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Freedom Song: A Study of Cultural Conflict

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Abstract:

Amit Chaudhuri is a well-known Indian author in Postmodern Indian English fiction. His creativeness lies in the forms which he has adopted for his writing. He depicts themes like identity crisis, search for self, socio-political issues, cultural or communal conflicts and so on in his literary corpus. His writing is remarkable for its description of bright side of ordinary life. He is a gifted storyteller whose narrative is filled up with daily routine of the characters which made him master of Miniature. His novel *Freedom Song* is all about the cultural conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities. He set the novel against the backdrop of Ayodhya incident. He brings out the clashes between these communities through his characters' reaction to this particular incident. This research paper is a modest attempt to bring out cultural conflicts reflected in *Freedom Song*.

Keywords: culture, cultural conflict, massacre, fundamentalist ideology, communism.

Amit Prakash Chaudhuri is the most gifted creative writer in Indian English Literature. He has developed a taste for music which is reflected in the theme of his novels is due to the influence of his mother. He has handled every genre of literature like poems, novels, short stories and essays effectively. Besides, he has contributed numerous reviews in various publications like The Times Literary Supplement, The Guardian, The London Review of Books, The New Yorker and Grantha Magazine. Till date he has seven novels to his credit which won him several prizes and recognitions. He was elected in the Judging panel of the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2009.

Freedom Song is the third novel by the author. It is set in the time of social and religious turmoil after the demolition of Babri Masjid. This communal tension serves as a backdrop of the novel and provides space or scope to the author to explore cultural conflict that shatters the harmony in society. He has depicted communal tensions between Hindus and

Muslims. It is a story of two middle class families living in Calcutta during the winter of 1992. The author clearly mentions at the very beginning of the novel that his focus is on the religious conflict between two major religious groups in India: Hindu and Muslim who follow different cultural values and beliefs. He illustrates this theme through the discussion of two female characters, Khuku and her friend Mini.

When the novel opens we find Khuku is complaining about the Islamic religious practice of *azaan*. It is a call for prayer to all devoted Muslims which is a part of their cultural norm. But this is not same for the people who belong to other cultures. They find it disturbing and unnecessary practice followed blindly throughout ages. This welcome call of *azaan* on the loudspeaker disturbs their sound sleep. Khuku becomes irritated by this practice of *azaan* and expresses her anguish to her friend, Mini. She thinks that it is not good to disturb many people for the sake of religious practices of minority people. Practically, her point of view is correct because she is brought up in totally different culture. The author points out that Muslims hold on to their tradition which is outdated in this modern era. He explains that, the tradition of singing *azaan* on loudspeakers early in the morning is not Indian originally. In fact, it comes down from the Bedouins, the Arab tribes used to live in tents in desert. They followed such practices in ancient period as there were no other options to gather at a particular time for their prayers. But Indian Muslims still follow this tradition blindly to preserve their unique identity in this multicultural nation. They do not bother whether it disturbs the peaceful life of other people from different cultural backgrounds.

These two friends express their concern about the increasing population of Muslims in India that shows their hidden fear. They opine all the rules of population are mandatory for Hindus alone. Chaudhuri writes:

They talked of how, by the next century, there would be more Muslims than Hindus in the country. Mini, being the teacher, had facts and figures. She told Khuku that “population control” was meant for Hindus alone, and Khuku, listening to Mini, began to see Muslims everywhere. (294)

Though Hindus are majority in India they are conscious of the growing numbers of Muslims in recent years. This will be a threat to their existence. They show their contempt towards the customs like beating oneself with cords and whips, walking on burning coal during the celebration of festivals. They consider it unreasonable and wrong. All these views



reflect their hatred towards Muslim community and their cultural norms and traditions. This approach is harmful for a multicultural society.

