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## **ROLE OF WOMEN IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S NOVEL THE LAST BURDEN**

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### **Abstract**

*The Last Burden* is a portrayal of life of an Indian middle-class Brahmin family. In this novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee traces the lives of different people constituting a joint family, clearly portrayed their emotions, needs, desires and frustrations. It also deals with the financial, social and emotional issues in the family. The protagonist of the novel Jamun is a civil servant, and stays away from his family. His family comprises his parents, Urmila and Shyamanand, his elder brother, Burfi, his sister-in-law, Joyce, his two nephews and the children's ayah. All the members of the family, except the younger son, Jamun, live together in a house which Shyamanand and Urmila got built after their retirement. The story moves round Jamun's family and focuses on the family's time together dealing with Urmila's illness. Jamun returns home after hearing about his mother's illness. During his presence he comes to know about the problems which arise among the family members. The present paper "The Role of Women in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*", it deals with the characters of women who sacrifice their life for the family.

**Keywords:** *Emotion, Burden, Family, women and Sacrifice*

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of the major writers of existential tenet in India. His protagonists represent the modern face of upper class Indian experience. Chatterjee focuses on in-depth landscape of his characters in all his novels. However, his portrayals have not left the external context of his characters completely. His narratives include the slight difference of the shift from external to the internal, the outer to the inner, the social to the private. His works try to depict the giggle interior view of an individual's mind as a dynamic shift from the exterior to the inner within this seemingly hostile world. But, in Chatterjee's novels women characters are not mere adjunct to their male counterparts and are meant to be passive. Moreover, the central consciousness in the novel is that of a man, who does not afford much scope for an understanding of a female psyche.

A woman's role is not clearly defined in his novels, reflecting the current situation where a woman carries out so many tasks and one can hardly define her role. Even in the portrayal of a mother in *The Last Burden*, there is no ideal picture of motherhood.

The Last Burden is a portrayal of life in an Indian middle-class Brahmin family. In the novel, Chatterjee focus the lives of different people constituting a joint family, portraying their emotions, needs, desires and frustrations. The novel portrays the financial, social and emotional issues that make people favour a nuclear family in contrast to a joint family. He presents picture of woman as wife and servant and the bondage of family kinship.

The protagonist Jamun is the main character in the novel who lives in a far away town. He is the son of Shyamanand, a retired government official and his wife Urmila, who lives a house with their elder son Burfi and his wife Joyce. The novel opens with Jamun who is preparing to go home after getting the news that his mother Urmila has had a heart attack and has been hospitalized. The novel ends with Urmila's death and Burfi's transfer to Bombay and Shyamanand's acceptance to live with Jamun abandoning his house. It brings out the dark side of kinship in the western society.

Among the relationship, man- woman relationship is the most important human relationship. Literatures of all countries celebrate this human relationship as it has the most significant role to play in family life as well as in society. But this relationship suffers when one fails to understand each other. In partriarchal society this relationship is based on man's domination over woman. Woman plays several role in family like wife, mother, daughter-in – law, mother- in- law etc. which is considered as basic Indian culture. Woman has to perform all house hold works, submits to the demands of her husband and becomes a child bearing machine. Simone De Beauvoir calls marriage a destiny for woman:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellions, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (Beauvoir: 415)

In the novel, one can see the women characters are not mere appendages to their male counterparts and are meant to be passive. Moreover, the central consciousness in these novels is that of a man, who does not afford much scope for an understanding of a female psyche. It is hard to imagine such a relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila, because they live in same house and having dinner in the same dining table but there is no communication between them. They have not been able to establish a meaningful and valuable relationship as they live in a distractive atmosphere of quarreling for something or other.

The seal of blood, the last burden keeps each member of the family hermetically locked within it. it compels emotion of affection or love, but hidden under these are sensations of boredom, dislike, contempt and even the burden of the geriatric father to be born, and the further burden of the children of the house, to be brought up into same vicious style. (7)

It shows the inner friction of a middle class family where every individual thinking about their own self. It displays lack of true love between husband and wife and also among the family members. Urmila shares all her feeling and also ill treatment of her husband. When Jamun returns home she complains to him as:

Your father can't stomach my being comfortable! He may seem solicitous, but only he festers whenever he spots me at rest. The instant I pick up an efficient servant to somewhat ease my

donkeywork at home, he begins to niggle and crab-only because I may catnap one afternoon or in front of the TV one evening. He's been like this for forty years....(113)

