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DEPICTION OF FAMILY TIES IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *THE LAST BURDEN*

MANDEEP KAUR

Research Scholar

Department of English, Ch. Devi Lal University, Sirsa



MANDEEP KAUR

ABSTRACT

Upamanyu Chatterjee is mainly concerned with socio-political improvement in the contemporary Indian scenario. A novel for Chatterjee is evidently an instrument for social analyses. As such, he writes socially relevant novels and his novels reveal his concern and responsibility towards society. His concern with truth makes him portray society as it is. He does not hesitate to reveal what his society has lost. His novels vibrate nevertheless with sturdy compassion for his fellowmen and a profound attachment with socio-political and moral issues. His reviewers, who find his novels often dealing with nasty issues, encumbered with intense negativity, skepticism and pompous expressions, however, generally aver that he is humorous and clever, gifted with a unique style of wry playfulness mixed with keen observation. Having appeared as a kind of campaigner of the de-centred and de-cultured world, Chatterjee probes deep into the postmodern ethos of the contemporary Indian scenario. The present study attempts to analyse the extent of degradation in familial relationships and Indian society at large, in the post-modern period.

Keywords – Family disintegration, Familial relationship, Gender discrimination

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According to Mark Twain, "To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail" (Goodreads); and for Upamanyu Chatterjee, a rigid moralist, the universe is filled with people and incidents that need amendment. This is the central theme of Upamanyu Chatterjee's new series of novel, i.e. *The Last Burden* (1993) and *Way to Go* (2010). *The Last Burden* is a novel about an ordinary middle class family comprising Shayamanand, a retired government employee and his wife Urmila, who live in a house which they have constructed on their "own clod of earth" (87), along with their son Burfi, his Christian wife Joyce and two grandsons. Shayamanand and Urmila's other son Jamun lives in a distant city. The novel begins with Jamun getting ready to go home

after hearing that his mother has had a heart attack and it ends with Urmila's death along with Burfi's hastily arranged transfer to Bombay and Shayamanand's bitter and harsh, but the entirely unsurprising decision to leave his house and to live with Jamun as his 'Last Burden'.

The novel is set in the contemporary social background where nuclear family disintegration is principal facet. The novel is an enthralling depiction of life in an Indian middle-class family. It recreates life in an ordinary Indian family luminously at the end of the twentieth century. It is concerned with family ties, the intricacies of relationships, etc.

Jamun is portrayed in the novel as a bisexual grown-up who admires his mother, Urmila

and detests his father, Shayamanand. Jamun's relationship with his father is least jovial and loving. Shayamanand, is very decisive of Jamun: "In your whole life, no one will wait for you as we have waited, as tensely with as much anguish. No one will be as happy to you. To no one else will you matter" (6). Jamun is aggravated and replies in rage, "You bastard-we should thank God that we are sons. If you'd hatched a daughter you'd've bedded her- you fucking ingrate - this as recompense for what I've done for you" (51). Upamanyu Chatterjee represents the conflict between the father and son as "monster verses monster" (51). It is the consequence of degradation and loss of warmth, care and concern for each other.

The relationship between Shayamanand and his wife Urmila is also rotten and on the threshold of demolition. Shayamanand is not prepared to spend his money on the medical treatment required direly to Urmila. There is a lack of communication between them except informal expressions like, "dinner is ready ... Have you signed the cheque for the electricity? ...the tea is cold" (162). In fact, Urmila and Shayamanand's is a love marriage. Urmila's parents did not like Shyamananda as her life partner and were against their marriage. But Urmila sustained her clandestine meeting with Shyamananda and eloped from her house and married Shyamananda. Even then, there is the lack of affection and intimacy between them. Before marriage, they had sex also, consequently Urmila became pregnant twice. And after the marriage, Urmila had two sons, and after giving birth to them, she stopped sleeping with Shayamanand. Shayamanand also avoided going to the same room where Urmila slept. Since then, there has been a lack of mutual understanding, love and intimacy. After the heart attack, Urmila was supposed to be taken to Dr. Holidays hospital, but because the doctor's fees were very high, Shyamananda decides to take her to another hospital. He considers spending such a large sum on the treatment of Urmila as worthless:

The sum'll be light weight, nothing holler about - one lakh or so – the lifetime hoard of a commonplace creature, who never had the daring or the adroitness to

speculate. Oof, such a dismal lower middle class exercise, a babyish sport – to mothball the interest on a fixed deposit – never to wade into it – with that interest after months to archly open a Recurring Deposit, and with the interest of the Recussing Deposit to start some Term Deposit, or National saving - like playing trader or monopoly. (64)

Here Upamanyu Chatterjee appears to suggest the uselessness and breakdown of love marriages as is seen in the case of Shyamananda and Urmila. Shyamananda holds Urmila responsible for Jamun and Burfi's decisive comments and detestation towards him. Blaming her, he says, "Savour your handiwork, our sons. Fostered for decades to hate me. Like a perfect mother, you've kneaded them against me. You're the saint and I the demon, but notice, the damn you too" (52). Thus, Urmila's love marriage is not blissful and healthy. It is full of disbelief, hatred, greediness etc. Both Urmila and Shayamanand come together not out of love, affection and admiration for one another but due to the desirability of sex. Owing to this reason, Urmila got her pregnancy terminated two times prior to her marriage. In fact, a woman is physically subjugated and her health is not taken into concern in the male dominated society.

Hence, Chatterjee shows gender discrimination as another facet of social reality in India. The egotistical, money oriented and self-centered temperament of men in the society is brought out very efficiently and callously by Upamanyu Chatterjee in his novel, *The Last Burden* through all the major characters of the novel i.e. Shyamananda, Jamun and Burfi. In the novel, Burfi is represented as self-centered and covetous character who, like his father does not wish to spend money on his dying mother. The lack of attachment and intimacy among family members is highlighted in the novel. Burfi wants to see himself as a financially strong man and independent. He never minds in disregarding his mother and her dire need of medical treatment. When his father asks Burfi for money for the treatment of his mother, Burfi tells him, "It shouldn't be an issue at all! She's your wife. You hatched her maladies. You should pay for them"

(44). At this father replies, "But you're her sons! Are you not her sons?" (44). This reminds the readers about the Old Age Home where abandoned and disregarded, helpless, poverty ridden and ailing, infected old people are given shelter because their sons and daughter's-in-law are not willing to look after them. It is ironic that the parents take efforts in order to nurture their children and the same children refuse them shelter, medical treatment, closeness, love, care during their old age. In order to fulfill the needs of Burfi, Urmila borrows money from her associates and sends it to him, but Burfi declines his liability to look after his mother in her disease. Not only the husband but also the children are responsible for the predicament of Urmila. Though Shayamanand is not compassionate and benevolent towards Urmila, but still she defends Shayamanand from the blames of her son. When Urmila is admitted to hospital and Shayamanand is waiting for his son, Jamun, to come and he gets late in his homecoming, Shayamanand scolds him and Jamun becomes furious and replies rudely. After watching the conflict between the father and the son, Urmila becomes irritated and takes the side of her husband, "Jamun, he's a worthless husband, but a good father. Jamun, the anger of parents is never anger" (52). Though, in her conjugal life Urmila is unhappy, but she is a proud mother. She leads wretched and miserable wedded life for nearly thirty seven years. She is represented as a cow suppressed under this unavoidable burden of her husband, sons and grandsons. She has been working from early morning till late night. No one in the family appreciates her hard work instead, when she leans and takes the side of her sons, her husband retorts angrily. However, she is proud that her family is lucky enough that the three generations are staying together. "For sure, Burfi and Joyce are rueful about living collectively...but instead, you should be proud and happy, because it's markedly rare... (104). But all through her life, she receives none - love, intimacy and respect - from Shayamnand. His attitude is not compassionate towards her. He says

Your mother is masochistic. She craves to feel persecuted, harrowed - it's her way of tugging at attention - look, everybody! My husband's so unpleasant, so miserly, that

