

RAPTURES, CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN *3 MISTAKES OF MY LIFE* BY CHETAN BHAGAT

Naresh Kumar

Research Scholar

NIILM University, Kaithal

&

Assistant Professor, RKSD(PG) College, Kaithal

Dr. Savita Ahuja

(Supervisor)

Associate Professor, NIILM University, Kaithal

Dr. Rajbir Parashar

(Co- Supervisor)

Associate Professor, R.K.S.D. College, Kaithal

Abstract: Chetan Bhagat in his novel *3 Mistakes of My Life* deals with the emerging disjunctions and continuities in religious identities. Broadly, the plot of this novel grows out of the communal tensions emanating from Ram Mandir movement and Post-Godhara violence in Gujarat. Bhagat explores religious identities particularly of lower middle class in the backdrop of long drawn communal rivalry between Hindus and Muslims. While the religious identity of main characters in the novel bears the burns of social disharmony, the novelist does not simply allow them to pass through the historical moment of Gujrat riots of 2002, as their cultural beings get implicated time and again. Instead of constructing this fictional work around naturalistic responses and impressions, Bhagat molds their subjective frames to foreground the worst and best potential of religious identity. The conflict between old and young generation, apparently linear and simplistic, is actually about two or more ways of living one's religious self. Political opportunism and majoritarian fanaticism is depicted through the old generation, while the emergent forms of comparatively secularized subjectivities are represented by new generation. In both cases, their religious identity is shaped by economic forces produced as an offshoot of capitalism. The paper acknowledges and examines how the novelist creates a fictional world with visible borrowings in plot and texture of characterization from Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir Movement.

Keywords: Religion, identity, nationalism, hypocrites

Chetan Bhagat is a contemporary writer who has made his fiction a unique kind of cultural space where subjectivities and identities of lower Indian middle class are given new expressions, especially in the context of globalization as an extra-economic process. Given his own literary temper and style, Chetan Bhagat in *3 Mistakes of My Life* explores the surfaces as well depths of religious identities envisioned and practiced by the young generation of Indians. The fact that Indians are basically religious minded and epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are actually cultural institutions perpetually shaping the consciousness of a vast majority is reflected in life, politics and literature.

Identity formation on religious lines forms the core of Indian culture and Chetan Bhagat in *3 Mistakes of My Life* employs his imaginative tools to capture its multiple manifestations. The characters of the novel belong to the same world. Yet, their ways of imbibing and treating religion as an internal truth or their individual or social beings is distinct and varied. Bhagat in this novel depicts the religious identities of three young friends Govind, Ishan and Omi and two religious hypocrites Bittoo mama and Parekh ji in a communal sensitive town Belrampur. The Muslims and Hindus live in separate streets and mohallas and do not communicate much and avoid intermingling and visiting one another. This is the unwritten and undeclared style of living which both the communities have been adopting for decades for peace and harmony. Further the writer passes the characters from the narration and incidents of Gujrat

riots of 2002 whose political background is formed by Ram temple issue. Without any direct references, Bhagat revisits the collective mindset that operated continuously before and after independence.

The dichotomy of old and young generation prevails throughout the novel. Bittoo mama, the maternal uncle of Omi sees an opportunity in the communally charged political environment in the wake of Ram temple issue and joins a Hindu political party which claims to protect the concerns and interests of Hindus. He is the trustee of the Swami-bhakti temple so the entire area of temple with its shops is under his direct control. Govind, his friend Ishaan and Omi have to take his permission to take a shop on rent in the temple premises. He is discharging his duty to attract more and more young people towards their ideology. So he aspires to recruit three friends the members to his party and readily agrees to their proposal. His subjectivity in actions is dominated by religious sentiments, fanatic and hatred driven towards Muslims. NRI sensibility relates to Indian reality with different understanding of religious identities and nationalism. Parekh ji, a political enthusiast but with spiritual pretensions is a Cambridge, and Harvard University pass out. He had a big hotel business in America, which he sold away and came back. He can speak English, play cricket and was in the Cambridge college team (34). He comes to India to join politics. In the public, he pretends to uphold Hindu cause and distorts the message of religious texts for mobilization of masses. He gives the reason of his joining politics as:

I say, I am a servant of God. I didn't want to join politics. But if I as a Hindu want justice, I need to get involved in how the country is run. And what other way is there to get involved than join politics? Here I am half saffron, half white-at your service. (44)

The above statement shows how smoothly he connects religion and politics. Through the depiction of Parekh ji, Chetan Bhagat has exposed the NRI nationalism and sense of religiosity. The affluent class that Parekh ji represents is back to Gujrat or India for re-selling Indian culture with sectarian and distorted notions of Hindutava as its core. He employs impactful rhetoric to construct narratives of injustice done to Hindu around himself and hides his political ambitions in religious idiom, communal and divisive. The duo of Bittoo Mama and Parekh-ji are typical constructions of post-colonial dilemmas. They voluntarily surrender to organized religion and try to realize meanings in personal and community life through symbolic issue of Ram Mandir. But for them, sanctity of faith and its spiritual foundations are no more desirable. When they organise a public event, they are trapped in their own contradictions and paradoxes:

We are going to Ayodhya for a reason. We will get gunny-bags full of soil from there. We will go to every Hindu house in Belrampur and ask them if they want a spoon of mud from Rama's birthplace in their house. They can put it in their backyard, mix it with plants or whatever. (117)

To Parekh ji and Bittoo mama, Lord Rama is not all prevailing, rather they advocate importing 'mud' from Ayodhya which is sheer symbolism. This idea of visiting every house and giving mud from Ayodhya shows the utilitarian attitude of Parekh ji towards religion. He has no spiritual and emotional sentiments connected to Hinduism or lord Rama but wishes to gain political mileage just by using religion in the name of Rama. But the party loses the election despite the hardwork of Bittoo mama. When he is very much distressed, Parekh ji like a seasoned politician takes him to a big hotel and lectures him "Eat, and don't get so sentimental about politics. Emotional speeches are fine, but in your mind always think straight"(191). The statement before Bittoo Mama in a room of hotel reveals Parekh ji's hollow and superficial adherence towards religion. Their true intentions get exposed not in public places but their private rooms.

The character of Omi is distinctly placed in background, cultural upbringing and key factors in identity formation. He is a son of priest so he is born and brought up in religious atmosphere. He is a devout Hindu as he does not eat non-veg and his adherence to religion is limited up to this. When he is offered the priesthood of the same temple, he denies it. Being a member of new generation of 21st century, he does not find it to be of any charm materialistically or otherwise. Instead, he joins the Hindu political party. He sees in it, the political opportunity for his mama as he pats his back saying "We will have an MLA in the family" (3 M 189). But in this process, his basic disliking for Muslims and love for Hindu brethren get intensified. He becomes the ardent follower of his mama and considers his every action and statement true and argues with Ali's father when he requests him to visit his party. This particular episode, Chetan Bhagat employs to expose how politics in contemporary India became an instrument of cultural 'othering':

Do you know who you are talking to? I am Pandit Shastri's son. You have seen the swami temple in Belrampur or not?

How does that matter, son? Ali's dad said.

You are telling me to come visit your party? I am a Hindu.

We won't hold that against you. Ours is a secular party.

It is not secular. It is suck-ular party. Suck up politics that is all you know (64).

The comment made on secularism in politics is indirectly addressed to a desirable re-orientation of civil and cultural space where Hindu nationalists like Omi and his mama are intervening. Omi's declaring of his Hindu identity empathically shows that in communication with Muslims, how his religious identity dominates his behavior and action. His quote shows how people like Omi view secularism with an eye of suspicion. The last sentence of quote in which secular word is broken into suck and ular shows big raptures in the concept of secularism and how it affects the Hindu majority whom Omi represents. In fact, his subjective consciousness has become a cultural space of contesting attitudes and identities rotating in the mutuality of three close friends, but in reality, having manifestations in larger cultural processes.

