



Imaging New Cultural Spaces

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Elements of Existentialism in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*

S. Chitra

Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine basic to existential psychiatry. It focuses on the individual's subjective awareness of his style of existence, his intimate interaction with himself and his environment. It is a set of philosophical ideals that emphasizes the existence of human beings, the lack of meaning and purpose in life and the solitude of human existence. Existentialism does not deal with the state of existence; it depicts the act of existing of the individual. According to Sheikh Mushtaq Ahmad,

Existentialism, in the strict sense, is not a system of philosophy but an approach to the study of man [. . .], it is not only the expression of the moods and experiences of man but also an agonized cry against all the processes of dehumanization, essentialism, objectivization, bad faith, alienation and an all embracing intellectualism. (14)

The main aim of existentialism is to focus on the problems of human existence with a view to providing solutions. As a result, the leading existentialist thinkers have reinforced the importance of the subjective attitude towards life. In the depiction of human life, we see a man completely involved with

only solace is Jamun, she unfolds her “emotional self”, her “alienated self” and her “isolated self” to him. She knows:

All family narratives are despicable hideous – if they’re faithful to the essential life – aimless rancour for one another, the most guileless even, milk from us, our watchful malice – living together merely to thrill in unkindness, marrying, mounting and spawning because we’re all afraid of being corporally alone. (55)

In this novel, all are in the ‘alienated world.’ They experience alienation in the family itself. Both Jamun and Burfi are alienated from the family. Urmila suffers from loneliness and alienation; so does the father.

Today man fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and his existence in this hostile macrocosm. The most exhausting problems that man faces are not only flood, famine and war but also inner problems of alienation and insignificance of existence. Shyamanand fails in his relationship with his sons. He is at loss to deal with them when he needs them most, at the crucial moment of Urmila’s heart attack. They seem to 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 a earlier, illusory genial world [. . .]” (108).

Jamun struggles hard to free himself of the burden that relationships had become to him. This he could do only by relating himself to Kasturi and Kasibai. He deliberately alienates himself from anything that would bind him emotionally, be it a home or wife or even a sense of duty to his servant. This novel can be read as a journey from rootlessness to maturity, but the emphasis this time seems to be on the ‘burden’ of family ties. As the novelist himself has pointed 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” (qtd. in Sengupta 29).

The burden of love, possession and ties are 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 live in a destructive atmosphere. Both the brothers wait eagerly for the death of at least one of the parents.

The theme of exile runs through most of modern literature and one of its persistent concerns is to explore the possibilities of reconciliation between man and his situation. This issue assumes an immediacy of concern with all post-colonial literatures as they are an outcome of an unequal dialectic between a violent and rapacious imperialistic culture and a subjugated, though often rich and complex native culture. This dialectic has caused in the colonized societies a large scale displacement, dispossession and dislocation – social, cultural, linguistic and geographical and thus resulting in a crisis of identity and creating a sense of exile.

Jamun has what can be termed a love affair with Kasturi, but he is not affected when she marries another. He is satisfied with the arrangement in the relationship as he has no additional burden. In this contended situation there is no chance of taking a decision which would transform the life of the protagonist.

Jamun is frustrated in life. He longs for modernized and city life. His family is not a happy one. Even as a teenager Jamun “feels for his parents a love that is only the tenderness of remorse, just a sorrow, a shame at their unhappiness” (198). Jamun has not found a truly happy relationship. His early love Kasturi remains a friend, occasionally a very close one indeed; but she is married. Jamun’s deep emotional bondage to his parents makes it impossible for him to enter into a responsible and independent life of his own. The novel ends with hope, Jamun finally realises his responsibility and decides to take care of Shyamanand; “For the millionth time in his life, he suddenly, in a panic that time’s running out, wants to expiate himself before his parents for the wrongs that he must’ve done them, years to convince them that he, despite his vulnerabilities, is truly grateful to them for the gift of life” (193).

Feelings of dread, anxiety and despair are the hall marks of

the protagonist of the the novel under discussion. These have a remarkable influence on matters of choice. Kierkegaard held that it is spiritually crucial to recognize that one experiences not only a fear of specific objects but also a feeling of general apprehension. Anxiety leads to the individual's confrontation with nothingness and with the impossibility of finding justification for the choices he or she must make.

In *The Last Burden*, 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.[. . .] 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. (225-226)

The Last Burden is a more sombre and sober book, different in its ambitions. Shyamanand is the anachronistic, displaced and dispossessed patriarch who doesn't 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 troubles within the family.

Urmila's situation in life is exemplary of woman's life as wife and mother getting caught in the process of modernity. Burfi does not have any affection for his family members. Within one roof, all are alienated from one another. When Urmila was admitted in the hospital, Joyce refused to stay with her: "Your mother hates me, Joyce screeched, why should I yawn about in a hospital watching a shrivelled cow die?"(84).

In this novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee has painted a world where all the characters are filled with the same sense of disquiet and so there is no one in the novel who can judge the protagonist and his activities. The characters who interact with the protagonist have no moral standards, they themselves are emotionally isolated and so it is difficult for them to judge the loneliness of the protagonist, Jamun.