The novelist describes the situation after the demolition of Babri Mosque by the Hindu fundamentalist. This act of violence resulted into communal riots that erupted all over India. It is believed that the fundamentalist who take initiative in the demolition are the activist of Bhartiya Janta Party. Khuku and Mini, representative of Hindu sensibility, welcome their efforts and praise them for doing such noble work. Their support indicates that they are equally antisocial in their behavior. They are responsible for the polarization of society and communal conflict which resulted in the massive bloodshed. Communal riots that erupted after Ayodhya incidence damage the socio-cultural harmony of India. The Muslim community becomes outrageous. Muslim fundamentalists infuriated the mob and provoke them to take revenge; as a result there were communal riots in December 1992 and January 1993. This is followed by the series of bomb blasts that took place in Bombay in March 1993. This costs hundreds of lives of innocent people from both sides.

The government declared curfew but still violence was going on. Common people have to suffer due to the restrictions imposed on them. They could not go outside to earn bread and butter. The fear of violence and police firing affected their lives. Women have to remain imprisoned in home as they are vulnerable. Many of them have to leave their home and go to the rehabilitation centers to save their life. The government and communists like Bhaskar try their best to bring back harmony and peace in the society. But Khuku and Mini's thoughts are contradictory to them. They believe that there is no point to be fanatic for the demolition of a single mosque. Because in past Muslim emperors had destroyed so many temples and no one is trying to rebuild them. The author penned their distress as:

“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)

Their conversation exhibits the feelings of many Hindus who are dissatisfied with the biased attitude of government. The author satirizes politician's policy of appeasing or favoring some communities for political gain. At this particular point they are trying to increase the number of voters by alluring them with the promise that in future they will build another mosque on the same place. On the contrary, their opponents are trying to appeal Hindu people by projecting the image of a temple of Shri Ram in the place of the demolished Mosque. In this way, these two political parties are exploiting people emotionally to fulfill their political ambitions.

The author has successfully depicted the conflict between Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist in this particular novel. Purvi Shah writes about the Hindu-Muslim tension in this novel. She comments,

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 tension, communist struggles, and the influence of economic changes within people's lives. (33)

The building of the temple of Shri Ram is an agenda of Hindu fundamentalist while taking revenge of the demolition of Babri Mosque is for Muslim fundamentalists. As every action has a reaction in the same way the demolition of the Mosque results in the communal violence. In this brutal massacre many innocent people lost their lives but politicians are trying to earn profit. Chaudhuri explained through his characters the contrasting feelings of two fundamentalist groups in India. Hindu extremists celebrate the demolition of the Mosque, which is a religious monument of Islam. While Muslim extremists felt content and happy after the bomb blasts in Bombay as the retaliatory action. Mini informs Khuku about Suleman's happy mood which lasts throughout the day after the bomb blasts. He effectively depicts the sentiments of both groups and resulting cultural conflict in this novel. These cultural conflicts are disastrous and pave the path of resentment. In future it will force us for another partition like situation. Amit Chaudhuri tries to give solution to resolve these conflicts through his narrator as:

The word "Fundamentalism", travelling everywhere and belonging nowhere: people try 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 Hindu fundamentalism beats in the giant of Muslim fundamentalism. Kill the giant, and you will have kill the parrot.” (323-24)

The author suggests that fundamentalism is a curse in a secular country like India. We have to respect each other’s religion and culture if we want to lead a peaceful life. He appreciates Bhaskar’s efforts to bring back unity and coherence among the two communities. He wants to reform society with his communist ideology. Thus, if we destroy this fundamentalist ideology we can lead peaceful and harmonious life in a multicultural society. To have a hatred free society should be an agenda for all political parties and that will also enhance their image in public.

Thus, we can observe that Amit Chaudhuri successfully describes cultural conflict between two communities residing India. He presents a realistic picture of communal riots and its aftermath in the novel; at the same time, he tries to portray lifelike characters who represent different sensibility of their respective culture. Chaudhuri wants to rebuild a harmonious society and believe that we can do it by respecting each other’s cultural values and norms.

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