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# The Quest

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*Editor*

**Ravi Nandan Sinha**

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Dr. Ravi Nandan Sinha

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## Burden of Woman as Reflected in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*

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Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought out a condition of reciprocity between them: women as we have seen, have never constituted a caste making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality. A man is socially an independent and complete individual; he is regarded first of all as a producer whose existence is justified by the work he does for the group; we have seen why it is that the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity. (Beauvoir: 415-16)

Indian society is a male-dominated society, where women are usually seen as subordinate and inferior to men. A woman's individual self has a very little recognition in her normal way of life. Indian woman who has been a part of this set-up has lived with this male chauvinism for ages.

Post-Independence India saw a change in the condition of women. Because of women's education and their progressive thinking, life started changing. Awareness was created among women to identify and realize their own selves. They started becoming economically independent and free. However, this kind of freedom is not spread all over. Even now, an educated, economically independent woman undergoes a great struggle in her life. Where family is concerned, she considers that as her first priority and fulfils her husband's and children's desires. She lives only for her family, but she is not rewarded for her selfless sacrifices and sometimes not even treated as a human being by her own family

members. The home is considered the only place where she is supposed to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties in the varied roles of wife, mother, daughter and sister.

In this context, Indian English novelists have unfolded the problems faced by women in the patriarchal society. One of the eminent Indian novelists writing in English, Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of those who are interested in portraying the interior landscape of the mind. His second novel *The Last Burden* presents woman's role as wife and servant and the bondage of family ties.

*The Last Burden* gives a captivating and vivid picture of an Indian middle-class family at the end of the twentieth century. The protagonist Jamun is the central character of the novel who lives in a far away town. He is the son of Shyamanand, a retired government official and his wife Urmila, who share a house with their other 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. It ends with Urmila's death and Burfi's transfer to Bombay and Shyamanand's acceptance to live with Jamun abandoning his house. The novel brings out the rottenness in the contemporary society. Sambuddha Sen in his review clearly describes the predicament of the modern Indian society of which Jamun's family is a part:

Jamun's family, which is the central subject of the novel, is not protected but shown to be constituted by the terrible tensions of the society of which it is a part. In it the exploitation and meanness of the world outside become entangled with the demands and resentments of domestic life to produce relationships that rot but never break. Urmila and her husband share little in common but they continue to live together stewing in mutual resentment and competing bitterly for the son's allegiance. (Sen: 55)

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. But this relationship suffers when one fails to recognize the merits of the other. In patriarchal society this relationship is based on man's domination over woman. This is apparent in India where a woman performs all the 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, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (Beauvoir: 415)

The relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila elaborates at length about the male domination. In her forty year long married life, Urmila has suffered subordination despite being a working woman. Shyamanand and Urmila have not been able to establish a meaningful and valuable relationship as they live in a distractive atmosphere of quarrelling and accusations. What Urmila says is true of middle class Indian married life:

... all family narratives are despicable, hideous - if they're faithful to the essential life - aimless rancour for one another, the most guileless event milks from us our watchful malice - living together merely to thrill in unkindness, marrying, mounting and spawning because we're all afraid of being corporeally alone. (LB: 55)

The novel evinces the inner friction of a middle class family where every individual seems to be thinking about his or her own self. The bond of love appears to be totally missing. The relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila displays the lack of true love for and understanding of each other. Urmila has a feeling that her husband is jealous of her and doesn't like her being in a comfortable state and she complains to her son Jamun:

... see again - your father can't stomach my being comfortable! He may seem solicitous, but inly 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 - a purulence in my skull. You must remember that chain of servants - Kishori, Bhido, Remtake, Chandan - that we had to help Aya. They all scrambled because they couldn't endure your father's prickliness.... (LB: 113)

They have not grown old gracefully. 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. *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.

Urmila's situation in life is commonly experienced by most of the Indian middle class women whose lives are caught between tradition and modernity. Urmila's role as a bread winner in addition to that of wife and mother limits her willingness to 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 circumstances in the form of an incorrigible husband, her growing sons with their big demands who are constantly trying to dodge her and her agony. Bitterness, bickering and frustration are all that she knows in her life with her husband, her sons and everything around her becoming an inescapable burden. As Chatterjee points out,

“... she, in a manner, likes to visit the loo more than once because, as she's times out of number apprised her tittering children, without any glint of waggishness, it's the one pocket of the house where she can be free of them and their father”(LB: 167)

Upamanyu Chatterjee brings out the routine life and chores of a woman in the middle class family through the character of Urmila. She has to wake up at four-thirty every morning including holidays and after having tea as the first thing in the morning, she plunges into other activities. There is nobody to help her and she does not have anyone with whom she can share her problems. Hence her complaint, “How to explain and who shall listen?” (LB:30).

After giving tea to Shyamanand and Burfi, she has to go on with the monotonous work of preparing breakfast, getting the tiffin boxes ready for her children and preparing them for school. Being a working woman she too has to be ready to go to office. In spite of all her busy works and preparations for others, she gets only scoldings from Shyamanand who blames her for his delay to go to office. Every morning Shyamanand goes before Urmila to the garage; but it is Urmila who has to wait to shut the door of the garage after the car leaves. She curses her conditions in life which force her to earn money by doing a job. Urmila comes back home at six in the evening and she has to continue with the household works. She is forced to think all the time about the food she has to serve others. She longs for physical and

mental solace. Even though she slogs, there is neither appreciation nor kind words from her husband, or from her children.