Urmila's situation in the life is exemplary of woman's life as wife and mother getting caught within the process of modernity. She is the first unmistakable victim within the home and outside. What ought to have been in the Indian tradition a position of absolute authority over the members of her family where work, however hard it might be would have been a labour of love and its own reward, has been supplanted by total slavery. Her role is read as a winner in addition to that of the mother stretches the limits of her capacity to willingly take upon herself any kind of suffering for the sake of her children. Her story of suffering reveals an ever-complaining woman whose life is one of eternal suffering meted out by her circumstance in the form of her incorrigible husband, her growing sons who're constantly trying to dodge her and always succeeding in doing so, the aya whose alibis for not doing the jobs given her she has to take without questioning, and the agony and ignominy of her piles that sends her to the lavatory for long periods. Bitterness and bickering is all that she knows her life with her husband, her sons and everything around her is an inescapable burden. She could share her inner feminine space only with the aya who had been serving in the family for a long period. Her old world values remain deep-rooted when she takes it upon herself to nurse her in her debilitating illness. Yet the task becomes a cheerless burden and she takes discreet but urgent steps to transfer her to a hospital that would look after her. Urmila is the ever-suffering woman in the novel.

Chatterjee brings out the routine life of Indian middle class woman through the character of Urmila. She has to wake up early in the morning every day even in holidays and prepares tea as a first thing in the morning. There is nobody to help her. After giving tea to her husband Shyamanand and son Burfi, she has to continue her routine work of preparing breakfast, getting tiffin boxes ready for her children and preparing them to school. She is also a working woman so she too has to be ready to go to office. Shyamanand goes early to the garage but it is Urmila's duty to shut the door after the car leaves. She curses her conditions in life which force her to earn money for their children. Urmila return home at six in the evening and she has to continue the house hold works. She is forced to think all the time about the food she has to serve others. She longs for physical and mental peace. Even though she slogs, there is neither appreciation nor kind words from her husband, or from her children.

After doing all the works for others, Urmila does not have anything to do for herself, she suffers from loneliness and alienation also. Her only solace is Jamun, who always care for her. But Jamun cannot do anything against his father. Till the death of Urmila, she gets the same kind of behaviour from her husband as well as her elder son Burfi and his wife Joyce. Jamun says that he never seen love bondage between their parents. Instead he could find only quarreling.

After the death of Urmila, there is no love tenderness or feelings of remorse shown at Urmila's death. But there is a harsh exchange of words between Shyamanand and the sons regarding the will and money matters. They even quarrel among themselves when it comes to settling the medical bill of Urmila.

The mother figure is respectable and modest undergoing everlasting suffering. In the article, "Feminism and the Romantic Perspective of the Text" in the book *Critical Responses to Feminism*, Dr. D.S. Kaintura states that:

The gender became a major division between man and woman as the two different biological individuals, who became two social categories of men and women having the different psychological behaviour of their inherited genders. Thus gender became a cultural construct instead of a biological distinction of men and women. (2)

In spite of their being educated modern men still feel superior to women and they try to dominate them. In such a situation love and respect do not find a place in the human relationships. The male dominated Indian society recognizes a woman as a daughter, a sister a wife, a mother and also a goddess. A woman is considered good based on her degree of submission and servitude to her father, brother, husband, sons and almost every other man in the society. This is evident in the character of "Urmila." Nobody understands her including her husband Shyamanand. Both the sons Jamun and Burfi try to neglect the responsibility of taking care of their parents. The male characters become antiheroes by not doing their duty as sons. The antiheroes of Chatterjee are "self centered" and they want to enjoy and to live their own life. Indu Saraiya in her review of *The Last Burden* points out that "The Last Burden is a infuriating book at the start, but finally quite compelling in its honest appraisal of the harsh realities and erosions facing Indian Middle-class/life today" (35). Chatterjee seems to be suggesting that this is the true nature of family relationships in India.

Joyce, wife of Burfi, is another woman character in the novel. She plays a cruel role in the family. She enjoys all the benefit from Burfi's parent but never speaks with them. Urmila spent five days in ICU, Joyce hasn't visited the nursing home even once. She justifies her action, "...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)".

Kasturi is a minor character in the novel. She is a friend and lover of Jamun but later she marries Agastya. Kasturi is pictured as the image of new, liberated woman who develops the free relationship with Jamun and after her marriage with Agastya she carries the child of Jamun.

Thus, it sum up, Chatterjee's the last burden suggests that, the number of compromises and sacrifices a women has to make and duty she has to do for her family. S. Chitra and S. Kalamani's article "Burden of Woman as Reflected in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*" says "The wife has to erase her true self and rewrite herself according to the desires of her master, namely the husband, in the Indian set up. Through the mother is considered the centre of the Indian family, the beginning and the end of the family image itself, Urmila is not shown as a powerful character." Chatterjee clearly shows the picture of Indian middle class family and the role of women in the society.

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