

## ***The Last Burden: The Realistic Picture of the Degeneration of Indian Family***

**V. Pawel (Ph.D.), NET, APSET, Assistant Professor**  
**Dr. G. Chenna Reddy, Associate Professor**

### **Abstract**

Family and marriage are basic structures of Indian society. With the advent of western education and consumerism, there is a collapse of value systems. This has led to the degeneration of the Indian family and this process is captured well by Upamanyu Chatterjee's second novel *The Last Burden*. Everyone in Shyamanand's household suffers from alienation. Especially, the sons of the family Burfi and Jamun struggle to find their place in the fast changing socio-economic conditions. They feel life bleak and purposeless. But the novel ends with a positive note hinting at the change in Jamun's attitude towards family. He expresses his willingness to take care of his father Shyamanand.

**Keywords:** Upamanyu Chatterjee, *The Last Burden*, alienation, family, filial relations, identity, cultural clash

*The Last Burden* written in 1993 is the second novel of a popular postmodern author Upamanyu Chatterjee. He has created a storm in the Indian literary scene with his first novel *English, August*. *The Last Burden* highlights the attitude of the Indian youth considering any relation a burden. It gives a realistic picture of the middle class Indian families and the emerging patterns in the joint family structure. Upamanyu Chatterjee in this novel has shifted his focus from public issues to private agonies of a family. The story revolves around the frictions in the middle-class Hindu Brahmin family of Shyamanand, a retired government servant. The family which lives in a town by the sea comprises of his wife Urmila, two sons Burfi and Jamun. The elder son is married to Joyce and has two sons Pista and Doom while the younger son works away from the family.

The novel recreates the family life at the end of the twentieth century. When his mother suffers from the heart attack, the protagonist Jamun returns to his home. It's not at all a happy family reunion. The events at home and his mother's sickness make him recollect the past events of his childhood, the death of aya, stroke of his father and his relations with Kasturi. The author

mercilessly dissects the family and exposes the flaws inherent in Jamun's family. Danny Yee comments, "The family members probe each other for weaknesses that can be exploited, fighting over every little issue, real or symbolic. *The Last Burden* is a family saga of expectations not met, failures of communication, unresolved frustrations and other traumas."

The institute of family is gradually losing its traditional sanctity due to the collapse of the ideals and values in the Indian society. The degeneration of morals in Jamun is revealed when Shyamanand suspects that his son visits the home partly to meet his beloved Kasturi. Kasturi has been married to someone else and Jamun maintains an illicit affair with her. Any prattle about sex always interests Burfi and Jamun. Burfi eagerly asks his father if he is a virgin when he is married. The writer observes, "A custom common to the brothers, to while away their time by discomfiting their parents with probing their sexual lives and tittering at their equivocal replies." (95) Shyamanand replies that no male is a virgin by the time he marries. Jamun is eager to know if his parents have sex. The entire home seems to be immoral.

Family and marriage are basic structures of Indian society. The novel deals with the question of change in both these institutions. Shyamanand's household represents the degeneration of filial relations in post-modern Indian society. the family, comprising of three generations, is pitted against itself as there is destructive relationship between the husband and the wife, the parents and the sons and the elder son and his wife. There are no harmonious relations or cooperation among the family members. Husband-wife relation is very important for the stability of a family. Shyamanand and Urmila share little in common. Shyamanand has disagreement with his wife over everything and often these disagreements reach clashes of mammoth proportions. He is often rude and passes caustic comments at her. They mutually loathe each other. Urmila avoids any communication with her husband. The lack of communication in the house plays an important role in the disintegration of the family. An awkward silence can be observed in the household. The family members prefer a life of aloofness and solitude. They hate all their relatives and maintain distance from them. Shyamannad and Urmila exchange only a few pat responses. The family members try to exploit each other's weaknesses to their personal gains. Urmila is abhorred by her husband and this is revealed through her words about the cat that enters her room:"At least the cat finds my face appealing, unlike your father." (47)

The treatment meted out to Urmila by her husband reveals the alienation she suffers from. S. Chitra and S. Kalamani comment,

Shyamanand is self-centered, inhuman and offensive. Urmila is self-pitying. They both are intolerant of each other but dependent on each other. Chatterjee does not deal with victimization following violent crimes, in his novel.