But it is the persona and identity formation of Govind that Chetan Bhagat employs to express really deep raptures in religious and cultural attitudes of contemporary Gujrat in particular and India in general. Govind with his psychological landscape is subject to the multiplicity of factors affecting cultural upbringing of Indian youth trying to carve distinctly individual paths in private and community life. He is not traditionally attached to religious temper of his peers and relatives as he declares himself as an agnostic. His dominating identity as an entrepreneur leaves little scope for him to be religious as in his view, it is a profit less activity. But Bittoo Mama persuades him to join the party by making him realize that he has done something for him as he says, "But this isn't about religion. It is about justice. And considering we gave you this shop at such a low rent, you owe us something" (77). This political and economic logic is given because he knows that Govind is not simpleton and would not be convinced with religious speeches. After the destruction of their shop, mama helps them in relaxing the condition of loan and businessman in Govind relents a bit feeling regretful, "Mama, I am sorry . I was arrogant , rude and disrespectful. I realize my destiny is this shop. May be God intended it this way and I accept it"(3 M 118). Govind trapped in economic crisis takes the relaxation of loan as a big favour and feels grateful to mama. He halfheartedly promises mama to help him in his political works. In the rally convened in support of local candidate Hasmukh ji, he along with his friends is assigned subsidiary tasks which he considers as low standard as per his dignity and potential. When he is asked by Omi to spy of the parallel rally of Ali's father, his state of mind is divided and not as linear as that of the crowd there. Vikram N. Patel in his thesis *Select Issues Of Contemporary Indian Society In The Fictional Works of Chetan Bhagat* comments on the use of youth for petty works in politics as :

The youth are used in politics in most of the cases as volunteers; as unpaid workers or labourers in most of the cases. ... The young generation is tempted during the election time, with the promises of employments in millions, they are shown shining stars in their palms, in day light but the end results are the prevalent unemployment, under employment, and exploitation of the young people. (246)

The above quote of Patel is aptly relevant in context of three friends whose participation in political actions and discourse of *3 mistakes of My Life* is having internal variations of reasons and understanding. As Patel argues, it is the young generation which is introduced in politics not as decision maker but as petty workers. The love hate relationship with petty political job sips deep into the psyche of young generation and Govind emerges as a kind of battleground of the inner conflicts.

In this novel, Chetan Bhagat has borrowed a part of his sub-plot from the historically sensitive and volatile social tensions preceding and following Gujrat riots in 2001. Pre or post-Gohara scene of Indian cultural discourse having a direct bearing on Indian politics is one of the issues addressed in the novel. Parekh ji and Bittoo Mama are both men in action as cultural agents of a political formation devising methods to co-opt the sensibility of youth as well as general public. They organize a trip of volunteers for Ram Temple to Ayodhya. On their return journey, near Godhra railway station, a bogie of the Sabarmati Express with Kar Sevaks (Ram Temple volunteers) is set fire by

Muslim miscreants. The communal riots that follow burn entire Gujarat and the flame of communal riots spread to some other parts of the country. Dr. Ashish Gupta and Siddharth Pandole comment:

We have seen dozens of communal riots among which the barbarity of the Gujarat riots will always remain the ugly face of modern Indian democracy in which more than 2000 innocent people lost their lives. ... It is paradoxical that when all religions intend to preach brotherhood and universal love, yet we are always in arms against a person who said to worship a different God. (Gupta,5)

The scholars have rightly highlighted the paradoxical position of religion. In the narrative, characters like Omi, Govind, Ishaan and Bittoo Mama get involved in the riots willingly or unwillingly. When in riots son of Bittoo Mama, Dhiraj gets killed, Bittoo becomes blood thirsty and considers every member of Muslim community his enemy – a moment when ‘othering’ on religious lines seems to have reached irreversible levels of hatred and mistrust. He has already killed parents of Ali and now he is desperate to kill Ali, who is in the custody of three friends. This religious identity which he assumes for getting personal revenge and garnering political mileage overpowers him completely. His identity of a politically motivated religious activist is taken over by that of a rioter and murderer. His psychological state is clear from his statement which he utters when weeping Omi tries to console him:

Don't cry. Nobody will cry today (. . .) we Hindus have only cried. While these mother fuckers come and keep killing us over the centuries. ... And we don't do anything. We just cry. Come rape us, loot us and burn us. They think they can terrorise the whole fucking world but we will have no guts to do anything (Bhagat Three 222).

