

IMPACT OF WESTERNIZATION AND MODERNIZATION ON UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *THE LAST BURDEN*

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Upamanyu Chatterjee's second novel *The Last Burden* reflects the fast-changing trends in society of the post-independence India. In such a rapidly changing society, the experiences of alienation, isolation and disintegration affect one and all, though in very dissimilar ways. Being a sensitive writer, Chatterjee is concerned with the disintegration of the family, discontinuity of the tradition, conflict between generations and several other issues that have become prominent in post-independent Indian Society.

The Last Burden is about an ordinary middle-class family which has managed to settle down to a decent life in a new home in a new region after being uprooted as a result of the partition of India. The family consists of Shyamanand, a retired government official, and his wife Urmila with their sons Burfi and Jamun. Jamun is a bisexual and Burfi marries a Christian girl Joyce, and they have two sons Pista and Doom. The novel opens with Jamun preparing to go home after hearing that his mother has had a heart attack and it ends with Urmila's death. Jamun's arrival home has another purpose which is to be close to his lover Kasturi, who is now married and pregnant. Jamun and Kasturi carry on their affair as before. The whole family is waiting for Urmila's death. There is hardly any love or tenderness in all this. There are several hot exchanges between Shyamanand and his sons on money matters, on the will which Urmila is supposed to have written and on questions of what obligations children have towards their parents. The sons quarrel between themselves over the expenses and speculate on how much they will get out of Urmila and what should be done with Shyamanand when Urmila passes away. In an interview, Chatterjee has commented on the novel:

My new novel, *The Last Burden*, is concerned not with growing up but with family ties. It takes a close look at

an Indian family, the complexity of relationships and how these change as a cataclysmic event occur.⁷ He also points out:

I wanted to write about the suffering that family members inflict on each other and the terrible responsibility of emotional dependence. I wanted to describe the burden, I suppose, of attachments.⁸

Chatterjee's *The Last Burden* treats the theme of family ties in terms of destructive relationships between the father and the mother, between the mother and the two sons, between the father and the sons and the elder son's wife, and finally between the elder son and his wife. The novel relates family life with social changes and the economy of a changing society and traces the impact of westernization and modernization on the characters' behaviour and attitudes.

Jamun, the protagonist of the novel, has undergone this experience more than others. He is a young unmarried man staying away from his family, who finds himself attracted to his colleague Hegiste in his work place. Perhaps the environment is responsible for this. This environment is clean and orderly but it is spiritually and socially dead. Like any other young man of his age, he yearns for a life in an urban environment and this makes him break away from his ties with the rural environment in terms of space and human bondage. His story is one that begins with the modernist desire for the city, a desire to accept the urban-rural split in his life and to draw energy from the inner struggle wherever it might lead him to in the end. It is a story of his learning to construct a fence around his private space and around himself and gradually, to lose these. Jamun could not reproduce the home atmosphere in the place of BoomTown where he lived. He is unable to buy the same brand of refrigerator and geyser that he had at home. Ever since he hears of his mother's illness, he is

closeted in his room reading Robert Payne's biography of Mahatma Gandhi and listening to the rainfall outside. Jamun's long wait is agonizing. He recalls that his mother is crying out to him and recalls the bondage that flesh creates:

..... in extremely one's duty must hurl one first towards one's blood. 'To hold true to one's blood is more noble than to combat General Smuts in a remote country. Harken unto thy Father that begat thee and despise not thy mother when she is old'. So, his friend and lover Kasturi had cited. That night she had also given a fleck of herself away. In my pregnancy, I am safe. I feel defended.⁹

Jamun's sense of complicity in the present condition of his mother disturbs him. Jamun rings up his home immediately and is answered by his brother Burfi, who is fully drunk as he describes the details of his mother's illness over the telephone.

Jamun's deep emotional bondage to his parents makes it impossible for him to enter into a responsible and independent life of his own. His relationships with women are all mechanical for he is incapable of relating to any one in a manner that would take him beyond himself. He has a relationship with a woman called Kasturi who is married to another man. She is his friend and lover, bears his child and is always available whenever he needs her. Since he is not living with her as husband, he is bereft of any kind of obligation to her. Jamun struggles hard to be free from himself the burden that relationships have become to him. Hence, he deliberately alienates himself from anything that will bind him emotionally, whether it is home or wife or even a sense of duty to his servant. Though he often feels that he would have to look after Shyamanand, it is not a very pleasant prospect for him. Jamun cannot break himself free from his sense of duty unlike Burfi and Joyce who always try to escape from the task of caring for the old man. Jamun is more comfortable with his oppressed and suffering mother than with his father against whom his natural tendency is to revolt. However, his sense of obligation to him dominates all other considerations.