The characters in Chatterjee's novel highlight the major tragedy of the twentieth century boredom. Boredom is another form of passivity. It usually envelops societies that have lived long under foreign domination. It also portrays hopelessness and anchorlessness of the protagonist.

Burfi and Jamun have grown up into westernised, rootless individuals in their own way unable to form lasting relationships. Though the attitude of Burfi to his parents seems to be utterly callous, Jamun shows some concern for his parents because, according to his mother he hasn't married thus far. The cruel relationship between sons and parents is revealed early in the novel. Jamun's attitude to his father is much more cruel than his attitude to his mother. There is a sense of dislocation and a general meaninglessness, as a result, the protagonist's search for identity is sometimes pathetic and ridiculous.

After their mother's death, Burfi and Jamun participate in the rituals but their ambivalent attitude about these superstitions is clear. Burfi is worried that they have to eat plain vegetarian food and wear iron next to the skin. Hardly the traditional attitude of the eldest son of a Hindu family is seen in Burfi. Jamun has nothing with which to replace the loss of traditional and cultural values. But perhaps Chatterjee suggests that it is at this point that the journey for Jamun from rootlessness to maturity begins. This comes out forcibly in the passage quoted below, which seems to sum up the very theme of the novel and also it reveals Jamun's realisation of the eternal truth that:

The world is indeed composed of these cyclical, wellworn tracks that every generation shambles about on, age upon age, that nothing that falls to one's lot is new, that maturing and growing old really signifies encountering, in the particular, what has already occurred numberless times in the universal.

[...] When one takes the family and not the individual, as the unit nothing shocks anyway, as though the fellowship of one's blood itself is a kind of cushion, a buffer, or a diluting agent, for all singularities. (263-264)

Though Chatterjee calls this fellowship of blood the 'last burden,' he is quick to point out through Kasturi that there is no such thing as 'last burden.' Thus, in this novel we find a journey from rootlessness to maturity, self-realization, a struggle to come to terms with oneself against the complex realities of this country.

Jamun can be seen as an archetypal hero who makes a lonely journey only to get more integrated in the society where he finds peace and salvation. These characteristics are present in Jamun who is unwilling to risk a journey to discover his inner self. He is content to live life as it comes. Though in the process he is numb to any sensation, he is happy to live that life. Jamun knows that his failure to accept the family responsibility is a sore issue with people at home but fails to do anything about it.

Modern man becomes more and more unhistorical, estranged from himself and from his past, opposed to traditional values and disloyal to his cultural heritage. Modern man's existential condition depicted with dark shades and colors applied in a gloomy mood of overpowering pessimism which can be best identified as the symptoms of an overall crisis of life. Upamanyu Chatterjee's protagonist, Jamun is morally and culturally degenerated youth. In him we cannot be able to find moral values. Jamun rejects the values of life.

In this novel the man-woman relationship is always seen from the point of male. One cannot compartmentalize women into any fixed groups. The role of woman is not clearly defined in this novel. Chatterjee portrays a woman who carries out so many tasks and one can hardly define her role. Even in the portrayal of mother, there is no ideal picture of motherhood. Urmila gives a description about her routine life. She blames everybody in the household. She is not proud about the role of a mother or a wife. This description of Urmila only helps in breaking the glorified picture of motherhood. Today's woman has started questioning the role given to her by society. This novel gives a poetic rendering of the collapse and disintegration of familial ties and values in an average Indian family at the end

of the twentieth century.

Another central concept around which existential enquiry revolves is the concept of freedom so essential to human condition. Existentialist theory identifies freedom with human existence. Existentialists accord with the truth that all human beings are potentially to choose their own mode of living. According to Frederic Patka, "Man is the privileged being who chooses the form, content, and direction of his evolution on the immaterial level, for better or worse. Moreover, man is that peculiar being who may choose his existence or reject it altogether" (37).

Man realises the concept of freedom only when he actively involves himself in taking personal decisions. It is important to note that freedom is not gained by passive acceptance of the human condition. Existentialist thinkers regard man as a unique being, ruled by his passions and driven by his desire for consolation and contentment in the world in which he is placed. According to them man is free in the world to act according to his choice.

As an existentialist he is aware of the despondency around him, but unlike the existentialist hero, he takes no efforts to make the situation better. Till the end he keeps his relationship with Kasturi, cribs when he is asked to pay for his parents and reluctantly agrees to have his father with him. There is no active participation on his part. He is never found regretting his life. He becomes a part of the shallow middleclass and loses his individuality in the process.

For existentialism, responsibility is the dark side of freedom. When individuals realize that they are completely responsible for their decisions, actions, and beliefs, they are overcome by society. They try to escape from this society by ignoring or denying their freedom and their responsibility. In *The Last Burden*, at first, Jamun rejects his responsibilities in the family. He does not want to spend money for his mother and waits for her death. There is no cordial relationship among the members of the family. But, as time goes on, he realizes his responsibility

and undertakes to look after Shyamanand in his old age.

The novel shows how all the sound and fury of life does not quench the human spirit; the existential angst does not defeat man. No ethical or moral values are dogmatized in the novel, yet, through the happenings and the behavioural changes of the characters, together with the emotional interplay, the positive and desirable ways of living are presented.

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