Even in moment of utter grief and loss, Bittoo is unable to contain his depleting humanism being eroded not by Muslims as such, but by the divisive cult of religiosity he has fallen a prey to. Thus religious identity adopted for political gain becomes central to his life. It dominates him so much that the tragic happenings, personal or community scale, are unable to correct him. Chetan Bhagat, as revealed in Bittoo's above outburst, recurrently reproduces how religious fanaticism evokes history, past, religion and contemporaneity without any genuine understanding of any.

Chetan Bhagat is naturally drawn to the life experiences and imagined realities of younger generation of India evolving in the age of globalized economy and cultural meanings produced by consumerism. The collective mindset of youth as expressed in the complex layers of relationship of three friends in *3 Mistakes of My Life* is not without internal raptures in their respective identities. Though their experience of life in general and understanding of relationships have perceptible limitations, but in a highly divided society of Gujarat, they readily come together to save Ali because Ishaan has owned to mentor him. Conflicts turn out to be temporary and their mutuality is far richer than the one offered through characters of Parekh ji and Bittoo mama. For example, the conversation between Govind and Ishaan brings out tensions while retaining the achieved level of trust and reciprocity in relationship. Govind, the most sceptic of three friends, utters:

Giving up three lives to possibly save one. Can you show me the maths in this?

Fuck your maths. This isn't about business.

Then what is it about? Why should we all die? Only because you love the kid?

No, ... Because he is a national treasure. (3 M 230)

Though Govind is questioning the rationale behind putting their own lives at stake to save Ali, his attitude is neither bitter nor rejectionist in essence. Ishaan, a sportsman, projects Ali as a ‘national treasure’ – a new and transformative moment for their subjectivities in face of communal tensions and acculturation in Gujarat. Consequently, all of them, three friends assert their humanistic values firmly and act as protectors of Ali due to their friendship. Here the novelist induces a rhizomatic scope in the identity of Omi who otherwise a devout Hindu and hater of Muslims becomes a well-wisher of Ali. Transcending and overcoming his subjective communal orientation and the embittered social milieu, he earnestly urges his maternal uncle not to harm Ali. It is Omi who intervenes decisively when he has been nearly killed as Bittoo's trishul enters his stomach five inches inside. He says “ He is a good boy Mama, he didn't kill your son. All Muslims are not bad”(3M, 244). Saying this Omi dies. This tragic demise of Omi in a self-sacrificing mode is suggestive of a specific message that implicates the identity and very living conditions of citizens of all age

groups. Nitin A. Kolekar in his article “Communal Violence in Chetan Bhagat’s *The Three Mistakes of My Life*” comments upon this particular incident in the novel:

Ishan, Govind and Omi became successful to save the life from Bittoo mama and his companions, but Omi sacrificed himself to save the life of one Muslim. Through this example we may say that they not only saved the life of Ali but also the Humanity, Friendship, which are the most important than Ram Mandir, Babri Masjid or any religion. (52)

This quote aptly defines how religious identity of new generation has ample space for nation, humanity, brotherhood and friendship to flourish. V. Anuradha while commenting on communalism in the age of globalization as such also hints at the problematics arising out of its cultural and political logic :

Communalism is all about narrowness and anyone with tolerance and broad mindedness can never be communal in nature. ... Man might have been exclusive in ancient times, but as earth rolled there would have been lots of mix up and it is a foolhardy thing to speak about exclusivism in the present era. (Anuradha,107)

Omi’s sacrifice to save a Muslim boy can be seen in the light of this statement. His family background and incitement by Bittoo could not dehumanize him absolutely. In fact, the surficial layer his Hindu identity communalized in given conditions finally embraces a more inclusive humanism coming through insistence of Ishan and the symbolic resonance of cricket in human hearts of the Indian sub-continent. Similarly, a horizontal move visible is in the identity of Govind, who despite being as a money minded businessman plays a proactive role in financial terms to protect Ali. Isshan, an individual passionate for Cricket and full of sportsman ship emerges as a true patriot who refuses to delink his nationalism from universal human values.

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