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

V. Pawel (Ph.D.), NET, APSET, Assistant Professor

Dr. G. Chenna Reddy, Associate Professor

*The Last Burden: The Realistic Picture of the Degeneration of Indian Family*

180

*The Last Burden* presents a case of domestic victimization in and through the character of Urmila. Urmila is a victim not of physical assault or battering or rape but of male domination. (70-71)

Urmila often worries about the inconsonance in her relations with her husband. As a teenager Jamun is shocked to see the gap between his parents. He is greatly disturbed that his mother does not let her husband see the letter written by Burfi. He realizes that his parents are living like strangers in the same house. He feels warmth missing in their relation as is evident from the fact that the two seldom share the bed. They don't even celebrate their wedding anniversary. Jamun is shocked at the parental incompatibility. He confesses to Kasturi, "Our house isn't worth returning to. It's unhappy dead." (136) This makes him develop a negative attitude towards getting married. Her mother rightly comments, "I know – that you don't wish to marry because you dread that you'll tail off like us." (57) Her mother tries to convince him to marry, but in vain. Even Kasturi tries to convince him saying, "Why don't you marry, Jamun? Since you've been so solicitous for your parents and their sentiments, beseech them to pick a Mrs for you, so that you don't have to wait for them to croak before you can, as my husband says, get your sex on tap." (146)

The novel also depicts the anger and conflicts of the postmodern man. The two world wars have shaken the foundations of many institutions and shaken many long-cherished values. The modern man struggles to find his place and identity in the fast changing world. This alienation has become a recurrent theme in literature and Upamanyu Chatterjee is no exception. Chatterjee is uncompromisingly realistic in portraying the cultural alienation of the educated Indians. Jamun and Burfi represent the modern youth living in megapolis and have ambivalence towards Indian traditions and customs. Both the brothers are highly westernized individuals. Indian education system, introduced during the colonial rule by Lord Macaulay, is deeply colonial and western in its outlook. He makes it very clear in the famous Minute on Education of 1835 that the purpose of the education is "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." India has continued the same system with superficial changes even after independence. It has created generations of people who cannot connect with the native traditions. They are torn between tradition and modernity and remain amoral and self-centered. When Urmila dies, Shyamanand and his sons go through Hindu ritual with a lot of uneasiness as they find them alien.

There is also cultural clash in the family. The parents cannot accept the marriage of their son Burfi with a Christian girl Joyce. They develop hatred towards their daughter-in-law and she reciprocates it. She does not even visit Urmila when she is in the ICU. The parents frequently

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

V. Pawel (Ph.D.), NET, APSET, Assistant Professor

Dr. G. Chenna Reddy, Associate Professor

*The Last Burden: The Realistic Picture of the Degeneration of Indian Family*

181

complain that Burfi spends time with Joyce neglecting them. Joyce wants to bring her children up in the Christian tradition while the grandparents expect Hindu upbringing.

Jamun's is a middle class family where there is always an anxiety over money. Shyamanand gives utmost priority to money. He adores it more than his family. When Urmila is in the ICU, Shyamanand and his son quarrel over sharing the medical expenses. It shows how material prosperity leads to alienation. The father and the sons frequently doubt that Dr. Haldia is deceiving them. Jamun spites his father for his obsession with money. Burfi always feels inferior about the financial condition of his family. He tries to imitate his friends who are anglicized children of rich men. Their affluence makes him ashamed of his family. He is a victim of modern consumerist culture. He tries to save his face by pretending to be very rich. For example, he does not want to take food from home to school, but rather wants to eat out. Shyamanand reminisces, "Burfi scorned tiffin when he was about twelve – too old, he said, which actually meant that his contemporaries were ragging him for being so dull as to cart food from home. In place of tiffin, he claimed cash." (16)

At the centre of the novel, all the family members of Shyamanand's household are sufferers. It is peopled with middle class people who are despairing, cynical and lack warmth and emotion. There is destructive relationship among all the family members. They remain loveless and divided individuals. The sons feel their house gloomy and joyless. Shyamanand is the product of male chauvinistic society. But he is not a rogue and often he longs for the love of his children. He tussles with his wife for their love. He believes that his rapport with his eldest son has crumbled with marriage. He believes that Joyce brainwashes both his sons. On the other hand, Burfi feels staying with parents screws his marriage up. Like the Judge in *The Inheritance of Loss*, Shyamanand feels guilty and miserable for the sins he has committed towards the end of his life. The entire family wants to shed the burden of any ties. An important character of the novel is Aya who has taken care of Jamun when he is young. She has served the family for a long time. But, Shyamanand objects the stay of aya in the house when she is affected with tuberculosis. When she is taken to the government clinic, Jamun hates sitting alongside her as he is afraid that "he might be mistaken for her relative." (87) The only person to show humanity towards her is Urmila.

