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Ordering the Disordered: Destiny, Religious Politics and Friendship in Chetan Bhagat's "*The Three Mistakes of My Life*"

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Abstract

Chetan Bhagat is the most loved and widely-read English language novelist in India today. His novels touch a chord with the youth of the nation. He is seen as a youth icon, as his novels mostly focus on the problems the young people confront. *The Three Mistakes of My Life*, his third novel, deals with the lives of three young friends in the backdrop of some real events which shook the nation. Set in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, the novel, while it portrays the community life and bond of friendship, it also exposes the wrongs done to the lives of people by the dirty religious politics. Narrated by one of the three characters, the story highlights the disorders that mark a society which fails to recognize the values of community life and sacred bonds of solidarity, brotherhood and friendship. How this religious politics poses a real hazard to the safety of a society is one of the central themes of the novel. Realisation of drawbacks on the part of an individual is a step towards bringing an order to the disturbances created in the world people inhabit. The paper makes an attempt to show how the theme of ordering the disordered has been developed through the confession of the protagonist of his big mistakes in life.

Keywords: Religion, Friendship, Destiny, Guilty Conscience, Disorder

Like his earlier novel *One Night@ The Call Centre*, *The Three Mistakes of My Life* also has a frame story. It is one of Bhagat's favourite techniques of entering the story himself as a character. This lends a touch of credibility to the fictional account of events imaginatively created by the author, making it easy for the readers to relate to the story. The novel begins with the author getting an email from Govind, the narrator of the story, telling him he has swallowed thirteen sleeping pills, as he is no longer interested in living. He committed

certain very serious mistakes in life, which sit like a heavy burden on his heart, and the guilty conscience tears his whole being to pieces. The author is shocked and somehow manages to meet the disheartened and broken Govind in a hospital and there begins the real story of three friends as told by Govind who happens to be one of them. Thus at the very outset, we find that normalcy is ruptured. Something is seriously wrong with one of the characters, making him lose all hope and confidence in life. The author is confronted with a challenge to order the disordered, to find out a solution to set things right.

The story of these three friends, Omi, Ish, (Ishan) and Govind is set in Ahmedabad. After they finish their school, Govind plans to enter business, believing that being a Gujarati, business is in his blood and to accommodate the passions of his friends, he opens a sports shop as Ishan is a cricket freak and Omi, the son of a priest, though much concerned with a healthy body, loves to be with friends. Abandoned by his father, Govind's mother runs her own small business of selling home-made food items. Govind who is very good at mathematics, continues giving tuitions even after starting the sports shop in order to make more money besides assisting his mother financially. However, he fails to maintain his practical attitude to life in the moment of high crisis. But the much needed consolation comes from the relatives, well-wishers and especially the friends. The true bond of friendship stands as a strong wall against any crisis and adversity.

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The novel while it highlights the theme of community life, brotherhood and solidarity, it underlines the sustained struggle of characters to put in their effort and energy in setting things right by accepting the challenges posed by the disturbances and disorders around them. They also show their human weakness of faltering, hesitating and not being able to take action in the most crucial and decisive moments. Then they repent, feel sorry and suffer inwardly. This internal suffering is indicative of their continued struggle to carry on. The spirit of togetherness and deep attachment with one another makes these characters the representative of positive attitude required to establish a healthy society where individuals collectively fight the malpractices and wrongdoings of anti-social and anti-human elements.

Govind and his friends name their small business venture 'The Team India Cricket Shop' at the suggestion of Ishan. He could not make it to the NDA and came back home to face the anger of his father who thinks him a good-for-nothing guy. But Ishan is very noble at heart. He is patriotic and his greatest love in life is cricket. He has been the best cricketer in his locality and school. When he discovers an extraordinarily gifted young Muslim boy, Ali, he makes up his mind to go any length to ensure the boy gets a place in team India.

Omi comes from a religious background. His mother's family has been the trustee of the temple in their locality for generations. His father is a priest in the same temple and his maternal Uncle, Bittoo mama is an active party worker enlisting his support to Parikhji, who is a religious preacher-cum-politician. These people manipulate religion for their vested interests mixing it with politics and playing upon the emotions of their community, igniting and fanning their sentiments to make them fight in the name of religion.

