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Cultural and Religious Diversity in *Freedom Song* of Amit Chaudhuri

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Abstract:

To better understand the key role of religion first of all it is important to know about the involvement of religious activities in conflict of cultures. It is recorded that many conflicts throughout the history are attributed to religious activities. Religion is an important part of human society. It works as a central part for many individual's identity. As the beauty is in the eye of its beholder in the same manner every religion has its' own value and belief in the heart of its beholders. And these are the things that pursue an individual one to accept it without any question. It is directly related to the word of the god. Religion is not fixed with any particular concept but it helps us to understand the historical, cultural and geographical aspects of the world. Religion is the mixer of many variables including beliefs in the existence of the god and a set of practices of an individual community to follow these norms and beliefs. The relationship between religion and peace is still a subject of concern because it raised a query about whether more religious countries are less peaceful or not for the human beings.

Keywords: Religion, Culture, Conflict, Community.

Generally, it is observed that the countries with greater religious freedoms are seemed more peaceful rather than the countries with less religious freedom in the world. India is a country which provides the equal religious freedom for each and individual religious activities to all religious groups. The conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities remains a subject of concern since the post colonial era. The British regime had played a key role to make divide India into two major communal groups. Indian council act of 1909 is not ignorable from the history of the Indian partition. To offer a separate electoral right to Muslim community from Hindu in local elections, British had made a wide ditch between both communities. The incident

of partition of India had imparted the joint power of 'Samyunkta Bharta'. However, Nehru was not in favour of separate electoral system so he advocated the idea that religion must be separate from the politics. Observing the majority of the Hindu community he declared India as a Hindu nation. As we know that the ideology of Hindutava in India gets its root in region of B.J.P. Chaudhuri discusses how "Hinduism" and the "mainstream" are inseparable:

'Mainstream': the word that would mean, in a democratic nation, the law abiding democratic polity, is cunningly conflated, in the newspeak of our present government, with the religious majority; and those who don't belong to that majority become, by subconscious association and suggestion, antidemocratic, and breakers of the law. (Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture, 162)

Amit Chaudhuri has a virtue of versatile personality. He is not only performed in the field of writing but also has drawn the attention of music lover's as a music composer. Chaudhuri is the writer of Indian English literature who has tried to encompass the many contemporary issues of the society in his works. He has given the equal space to all these issues which has to face by an individual in society in terms of the languages, cultures, and religion. He is an acclaimed author of seven novels. In *Freedom Song* he drew a perfect line between Hindu and Muslim communities through depiction of the conflict. He represented each and every smallest happening of the story in a perfect way. The major characters inside the novel are divided into two age's groups which are the reflector of their own culture and tradition in perfect way. The story begins with the feeling of irritation of protagonist's mother Khuku. She feels unrest from the voice of the loudspeaker which was coming from a mosque's speaker. Chaudhuri has depicted the irritation of a Hindu for Muslim community in below given style:

It was a solitary voice, saying Allah-hu-akbar and other familiar but incomprehensible syllables. Though it was coming out from quite far away, for the nearest mosque was a mile northward, she could hear it clearly, as if it were being recited in this very lane, and its presence filled the grey area between her sleep and waking. (F.S. 3)

The idea of communal harmony and unity is clearly reflected through the face of historical evidence and native literatures. It is no doubt that the aspects of Hindu and Islamic communities, particularly Persian and Turkic culture have influenced each other in a deep way. It

is remarked out by Cynthia Talbot that, “at the village level...Hindus and Muslims shared a wide spectrum of customs and beliefs, at times even jointly worshipping the same saint or holy spot”.(Web) Talbot, a historian whose main focus of study remains on pre-colonial India, argues:

No one would deny that modernization has led to the sharper articulation of identities encompassing broad communities...modern identities do not spring fully fashioned out of nowhere. They commonly employ the myths and symbols of earlier forms of identity that may be less clearly formulated and more restricted in circulation but are nonetheless incipient cores of ethnicity.(Web)