I've to beg and borrow from the lumpen just to keep body and soul together. The one defence that I can pick out for your mother's conduct is that with so much heartache in this world, it is better to be masochistic. (200)

Shayamanand always squabbles with his wife. In fact Upamanyu Chatterjee is too cynical in his portrayal of middle-class family life. In this association Sambudha Sen writes in his analysis:

Quarreling is indeed the central organizing feature of the action revolves. Chatterjee is too pessimistic a writer to attribute the pervasive takes for granted, ugliness within familial interactions to any specific removable causes. But no holds barred contempt which goes into his portrayal at the Indian, more specifically, the Bengali "head" of the family. (55)

Shayamanand is presented in the novel as a complaining and aggressive old man who exploits his wife both psychologically and physically. He hates to spend money on her medical treatment and wants every member of the family to share medical expenditure incurred on her illness. Burfi assaults his father cynically: "Baba's first love, his money, will now be gobbled up by his hocus-pocus extricate his first hate, his wife" (63). He goes further and resentfully comments on his father's hunger for money: "His money'll damn him", and, "As though he is going to carry his money over with him when he croaks" (64). His sons are also not grateful to him. At this he repents, "Perhaps we should've spawned daughter instead - I understand that they're more faithful to their source. Once you assign the house to me, I'll square these two fiends, who presume concurrently live off and denigrate us" (130). When Shyamananda comes to know the harsh remarks of Burfi, he shields himself, "Isn't my money yours? After I die, won't my money be yours?" (72)

Hence, Upamanyu Chatterjee has depicted the negative and the positive sides of the human beings and the intricate nature of human relationship. He throws light on the convolution of the human mind through the characters like Urmila, Shyamnanda, Burfi, Jamun and etc. Due to the weird nature of Shayamnanda, he has a heart attack and

his health does not support him and he is paralyzed due to the attack. The home of Shayamanand is turned into hell in the absence of love, affection, affinities and warmth. Conflict, argument and struggle become the indivisible part of Shayamanand's home and his life. Jamun asks,

Why don't you and Ma display at least some signs of intimacy, of charity, towards each other, acquit yourselves a little like some other married couples. Why don't you stop scuffling with each other for the affection of your children, and instead ferret content out of yourselves. Your brood is not yours just because you've fostered it. After all, since no wily go between hitched you up, once upon a time, between the two of you must've lurked some kind of concupiscence.... (161)

Though Urmila and Shayamanand hate each other yet they continue to live with each other due to the pressure of society. Both are afraid of what society will say if they start living separately after marriage. In a middle class society parting of husband and wife is not accepted and renders such a couple secluded. That might be the reason behind Shayamanand and Urmila living together by ignoring revulsion. Jamun recognizes this reality after the death of his mother Urmila and decides to reconcile with his father. He wants to demolish the charisma of hatred and to increase love for his father. Jamun is portrayed in the novel as a contrast to his elder brother, Burfi. He sees the vision of his mother even after her death. He is more caring and loving towards his brother Burfi. He carries the burden of his family upon his shoulders. He muses:

All parents die, so every human being must experience the anguish, or the discomfiture, of their passing, of the snacking of cord. No, obviously not every. Not those without memory. One's reaction to such a death was controlled by one's maturity and one's closeness to one's parents. Kuki's father, for instance – if that ugly family yarn of Kuki's was at all true – oughtn't to have felt a jot of sorrow at the exit of Kuki's grandfather. (253)

It is apparent that Jamun is kind towards his parents. Thus, the two brothers, Burfi and Jamun are represented in contrast to each other; former egotistical, money-minded and self-centered, whereas the latter is very loving, generous and kind towards his parents.