Although Omi participates in various programmes of the party on the coaxing and persuasions of his mama, he fails to understand the religious notion of the elders in his family and is

rather confused. He loves the company of friends and is ready to help them in any possible ways. It is through his involvement that Bittoo mama allows the boys to open their small shop outside the temple compound. When the friends meet Ali's father for the first time who is a member of a secular party, we find Omi getting enraged even at the very sensible talk of Ali's father related to a controversy that involves Hindus and Muslims. This gives a fair idea how the poor fellow's religious thoughts and emotions have been conditioned and governed by his mama who is a hardliner Hindu and Parekh-ji who is a witty politician and crooked preacher rolled in one.

Omi's friends know him well. Ishanout rightly rebuffs him whenever he tries to bring in the issue of discrimination between people on the religious ground. When Ishan plans to coach a Muslim boy, Govind raises an eyebrow and tries to object but Ishan is there always to shut him up and Govind like a good friend admits his faults. Thus we see that the author through numerous events, incidents and situations in the story makes his one or the other character the representative of the process of ordering the disordered.

If there are Bittoo mama and Parekh-ji with their extremist views and damaging religious ideology, there is Ali's father, a member of the secular party who knows the importance of fraternity and tolerance in a society for different communities to live together with peace and understanding. He respects an individual as a human being first, irrespective of the consideration of caste, creed or religion, recognizing the dignity and respect one deserves as a member of a civilized society and realizing the fact that "Politics and religion are both expressions of our underlying moral psychology, and an understanding of that psychology can help to bring people together" (Hadith10). His association with the secular party is only to the extent of getting a platform to share his views of human goodness, piety, and unbiased attitude toward people. He is aware of the destructive role of dirty politics, which unfortunately has taken the centre stage, making

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politicians forget their responsibilities, as they have no qualms getting into all wrongful deeds to secure their source of income and material gain even if it is at the cost of other's loss and destruction. Even those under the banner of secularism can hardly be trusted as their claims and actions often prove to be contrary to one another. Ali's father takes religion as a source of inner positive strength:

Virtually all of the world's major religious cultures provide reassurance that, even though the individual alone can't understand or predict what lies ahead, a higher power will ensure that things work out. Both religion and secular ideologies assure people that the universe follows a plan, which guarantees that if you follow the rules, everything will turn out well, in this world or the next. This belief reduces stress, enabling people to shut out anxiety and focus on coping with their immediate problems. (Norris and Inglehart 19)

Ishan gives tips on cricket to the customers who visit their shop. They also install a T.V. in the shop to watch cricket. Their favourite place is a deserted and abandoned bank building where Govind holds his tuition classes and Ishan gives cricket coaching practice to the boys. Although Govind does not visit students' houses to give them tuition, Vidya's case is special as she is the sister of his best friend, Ishan. While giving her Maths tuition, both of them get close and enter into intimate relationship for which Govind had to pay a heavy price later. It is the sheer play of destiny that this secret gets disclosed to Ishan in such a critical moment of his life that Ishan cannot forgive Govind who becomes a real victim of the situation and seems responsible for the tragedy that affects Ali, Ishan, and Omi.

Through other boys in the locality Ishan comes to know of Ali's exceptional talent at cricket.

When he meets Ali, he is wonderstruck to find him hitting sixes off every ball that he delivers him. But the boy is too delicate to run fast and gets badly tired after playing for a little while. Ishan notices something extraordinary in the boy and gets him to meet a doctor in his area. The doctor tells him that Ali has got a special brain enabling him to locate the swift movement of the ball and in reflex action hitting it but the whole activity puts a lot of strain on his mind making him fatigued. Ishan sees in Ali the team India stuff and makes up his mind to train him. Not only this, he also ensures that his friends cooperate him to get the boy a place in team India one day. He asks Omi to give Ali physical training to make him sturdy and Govind to take care of his maths so that Ali's parents have no problem allowing him to spare time for cricket coaching in the abandoned bank building.

Ishan is so passionate in his eagerness to find Ali a place in team India that he devotes his maximum time and money, trying his level best to follow his dream of seeing him one day playing for his country. His friends also don't disappoint him. The novel, through these friends doing everything as guardians to the little boy belonging to a different community emphasises the need on the part of people to learn the message of solidarity, fellow-feeling and brotherhood in order to ensure order, harmony and health in a society. Friendship emerges as a powerful bond to tighten the loosened threads of trust and faithfulness, care and respect, tolerance and understanding which go a long way in ordering the disordered at any point of time.

