move towards progress and prosperity. If the fundamentalist forces, in both the religious communities, are destroyed, there will not be any type of religious and cultural conflict and our country will be free of communal tensions and racial riots. Thus people will live hatred free, tension free, peaceful, prosperous and happy life forever.

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