Chaudhuri has represented a perfect scenario of Hindu- Muslim riot during the period of demolition of the mosque. The clash between two cultural groups is well described by Chaudhuri in his travel essay. Chaudhuri splendidly described his journey through this novel by observing different part of cultural values in philosophical and speculative manner. Chaudhuri’s idea of elaboration of the situations and characters is very peculiar so he has tried to shape out and frame all these things through the perspective of cross cultures. The novelist has reflected the different type of traditions and culture in his works. He has described about Islamic culture and religion in a deep manner. The Islamic people are very intricate in nature. They feel that they are superior in the world. They can’t assimilate with other religion and culture. They are quiet opposite to Hindus community in every manner of life. So a conflicted situation always remains stand in front of the both community. Both are intolerable for each other in religious perspective. Chaudhuri has cleared the picture of modern India through given his own opinion on Indian society. Mini the friend of Khuku’s childhood lives with Khuku in her house. Once Mini finds Khuku in disappointment and asks about the reason in gentle manner, “What, Khuku! She said with great surprise. ‘You’re up already?’”(F.S. 5) The question was obvious because Mini finds Khuku in awaking state before the usual time of woke up. And then Khuku being a Hindu devotee complains in bold manner:

‘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 say wide awake with my head feeling hot.’ ‘Really!’ said, Mini, feeling outraged on her behalf, and seeming to speak of group absolutely tiresome school children (for she was a school teacher), ‘They are going too far! And,’ she said, ‘it is not really Indian, it sound like Bedouins’. (F.S. 5)

Indian constitution also not left untouched with this issue. Article no. 15 supports that there would be no divergence between the religions; all religious followers are free to do their religious activities in their religious institutions. In her book *India Before Europe* Cynthia Talbot writes, “Although the religious beliefs and practices of India were never systemized by a central institution or spiritual authority, the circulation of Sanskrit and Brahmins throughout the subcontinent did produce some semblance of a unified religious culture at the elite level by 1000 CE”(Web).

Chaudhuri has painted a perfect picture of religious conflict on a broad canvas of literature. He has tried to confine the religious beliefs of two different communities. Hindu and Muslim both religions are different to each other in terms of cultural and religious activities. From the history of the world; it is observed that Muslims always remain in favour of spread of Islam. They had promoted the idea of Persian language and literature and established Islam at broad level in India during their regime. The two nation theory is not an idea that comes out of nowhere. It becomes one of the major causes of formation of Pakistan.

Inside the novel’s story Khuku and Mini are busy in conversation on the burning issue of Muslims’ increased population. No government policy has shown their interest to prevent their increased population. In this regards Mini accuses the Muslims and blames them for increased population:

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. (F.S. 66)

An individual, class or group or a society's way of living style is structured by its religion and this religion ties the members of that particular society in a thread. In this sense, we can say that culture and religion are most complementary components to each other because neither the culture of an individual can be isolated from that of the group nor the culture of the group can be abstracted from that of the whole society.

India established itself as a secular country. After declaration of partition many of the people had to leave their home either by force or in intentionally way. The Partition created a

barrier between Hindus and Muslims communities. It is universal fact that both communities cannot be merged to each other in cultural and religious activities. British had sowed the seedbeds of conflict between Hindus and Muslims in early 20th century period. But it is not means that all Muslims were in opposition on the name of the religion but few were kept themselves attached with the feeling of nationalism.

Chaudhuri reflected a perfect picture of cast and religion through his novel, *Freedom Song*. He wants to represent a conflicting situation of particular part of the society. The theme of the cultural conflict depicts the contradictory narrative pattern of the writer. Amit Chaudhuri loves his nation very much. He hates the negative forces like selfish growth of communist party in Calcutta, the act of Babri Masjid's demolition and the Muslim attitude for their gratuity to make their religion grow in India. Chaudhuri has strictly assimilated with the Indian cultural value. He thinks that Indians hate to Muslims beyond their caste matter. They both have the feeling of enmity to each other. They curse to each other for their different cultural activities. Chaudhuri has depicted the perfect picture of contemporary issue of communal conflict through representation of Hindu's and Muslim's belief. Chaudhuri has tried his best to bring out the matter of conflict in front of the readers. Khuku informs Mini that the cultural activities of Muslim's community are too horrible to bear for a Hindu. She gets frustrated and expresses her views for their religious festival:

During their festivals, sweets made of semolina were left in platters and distributed; they prayed here; marriage were made; they had their own butches' and 'tailors' shops. They had their own school for the blind and their madrassas. Children and women in saris and in burkhas, maulvis and music teachers and private tutors and businessmen all mingling under storeys that were heaped one on the top of the other.(F.S.160)