Through the combined efforts of these friends Ali gets a chance to go to Australia. The ex-Australian batsman Fred introduces the boy Ali to Mr Greener, the chairman of the Australian Sports Academy and Mr Cutler, the head of AIS scholarship programme. They are interested in Ali's talent and are ready to coach him in their academy and provide scholarship only if Ali becomes an Australian citizen along with his friends. But most of all, Ali does not like the idea of playing for any

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other country than his own. He prefers being called an Indian to a promising future and luxuriant life in some foreign land.

Govind's first brush with destiny takes place when the city is hit by an earthquake. He suffers a great monetary loss as he had invested his all savings from his shop in a newly constructed mall where they planned to shift to expand the business and to get a city location for better sales. To his shock and sadness one morning he finds the building in ruins. It is really hard for Govind to go through this heart-breaking experience and the frustration of it all sits like a burden on him. His grief and sense of guilt is intensified by the realization of the fact that it was his decision to put in money in another project while their small shop was already doing brisk business. But somehow Govind manages to come to terms with the reality. Even though Govind calls it the first big mistake of his life to invest money to get a shop in the city mall, he is not only successful in getting over the crisis but soon with the co-operation and help of his friends takes his business to the heights he never imagined himself.

It is easy to get over the tragedy that befalls human beings as part of their destiny in the forms of calamities and natural disasters, as they also provide new ways to recover hopes and means to compensate for the losses incurred. God never puts to test human beings beyond their fortitude. But the disasters and catastrophes created by people leave a very devastating impact on the normalcy of things. The man made mess and disorder is very fatal, snatching away peace, prosperity, and hope with regrets that last for ever. The role of dirty religious politics in creating disturbances of huge proportions has been exposed in the novel through the characters of Bittoo Mama and Parekh-ji. Both of them dream of India as a Hindu nation but with different degrees of seriousness and passion. Parekh-ji as a senior Hindu party leader exploits the religious sentiments and emotions of people to enlist their support for the party and to strengthen it. Posing as a saint, he not only commands veneration from the people of his community but also through his provocative

speeches brainwashes them to join the Hindutava mission, exaggerating small issues and giving them an impression that they have been really wronged.

Bittoo Mama lends his blind support to the party, getting a special place in the eye of Parekh-ji. He sees in him the bright future of the party as it is he who brings quite a number of young people to the programmes making them a success. Bittoo Mama has his own personal interest, as he eyes the party ticket from his area. He would motivate Omi and his friends to attend the party functions and gatherings off and on by sparing some time from their shop.

But Govind's faith unlike Bittoo Mama's does not make him blind. Rather it opens his eyes to the realities and the practical lessons they teach. It is the faith which makes him accept his mistakes and continue his struggle, trying to find means and ways to rectify them, to lighten the burden of his guilty conscience through repentance, and ultimately when he is about to give in to his failures, it is his faith that finds a suitable person (the author) who helps him restore his belief in life and trust in the goodness of things. The disorder in and around him gets settled, bringing things back to normalcy.

Life is never the same for the three friends after a great tragedy hits the city and specially targets Mama. The news of the twin towers blown down by the terrorists in America and the alleged involvement of some Muslim terrorist outfit provides a golden chance to the politician-cum-preachers like Parekh-ji to accelerate their activities and encash the turn of events. At the behest of Parekhiji, Mama starts meeting the people of his community and convincing them with a renewed zeal as to how they have been wronged by the Muslims as well as government. Playing upon their religious sentiments, he asks everybody to join a trip to Ayodhya as part of their religious duty to bring back home a handful of dust from the sacred place where the lord Ram was born and where unfortunately a mosque was erected by the Moughal emperor Babar.