After doing so much for the others, Urmila does not have anything to do for herself, she suffers from loneliness and alienation also. Her only solace is Jamun, who understands her better than all the others. She unfolds her emotional self, her 'alienated self' and her isolated self only to Jamun, but in vain, as he cannot do anything for her. Till the end of her life, she gets the same kind of treatment from her husband. Jamun says that he has not seen love or bondage between his parents and has never spotted them touching each other out of fondness. Instead he has seen only hatred.

Urmila's husband Shyamanand is very authoritative. He does not beat his wife but manages to reduce her self confidence and even of her ability to think clearly. She has been trapped in a life long struggle with her husband Shyamanand. Urmila's relationship with her sons also reveals the tragic nature of 'the burden' of love. The sons Burfi and Jamun have grown up into westernized individuals displaced from their cultural home Calcutta. The attitude of Burfi to his parents appears as 'burden'. But Jamun shows some concern for his parents.

Chatterjee's novel is a classic example of what Simone De Beauvoir vividly portrays as the state of a married woman:

In the early years of marriage the wife often lulls herself with illusions, she tries to admire her husband wholeheartedly, to love him unreservedly, to feel herself indispensable to him and the children. And then her true sentiments become clear; she sees that her husband could get along very well without her, that her children are bound to get away from her and to be always more or less ungrateful. The home no longer saves her from empty liberty; she finds herself alone, forlorn, a subject, and she finds nothing to do with herself. (Beauvoir: 461)

When woman is relegated to such a low level, she feels empty; unable to achieve what she wants through her life, life loses its meaning for her. Beauvoir clearly brings out the plight of women after marriage in her book:

The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness - there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness - but that it mutilates her: it dooms her to repetition and routine. The first twenty years of woman's life are extraordinarily rich, as we have seen: She discovers the world and her

destiny. At twenty or thereabouts mistress of a home, bound permanently to a man, a child in her arms, she stands with her life virtually finished forever. Real activities, real work, are the prerogative of her man. She has mere things to occupy her which are sometimes tiring but never fully satisfying. (Beauvoir, 462)

Thus she stands apart without a chance to prove herself or assert herself.

The whole family waits for the death of Urmila. There is no love, tenderness or feelings of remorse shown at Urmila's death. But there is a hot exchange of words between Shyamanand and the sons regarding the will and money matters. Shyamanand says, "Twenty thousand for the pacemaker. Does she need it? Can she bear it? We should consult a second specialist" (LB:63). They even quarrel among themselves when it comes to settling the medical bills of Urmila. The elder brother Burfi talks about the relationship their father had with their mother: "'Ironic' decrees Burfi, as he forages in a picnic basket at his feet. 'Baba's first love, his money, will now be gobbled up by this hocus-pocus to extricate his first hate, his wife'" (LB:63). This is the nature of relationships in India and the 'family togetherness' of which India has been proud has become a myth.

It is only when Urmila suffers a stroke and lies dying in the hospital, that Shyamanand shows some concern about which Burfi remarks – "He loves her only when she is absent and dying" (LB:230). But Jamun is not quite sure whether his father is suffering at all. This suffering or grief is just momentary and even when they are returning from Haridwar after immersing Urmila's ashes, it is Shyamanand who broaches the topic of Urmila's will.

Urmila's son Jamun thinks about his mother's life when she is in the intensive care unit of the hospital. Jamun is chastened by his extreme exhaustion. Nothing else appears to wriggle into his skull. This is the real life, he ruminates messily, this fatigue, these aching calves, this bedpan world. Jamun ruminates - we'll never know for certain whether Ma wished for anything other than the braiding of her hair. A primal remorse oozes through his veins. We can never express the true sentiments - love, devotion, kindness - we can never act humanely, while those whom we cherish are healthy and alive. At the moment, to Jamun, this thought seems as indubitable as the precept of Genesis that a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his

wife, and they shall be one flesh, and shall spawn a litter which in due time will leave its father and its mother to cleave to and be one flesh with a spouse. Thus existence has trundled along for thousands of years, and will chug on till Time itself peters out, and its hellish and dreadful designlessness is at last immaculately clear when one witnesses, at close quarters, the sickness of death. (*LB*: 225-26)

To sum up, Chatterjee's novel suggests that, the number of compromises and sacrifices a wife has to make and the amount of work she has to do, to adjust to her husband's lifestyle, make her a victim figure. 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. Though 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: there are many times when she is shown at her worst. Chatterjee is clearly aware of the disease that afflicts middle class life, and through *The Last Burden* and the portrayal of Urmila's family, he attempts to paint a searing picture of reality.

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# An Analysis of Social and Political Constraints in the Writings on the Women of Royal Families

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The writings on Rajput women or by Rajput women do not constitute a mere exhibition of the glamour and glory of royalty. They are the poignant convictions of the ethos and the precarious catalyst of the conflict between their regal splendour and discriminatory gender perspective during the times of Indian Princely States and the British Government of India in the modern period of Indian History, which was categorically passing through the fusion of imperialism and orientalism. The women of the Indian Princely States, especially of Kshatriya or Rajput families, were then considered specimens of pristine beauty and aesthetic ethics. Their position in the royal courts was indeed politically nominal, as they were relegated to realms of sensuality, sexual fantasy, fecundity, artistic dignity and to exotic oriental fortune. As a consequence of their position in the royal courts, their story of ageless conflicts between love and loyalty, and duty and desire had a stranglehold on their human emotions and their human nature. This is well explored and aptly drawn in one of the writings on the life of Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmi Bai whose achievements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are unforgettable. Jaishree Misra's *Rani*. The author writes,

When thirteen year old Manikarnika leaves her father's court-in-exile to marry the king of Jhansi, little does she realize the burdens of greatness awaiting her. As she grows from a headstrong and spirited girl into a young