Mother is the vital force of the Indian family and Urmila provides the necessary emotional sustenance to the family. She often balances the fissures between the father and the sons and tries to avoid altercations between them. She tells Jamun, "...he's a worthless husband, but a good father. Jamun, the anger of parents is never anger." (52) She loves both the sons and her bond with her younger son has special significance. The relation between Jamun and his mother reminds the readers of the novels *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence. Paul Morel has a

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

V. Pawel (Ph.D.), NET, APSET, Assistant Professor

Dr. G. Chenna Reddy, Associate Professor

*The Last Burden: The Realistic Picture of the Degeneration of Indian Family*

182

special relation with his mother and his mother is unhappy with her own marriage and sees his son as the only emotional support. In *The Last Burden* Urmila can share her agony only with Jamun and Jamun takes special care of his mother while she is neglected by others in the family. The mother and the son take special walks from office where they share their emotions.

Shyamanand envies his sons' love towards their mother and feels it is partly because of oedipal complex. He does not accept that it is due to his deplorable behavior. But while attachment with his mother prevents Paul from preventing relations with any other women, Jamun can have free sexual liaisons with women. He comes to his home partly to visit his mother, but also to visit his lover Kasturi. Kasturi has been married to someone else and yet Jamun continues his relationship with her. He also develops illicit affair with his servant maid Kasibai. He even goes to the extent of being bisexual but cannot find solace in any relationship. These relations show his emotional nakedness. The novel is full of divorce and adultery which mirror the moral ennui and purposelessness of life. Upamanyu Chatterjee in inflamed prose has explored immorality and the lack of nobility of mind and spirit. All the major characters in the novel maintain extramarital relations and it results in the family filled with hate and revulsion.

The novel is divided into seven chapters and the first chapter is titled "August" to remind the readers of the first novel. Chatterjee has penned this novel also to bring out the irony of the modern life. Jamun has to wait to get to his parents' place as he cannot get a flight ticket for four days. He tells Hegiste, "Two women ahead of me in the queue conceived dead fathers. One was to zip straight to the ghat from the airport. In comparison, my mother was merely dying." (6) It also shows Jamun's casual attitude towards his mother's sickness. Alienation has created fissures in his personality and makes him feel uneasy and anxious, wherever he is.

The novel, which is a metaphor of monstrous ugliness, gives the true picture of the post-independent India. The old people are subjected to a lot of ill-treatment by their sons and daughters. The novel is about the younger generation's failure to come to terms with their parents. It shows the ingratitude shown by the young people towards their parents. Both the brothers want to shed the burden of the family ties. Ironically, they do not realize they will face the same plight when they become old and they will become burden to their children. The sons do not bother about the multiple ailments of their mother like hypertension, piles, corns and arthritis. Burfi enjoys debunking his parents in presence of his children and Shyamanand feels deeply humiliated. Defiance and disobedience of parental authority is seen in the family. The grandchildren Pista and Doom mimic and insult their grandparents. Shyamanand scoffs at his wife for not nurturing children well and refuses to accept that he has an equal share in it.

As a social realist, the author attempts an honest dissection of family, the strength of Indian society and shows how it is gradually weakening and destabilizing the society as well. There is very little humour when compared to the author's first novel *English, August* known for its black humour. *The Last Burden* is a tale of a young man who fails to understand the complex web of relations and is uneasy about his place in the world. But the novel ends with a ray of hope as Jamun evolves into a mature individual. As the novel progresses, a sense of guilt chases him, and he starts relishing the sweetness of the family. A sea change comes over him with the death of his mother. He takes the responsibility of taking care of his father. Like the hero of the bildungsroman, Jamun grows mature at the end.

Thus, *The Last Burden* is a saga of the Indian family with its ebb and flow. The degeneration of the Indian family results in loneliness and alienation of all the members of the family. Rumina aptly comments, "Bizarre and bitter, the novel nonetheless takes us away from the routine expressions of many Indian novelists into a relatively unexplored domain of lower middle class materiality, meanness and avarice." (128)

---

#### References

1. Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *The Last Burden*. Penguin Books: Gurgaon. 1993.
2. Chitra. S & Kalamani. S. "Burden of Woman as Reflected in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*" *The Quest* Vol 30, No. 1 June 2016. pp. 68-77.
3. Sethii, Rumina. "All Dressed-up and Nowhere to go". Rev. of the last Burden. *New Quest*. No. 104, Mar-Apr 1994. pp. 127-128.
4. Yee, Danny. Rev. of *The Last Burden*. <http://dannyreviews.com/>
5. [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt\\_minute\\_education\\_1835.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)

---

V. Pawel (Ph.D.), NET, APSET  
Assistant Professor  
DVR & Dr. H.S. MIC College of Technology  
Kanchikacherla  
[vpaweleng@gmail.com](mailto:vpaweleng@gmail.com)

Dr. G. Chenna Reddy  
Associate Professor  
Dept of English  
Acharya Nagarjuna  
University