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Innocent people are easily swayed in the name of religion. They little notice the sinister face of hatred and mistrust that the politicians plan to slowly unveil when the time is ripe and when they can benefit most out of the plight of the people. Mama tries his level best to persuade the boys to join the campaign but they excuse themselves on the pretext that their shop is doing brisk business, and they cannot afford to lose any opportunity to make much money in order to compensate for the loss they incurred, when the earthquake hit the city and ruined their business venture. Mama is convinced but takes a promise from them that the next time they will certainly come forward openly for the cause of their religion and their people. The boys understand the whole political business but avoid any argument, as it was the mercy of Mama that he allowed them to continue their shop in the temple compound. As a friendly gesture, Omi even offers to get the tickets for Brijesh, the son of his Mama, about whom Mama is so proud that even at such a tender age he agreed to join the Karsevakas in the holy trip to Ayodhya. On the day the train returns from Ayodhya, a tragedy occurs. The city is under the threat of a riot that could burst any moment. Some of the coaches of the train carrying the karsevaks are burnt down. In the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid “the nationwide communal violence that followed was the worst since partition, claiming at least two thousand lives” (Chiriyankandath 87). Unfortunately, Mama’s son Brijesh is also killed. Mama never knew that one day he will have to pay such a heavy price for his involvement in the mission of the party and his activities related to it. His loss makes him mad. He makes his grief transform into deep hatred and disgust for the people of the other community. He collects some miscreants and sets out on his mission to destroy each and every Muslim house in the locality. The deep-seated hatred that he had been nourishing in his heat boils over and he is burning with a rage to avenge the death of his son from the entire Muslim community.

The trouble starts in the city. News channels flash the pictures of the burning train and talk about the alleged involvement of the Muslim community in the act. People easily connect this incident to the earlier attack on the twin towers of America, that too by some Muslim outfit. In a moment the peace, harmony and order that prevailed in the locality seems to be shattered and the communities that lived together for generations become blood thirsty. The mob has got no identity—mobis furious, led by hatred and the peculiar delight it derives out of violence; mob has got no face that is why it is best suited to fulfil the desires of some devils in human forms who are concerned with their material gains, power and pelf at the cost of countless innocent lives. They want to rule through disorder. But there are people who always resist, there are institutions which always safeguard, there are beliefs and hopes that always stand up against all odds putting up a fight, struggling to bring order and normalcy back so that the world could be at peace.

While the friends are shutting their shop, they are startled to see Ali coming that way. Ish doesn't want the boy to be in any trouble so he brings him along to his house. The friends however, gather at their favourite haunt, the forsaken bank compound. They consider it a safe and peaceful place. From the roof of the building they see the burning city and the mounting flames engulfing the houses of the people whom they knew by faces and names. They were not strangers; they were their own people inhabiting the same locality as theirs. The boys could never have imagined the hatred among communities to assume such dangerous proportions as to threaten the lives and properties of their people. The first-hand experience of witnessing a riot shattering the harmony and peace of life around fills them with a deep sense of sadness and pain. Through their observation the novelist portrays the madness that fills the minds of people and the poison that seeps into their hearts making them forget the lessons of tolerance and brotherhood in the name of religion which is exploited by some wicked persons for their selfish ends. The hatred

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destroys much in its sweep and the fractured harmony has to be restored at the cost of a great loss. For boys like Govind, Ish and Omi who believe in friendship, order, harmony and the concept of a healthy society characterised by fellow-feeling and tolerance, the tragedy that befalls their locality seems too severe to bear. Now Govind takes a lesson from this horrible incident that man-made disasters are more dreadful and fatal than those Nature brings to the lot of human beings:

I had witnessed someone's death for the first time in my life. My hands, face, neck, legs-everything turned cold. My heart beat in the same irregular way as it did on the day of the earthquake. Nature caused that disaster, man made this one. I don't know which one is more dangerous. (*Three Mistakes* 221)

But the way the young boys put up a fight shows the seriousness with which the author emphasizes the point how positive forces confront the evil ones in a bid to save the system from totally collapsing and giving in before it is too late. Furious and enraged Mama along with his supporters comes to the area. He is mad with disgust and hatred for the Muslim community, as he believes the entire people belonging to this community responsible for the death of his son which was purely an accident. Having burnt many houses, his thirst for vengeance is still fresh and he wishes to sacrifice the young boy Ali whom he fails to find while he burnt his father and mother. As he had seen the small boy with the friends of Omi often, he comes to the bank compound in search of Ali. He meets the boy at the gate and demands that they hand over the boy to him. Omi tries to pacify him but it is of no use. The personal grief of Mama is transformed into a fatal hatred for the people of the Muslim community and the madness which has taken full control over him leaves him without any reason. He will not sit with ease unless the hatred he has nourished in his heart for a long time finds an outlet only through

destruction and disorder that his blind eyes can witness:

'I want the boy, I want the Muslim boy,' Mama said.
'What?' Ish said.
'Eye for an eye. I'll slaughter him right here. Then I will cry for my son. Get the fucking boy,' Mama said and thumped Ish's chest. Ish struggled to stand straight. (*Three Mistakes* 224)

He is the same boy whom they had taken to Australia for training in the Academy of Fred Lee. He is the same boy who refused to enjoy the scholarship offer as it made it necessary to accept the Australian citizenship and he couldn't in his wildest dreams think of being other than an Indian. The same boy is now the target of some people who hold him responsible for the wrongs done to their community as he belongs to another community suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. But the three friends stand as a barrier between the rioters and Ali. Ish tells Ali to hide in the vault and gives him his phone to keep its light on so that he may not get frightened in the darkness. At this very moment when the struggle and fight with Mama and his aides is going on, a much unexpected thing takes place. The phone beeps with a private SMS telling Govind the good news that Vidya got her period and there was nothing to worry about their unprotected sex. As Ish had taken Govind's phone to call the police, he is scandalised that his sister and his close friend should be having an affair under his very nose. To make the matter worse, Ish's phone in Ali's hands rings and the killers get to know he is hiding inside the vault.

To see the boy before his eyes, Mama is furious and blind with rage. He little realises that his nephew Omi and his young friends could give him and his supporters such a tough time getting hold of a small Muslim boy. The fact that boys belonging to his community are so adamant and eager to save the

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life of a Muslim boy infuriates him all the more and his anger knows no bound. In his rage he forgets that he is assaulting none other than his own sister's son Omi and his close friends. As hatred and violence have their own course to run, Mama has to face the accidental death of his own Omi at his own hands. The violence he embraced showed him its disgusting face; the hatred he nourished took its price from him.

Mama's pain is intensified. Now he wants his vengeance. He asks Ish to release the boy from his grip. Ish expects Govind to stand between Mama and Ali the same way Omi did when it was required. For a moment fear of death grips Govind and he hesitates. This little delay on his part results in what Ish never forgives Govind for. And in the meantime Ali is in the grip of Mama and badly wounded in the wrist which was the rarest gift he had from God. This is the third great mistakes that make Govind's life a burden for him. In the fierce fight that ensues, Ish and Govind together are, however, able to save Ali but Ish is not ready to forgive Govind not because he betrayed him by having an affair with his sister but more because he failed to take action in a particular moment when this could have saved the greatest loss. The agony of this all is too much for Govind.

Order comes back to prevail but at the cost of much loss, suffering and pain. Hatred and violence run their course and destroy much that is good, positive and healthy. In a society there are people like Govind, Ish, and Omi who always direct their energies towards to maintain peace and happiness. In the face of the eruption of hatred and violence, they also suffer but gradually they are able to get back their happiness and their losses are restored. Govind, the narrator of the story, through his normal human weaknesses, becomes the representative of a good person, who at the high point of frustration and disappointment thinks of committing suicide but through the intervention of destiny his life is not only miraculously saved but all his happy moments restored.

The role of destiny as a healer is highlighted through the incident of Govind leaving an email to the famous writer ChetanBhagat who reads the mail, locates the Hospital where Govind is under treatment and sits with him to hear from his own mouth the story of his life. The same destiny which seemed to destroy the future prospect of his business venture in the form of an earthquake now intervenes to save his life. To his pleasant surprise, he finds everything turning good and happy. Vidya comes to meet him, Ish is no longer angry with him. His every loss is restored and he has no longer left with any reason to say goodbye to this world. As the favourite technique of using the presence of author in his novels, ChetanBhagat seems to be living with his characters, sharing their joys and happiness and thus giving a convincing picture of the world and people he creates with his magical pen. The novel ends on a happy note with a happy news that Ali's wrist-operation is successful and he is able to hit sixes again.

Apparently a common story of three friends in the backdrop of riots and violence, the novel portrays such characters as become representative of strong and positive forces fighting against evil and disturbing elements. Destiny has its own way of bringing order to disorder but human effort is no less important which is best represented through the story of these three friends.

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