Chaudhuri's description of Islamic community reflects his internal thrust for self and search in the world. Islam becomes a unique challenge for the world. As it is world know that Muslims came with the ideas of spreading the Islam in the world. They not only had occupied the kingdom but also hampered the values of Hindu's culture in India. So the footprints of their culture somewhere still found in several religious festivities and occasion of India. The demolition of the Babri mosque becomes the main cause of cultural conflict in Hindu- Muslim relationships. Alev Adil in his article given his remark:

Bhaskar's political passions, his membership of the communist party in the face of his family's disapproval and the effects of his affliction on his marriage and career prospects, like Khuku and Mini's hatred of Muslims are not something that Chaudhuri takes seriously.... Khuku's fervent racism is treated as motherly childish foible. From their domestic vantage point, political unrest, the curfew, bombings and the Babri Masjid incident are not entirely real. (20)

Khuku and Mini keep continuing their discussion on the matter of Muslims' odd behavior. Both friends assert their crude opinion for the Muslim community and every time, "they grew excited about the azaan on the loudspeakers, and about Muslim festivals in which people beat themselves with whips and cords"(F.S.66). She criticizes the loudspeaker's sound whose noise had disturbed her sleep. However, the sound means in Islam's point of view is different. Suleiman the music teacher defends his religion on asking by Khuku, "Meanwhile, the muezzin went on praising the virtues of Allah in syllables that sounded like 'laillallah rasulallah,' and Allah was great, Allah was good and glorious"(F.S.106). She further keeps continuing her comment and says, "They should change as well, not just Hindus"(F.S.66) Even she reflects her frustration in more aggressive manner saying that, "Is it necessary for all the world to hear it?"(F.S.109). Hearing these words from the Khuku's mouth, her music teacher Suleiman retaliates and reflects his faith using the following words, "It is the word of God"(F.S.159). Khuku is surprised getting the response from his teacher and murmurs in the heart, "See how stubborn they are"(F.S.159).

Here Chaudhuri has highlighted the idea of communal conflict in contemporary society of India. Muslims want to spread the Islamic state in India while the Hindus seem conscious to keep their identity safe. It is reflected through the given act of the novel in which Khuku boldly exclaims to Mini in a bold manner keeping, "her eyes larger than usual. 'I might even vote for the BJP. Why not?'"(F.S.67) However, "Khuku and Mini did not believe in Ram or Krishna; Khuku's personal deity, which she might have created by her mother, was one she called Bipad Nashini, or Destroyer of Distress, who she saw as a maternal figure who watched over her and her family, and whose name she muttered whenever she was worried: 'He bipad nashini, he bipad nashini'"(F.S.68) In his childhood period, "Khuku had heard of the Muslims, or the Musholman, as child"(F.S.68) from her elder brother and, "it was he who first told her of the Hindoos, who were a fierce wandering tribe with swords who cut up everything in their path, as

their very name, ‘Hin-doo’, suggested, and Musholmaans, he explained, were ghosts who haunted the dark and hilly regions of Sylhet”.(F.S.69)

Hindu and Muslim communities in India still remain a subject of concern. Through the representation of contemporary scenario of Indian politics Chaudhuri has tried to reflect the community conflict in a perfect way. A fine example of Bihar assembly’s election is represented by Chaudhuri in order to understand the cultural conflict between both communities. In assembly’s election where at one side the Hindu supporter were supporting to B.J.P and ‘Har har Modi’ had been the celebratory chant in Bihar, echoing, perhaps, the battle cry of the Maratha warriors who’d fought Muslim kings while invoking Shiva: ‘Har har Mahadev’(Diary). So an act of conflicted situation is depicted by the writer in front of the readers. Author himself experienced the same conflict during election time when the exit poll was in favor of Congress. At that time Chaudhuri observed the two Muslim supporters, who were pleased to declare that B.J.P party had lost the election. The politics pundits also, “blamed Modi for abandoning development in favor of religion. Others decided that caste politics had, as they usually do in Bihar, decided the outcome. The result probably owed something to all of these factors” (Diary). Chaudhuri has reflected the political picture of India in front of the society that arouses the issue of cultural conflict:

Late in the morning the vegetable-seller who comes to our flat with his basket every day said: ‘BJP haar raha hain’ (‘The BJP is losing’). He is Bihari and Muslim, and had a reason for keeping track. But I didn’t rush to turn on the TV so it wasn’t until five o’clock, when a tabla player arrived to help my daughter with her vocal practice, that I heard it confirmed: ‘BJP heré gechhe’ (‘The BJP has lost’). Although the tabla player, like the vegetable-seller, is a Muslim, I don’t think that either of them is a staunch opponent of the BJP. Besides, the BJP has a few vociferous Muslim members, and intermittently makes half-hearted gestures of inclusiveness towards the Muslim vote-bank. (Diary)