The world of Burfi, on the other hand, is something different which he has acquired from his school friends. Burfi was influenced by this culture, whether it was his schooling and its accompanying package of culture or the pseudo sophistication of his wife who even told him that all that was un-anglicized and natural about his behaviour bespoke about his lower middle-class origins. All that he is concerned with is getting the best of what the family can give him with the least spending on his part. He has conformed to the larger identity of the family by marrying and fathering two sons.

After their mother's death Burfi and Jamun participate in the rituals but their ambivalent attitude about these superstitions is clear. When Aya reminds them that for the days of mourning, they have to eat plain vegetarian food and to stave off Urmila's spirit, Burfi responds to this typically:

I could never be petrified of Ma's spirit, not Ma's at any rate if you know what I mean and I don't mind if it hovers about my ears for the rest of my damned life. (243-44)

According to family tradition the eldest son Burfi has to perform all the rituals but due to his westernized mode of existence, he is not even worried about his dead mother. The two children have nothing to do with which to replace the loss of traditional cultural values. Displaced from Calcutta, their cultural home, the sons, Burfi and Jamun have grown up into westernized, rootless individuals, each in his own way unable to form lasting relationships. Neither are they able to define themselves in terms of their culture or religion. In contrast, the shrewd and hearty Mr. Hegiste, Jamun's Maharashtrian un-westernized colleague in Bombay, is firmly and happily moored in his traditional culture.

The novel portrays Shyamanand as a father who has toiled hard along with his wife to give his children a decent home and an expensive education. Though he is more interested in inanimate things than in people, he is very loyal to the household. He often speaks about his daughter-in-laws indifferent attitude to him and his wife. He is a shrewd father who tries hard to retain the old world

value of keeping the family together. However, he fails when it comes to his relationship with his sons. At the crucial moment of Urmila's heart attack, they observed him:

...brand new and alien, in jeans and T-shirts of dubious shades, and articulate a puzzling species of English; whereas Urmila and he had ripened in an earlier, illusorily genial world wherein, mawkish that he is, he reckons that the bonds of family had been sturdier, and parents more revered.(108)

Shyamanand is the anachronistic, displaced and dispossessed patriarch who does not miss any opportunity to exercise his authority over his wife, children and servants; an authority that does not subsume any responsibility. His character seems to be the source of all trouble within the family. The root cause of the family tragedy lies in the choices that he had made in his life, in the direction he had chosen for his family's prosperity and happiness which contained within them the prospect of his children learning to detest him and native language and traditions.

The burden of love, possession, and ties is most evident in the relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila. Even though married, for about forty years they have not been able to establish a meaningful relationship and instead live in a destructive atmosphere of squabbling, bickering and accusations. There is little true communication in the house hold. Urmila and Shyamanand seem to have lived with only a few pat expressions that they would exchange; indeed there is little intimacy between them. Though Urmila dies in the early part of the novel she is the centre and a powerful presence in the novel. She is trapped in a life-long struggle with her husband Shyamanand. We see her through the uncertain eyes of her two sons, who compromise themselves in their relationships with the women they meet. We watch her tottering around in her old age mimicked by her two young grandchildren.

Urmila suffers from a number of major ailments such as hypertension, piles, corns, arthritis, heart problem and so on. Urmila's situation in life is exemplary of woman's life as wife and mother getting caught within the process of

modernity. She is its first victim within the home and outside. Her role as a bread winner in addition to that of mother stretches the limits of her capacity. Bitterness and bickering is all she knows. Her life with her husband, her sons and everything around her is an inescapable burden that weighs her down. She could share her inner feminine space only with a person like Aya who has served the family for long and who has taken upon herself to nurse has in her heart disease. Urmila's old world values remain deep rooted, she is the ever-suffering woman who Jamun realizes had ultimately made a meaning out of her life. Using a series of flashbacks, Chatterjee leads us back and forth through the sons' relationship with their parents. While the attitude of Burfi to his parents seems utterly callous, Jamun shows some concern for his parents. The cruel relationship between sons and parents is revealed early in the novel:

They have never threshed about for their parents with any

remotely comparable strain.... yet parents can lacerate with equal virulence. (26)

Both the brothers wait eagerly for the death of one of the parents. Their attitude to their father is more cruel than their attitude to their mother. When Urmila has her heart attack and Shyamanand decides to spend some of his (Burfi) own hard earned money on her treatment, comes Burfi's caustic remark:

Baba's first love, his money, will now be gobbled up by this hocus-pocus to extricate his first hate, his wife. (63)

No one wants to contribute towards Urmila's medical expenses, not excluding her husband Shyamanand who demands the bill be split amongst them. Nowhere is the vicious and tragic nature of the burden apparent than in the relationship between the parents and the two sons, and the elder son's wife. In this sense, the novel focuses on how values and cherished relationships suddenly get distorted to mutually destroying burdens. Indu Saraiya remarks, "Chatterjee's greater achievement in *The Last Burden* is the mirroring of a Society in flux. This is done completely naturally and convincingly".¹⁰ Chatterjee seems to be suggesting that this is the true nature of family relationships

in India. The myth of family togetherness perpetuated in India is exploded.

The novel presents not merely the behaviour of the characters and their social atmospheres but also Chatterjee's skilful use of the English language that creates the sense of an ugly, tension ridden world. Chatterjee is faced with the linguistic challenge of how to reproduce in English the nuances, idioms and the flow of an alien language. The writer frequently uses Indian words and phrases like Thakuma, Thakuda, Grihasti, Charpais and several others without providing their meaning. Names like Jamun, Burfi, Pista and Doom are the names of delicious things. As Ravi Dayal remarks, "This choice of names seems to echo a dominant theme of the book: the devouring nature of family relationship."¹¹ Chatterjee has also defended himself against his use of English language:

I wanted to write at least one book that would be challenging to read. This was in protest against the lucid style of English August... In the Last Burden, the language balances the space of events.¹²

Chatterjee distinguishes between the colloquial language of Urmila and those of her more anglicized sons. In fact, Chatterjee's approach is very different from what he might have drawn from his own anglicized education. He mixes slangs, abuses, and usually ugly sounding words (as for instance "crabbedly" or "pawkilly") in order to create the atmosphere in which the characters live, breathe and speak. But Dom Moraes in his review of the book points out:

He uses surprising and unexpected words but he does not use them precisely and he uses them where they are not necessary. As a result, much of his prose seems a conscious effort to impress and amuse and it succeeds in neither.¹³

In his first book, Chatterjee used wit in situations, here he has attempted to convey it through language. The dialogue in the novel however seems unreal and stilted. The free flow of the dialogue gets impeded by the inclusion of difficult words. As C. Sengupta points out: "Everything in the book is unreal; the stilted family ties and the stilted language, and one shuts the book with a sense of

bitterness. It leaves a taste of gall and worm wood in the mouth. The book deals for the most part with wasted, aimless lives and it becomes a metaphor of a monstrous ugliness. The characters Chatterjee describes are tawdry and despising and a burden of human failure subsumes the novel. Perhaps the only redeeming feature in the book is a slight trace of maturity in Jamuna's character. All the rest is unreal."¹⁴

The first novel of the Chatterjee though reflects the disintegration of a society which is in the grip of cultural erosion, economic instability and social alienation, particularly in relation to the community. In this novel, he focuses on the individual's desire to ape the West and which takes its toll on the harmony in the society (family, language). The class conscious which was hitherto been a problem in relation to the economic status and caste-dependent continues to remain the same but with a difference. The difference lies now with the mobility in search of acceptance, recognition and equality which unfortunately depends more on the material strength of the individual than on the kind of human relation between individuals. Chatterjee digs at the household of Urmila in relation to the behaviour of her husband Shyamanand who does not always look at the family as a whole unit but only as individuals. This Chatterjee attributes to the evil effects of modernity which prevent individuals from having the "We attitude". Also, even the death of the mother does not seem to unite and bring together the divided individuals because of every one's longing to be highly individualistic. All these point out to the fact that Chatterjee though not in a position to offer any solution to the existing scenario and social predicament, is implicitly stating that modernity is responsible for such chaos in both the family and social life. What Chatterjee has not stated is obvious that he does not approve of the influence of modernism on human life nor would he like individuals to submit themselves to the temptations around there becoming victims to the way of life as set by the norms of modernism.

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