Chatterjee has very clearly demonstrated that moral degradation, illegitimate relationships and infidelity are the distinctive characteristics of modern urban middle class society. For example, Kasibai, the maid-servant of Jamun, has a son without marriage. Another bleak Indian social reality is represented through the incident of rat poison. Belu drinks rat poison because his father has not given him the permission to marry a girl who belongs to a low-caste. Belu's father beats him angrily and renders him half paralyzed. He drinks poison, but luckily survives for nearly fifty years. There exists an illicit relationship between Jamun and Kasturi, so much so that Kasturi has given birth to a baby girl from this relation and has no regrets for her sexual affairs. They continue with this illicit relationship even after Kasturi's marriage. The moral vacuity and degradation in man-woman relationship is yet another feature of Indian society as represented in Jamun-Kasturi relationship. This immoral man-woman relationship is also evident in Shayamanand's neighbour Mr. Naidu's affair with a woman in his office, though he has a gorgeous and loving wife at home. In short, pre-marital and extra-marital relationships are the other segment of social reality. Sexual relationships are elaborated by pre-marital and extra-marital relationship. The moral and social norms involved in man-woman relationships are violated by individuals craving for sex. The novelist has realistically represented this dismal picture of man-woman relationship prevalent in middle class Indian society.

In *The Last Burden*, Chatterjee deals with the theme of familial relations and blood ties. And these blood ties and familial relationships become the burden for the protagonists. The choice of blood ties, which becomes as unavoidable as a burden, as the theme of the novel is fairly in the vein of Chatterjee's artistic conception of the modern world of youngsters. Here immorality and self-centeredness transform themselves into a condition,

very well illustrated in the very perspective of the novel. Dom Moraes contends:

Family life, as Chatterjee seems to see it, is an arena where all barriers are down.... Dependence and the process of destruction it holds within it are the material of the novel. The various interlined protagonists suffer each other. The seal of blood, the last burden, keeps each member of the family hermetically locked within it. It compels emotions of affection or love, but hidden under these are sensations of boredom, dislike, contempt, and even the burden of the geriatric father to be borne, and the further burden of the children of the house, to be brought up into the same vicious cycle. (28)

They, too, are a loveless couple, though not as absolutely as Shayamanand and Urmila, who live a life unirrigated by the tonic of love, compassion and sympathy. They also suffer the dreary and arid existence of their loveless relationship. Jamun notices in Burfi-Joyce relationship a kind of disparity similar to the parental disagreement, but with a minor difference. On the surface, their marriage seems to be a happy and prosperous one, but in reality they both bear themselves inane. Burfi, the elder son of his parents, ingenuously tells them that "staying with them is screwing my marriage up" (116). His wife Joyce, who is considered as an outsider in the home, goes one step ahead. Joyce does not visit Urmila while she was in the ICU. She never addresses Shayamanand as Baba, she addresses him as Mr. . When Burfi tells her "Joyce, perhaps you could call Baba "Uncle" or something, and not Mr. , which sounds sort of queer....Yes, "Uncle" is odd enough, but if you just can't call him Baba, then Uncle's better than Mr., or maybe you shouldn't address him at all..." (127), she simply denies it when Burfi asks her the reason and replies:

Your mother hates me...why should I yawn about in a hospital watching a shriveled cow die? If her two darling sons treasure her at all, they should be waiting their nights outside Intensive Care; instead, they look in now and then, as though she was a

dragging Wimbledon quarter-final on TV. (84)

She even justifies her action in her own anomalous way, "I'm not a fraud. To bob about her bed looking pathetic, while speculating every second when it'd be okay to glide away, that's how you all behave there anyway" (234).

It would be quite appropriate to say about the existing emotional structure of this family that it is like an arena where everyone fights everyone. The ambience of the whole family is that of doubt, distrust and hatred. India is a country where family is given the main concern. It is not a bad thing, but most of the people do not get the accurate meaning of the word family and the responsibilities that come with it. If one looks closely enough, one will find one Burfi in almost every house, making akin choices and decisions with a Jamun by his side. *The Last Burden* gives a deep penetration into middle class Indian family life and moderately explains why the majority of people abandon the traditional joint family structure in favour of a nuclear one. Thus, all the ins and outs that reside in this world are given a free rein in this novel.

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