As BJP came into power on December sixth, 1992, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished by a Hindu mob. They argued that it had been built on the site of a previous temple to Rama. Anna Sitbe concerned her remarks in her study “I am walking in my city” The Hindutva ideology reached a peak in the winter of 1992-1993 with the destruction of the Babri

Masjid (Mosque) in Ayodhya, and the following riots. In addition, 1997 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the independent Indian nation-state, and these novels engage with foundational ideas, such as the creation of the imaginary of India and its urban centers.” (F.S.8) She also further remarked on the riot:

The “incident” of the Ayodhya mosque brought issues of secularism and sectarianism to the foreground. Sectarianism (especially between Hindus and Muslims) has been recurring in the history of independent India, and was indeed most prominent during the violent 1947 Partition.(F.S.12)

The communal riot is a common incident in Bengal. They are not only happened one or two time but immerse frequently whenever the issue of conflict rich at high level. Chaudhuri has painted a live picture of Hindu and Muslim religious conflict in Bengal through the representation of the riot incident. The riot is depicted by the author through representation of an act of curfew:

During the curfew a month ago, all had been disorder and silence, Jochna, who was becoming increasingly pretty had not been able to come to work for two days, there had been tension in her area and fear of violence. It was at such times that the sketchy unfencedness of their existence became palpable, that they must lead live perpetually and nakedly open to duress. The Muslim had taken out a procession, at night, when usually an owl – Laksmi’ a ancient companion and carrier- hooted near the railway crossing, with a tremulous sense of something about to happen, Jochna and her family and other Hindus in the basti had been moved to a nearby Christian school, while the furious Muslims apparently congregated and went about shouting and protesting. (F.S.86-87)

Through the depiction of the novel Chaudhuri has tried to bring out the major concern of communal conflict between the Hindus and Muslims on the matter of Babri Masjid. Khuku and Mini criticize government for failure in policy. Khuku confirms her faith in toppling of the mosque in saying that, “What if one mosque had gone- for hundred of temples had been destroyed before”(F.S.104) She does not stop her comments but further remarks also that, “Promises, always promises. No sooner had the mosque gone down than the government had

promised that it would be built again” She puts out her anger and said, “Who’ll rebuild those temples?”(F.S.105)

Chaudhuri has depicted the true picture of contemporary society in which Muslims want to spread their roots (Islam) over the world. He criticizes this community to protest the government policies. The latest example in front of us is the incident of Shahin Bagh protest, in which this community had created a huge havoc on the name of Islam. They kept continue their protest more than two months with the support of few local bodies and political parties. Author has tried to reflect the overconfidence of this community through the given lines of the novels: “In one newspaper, a Muslim writer said, ‘The heart of the parrot of Hindu fundamentalism beats the giant of Muslim fundamentalism. Kill the giant, and you will have killed the parrot’”(F.S.107).

Chaudhuri has tried to find out the Hindus’ opinion for Muslims’ cultural activities. Khuku had learnt from her from her elder brother Borda about the cruelty of Muslims. So now, she hates to this community. The reflection of hated behavior towards Muslims is depicted by Chaudhuri through the character of Khuku:

As for Khuku, she was often in a state of irritation. Only recently she had woken up again by the azzan, and at first she had thought it was a mosquito humming near her ear. It grew louder, and then faded, and then grew louder again; its notes swelled faintly and then diminished, just as when a mosquito hovers above one in indecision, then she realized what it was. Where is it coming from? She wondered. It must be Park Circus, from one of those lanes above which the minarets rose. It reminded her that there were altogether too many Muslim around her. Sometimes, in the afternoon, the sound hovered in the middle air, and, if she were passing by in the car, she could sometimes hear two different voices at different pitches, as one came closer, they filled the air. (F.S.158-159)

Conclusion:

Chaudhuri expressed the matter of sectarianism and communalism and its effect on the middle class people in India in their everyday life. Hindu and Muslim are two different ideologies which cannot be merged to each other at any condition. They are different to each other in many perspectives like as religion, culture, books, language, dresses, food, festivals,

manners and behavior. Through depiction of religious conflict Chaudhuri tried to reflect a perfect picture of the changing face of Bengali culture in terms of cultural and religious conflict.

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