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***The Last Burden* by Upamanyu Chatterjee: A Realistic Criticism
on the Degeneration and Changing Values of the Younger
Generation**

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Abstract

The Last Burden (1993) is the second novel from the prolific literary pen of Upamanyu Chatterjee followed by 'English August: An Indian Story' (1988). 'The Hindu' spoke very highly of the novel as it writes, "'The Last Burden' is one of the most honest novels of Chatterjee's generation."¹ The novel deals with the suffering and obstacle as faced by the contemporary middle class Indian families in day to day life on the realistic front. It broadly highlights the burden which has rather become unbearable for most of the Indian middle class families living in all kind of background.

Keywords: Realism, Degeneration, Sufferings, Responsibility

'The Last Burden' is about ingratitude of the young generation about their parents in their old age. The type of treatment given to the age old people by the young lot is a kind of new phenomena as the same has been a sort of rarity in older times and milieu. The burden in real sense is the responsibility of the old lot in a family and the author very subtly title it as last because after that the young lot will be the burden for the upcoming generation and after taking care of the last burden they think that they will have to bear nothing else in their lives they shall be relieved forever. The back jacket of the novel gives the gist of the story as under:

Jamun, young, single and adrift, reluctantly returns home to see his dying mother. Once there, he is surrounded by family—his father Shyamanand, elder brother Burfi, sister-in-law Joyce, his nephews and their ayah—and decides to stay on until one of his ailing parents dies. What Jamun doesn't admit to himself is that there is another, probably stronger reason for his extended stay in the family home—an old friend Kasturi, now married and pregnant, who has returned to the city that she associates with him.²

The burden depicted in the present novel is so very realistic that it gives the true to type picture of Indian society. Whether it is a rural society or urban the condition and the treatment to the old people is the same. The poor as well as rich, they both are affected in different ways. Moving back and forth in time and space, and writing in a language of unsurpassed richness and power, the novelist presents a funny, bitterly accurate and vivid portrait of the awesome burden of family ties. The novelist clarifies his intention of writing this wonderful piece of composition in an interview. 'I wanted to write about the sufferings that family members inflict on each other and the terrible responsibility of emotional dependence, I wanted to observe the burden, I suppose of attachment.'³ When the novel was written in the year 1993, the transition period of the family bonding was at its crest. In the initial years of globalization in India, the preference for the nucleus family over joint family was found to be the outcome of an individual's quest for identity, his attitude of self centeredness and the same was the root cause of the cracking of the family bondage. The author par excellence has described the terrible burden of the family ties in the family of Shyamanand and Urmila—a middle class couple—with their two sons Burfi and Jamun daughter-in-law Joyce, and grandsons Pista and Doom. In his manner and appearance Jamun represents a typical young and modern generation as he dons latest outfits in vogue. His elder brother seems to be a responsible son. However sometimes he too displays his selfish caring to his parents. As an elder son Burfi appears to be extremely selfish and in real sense he was less responsible to his parents and his concerns are restricted to financial concerns only. The novel examines and evaluates the relationship among the family members, which appears to be too dry and mechanical in form. Even the relationship in old age, between the head of the family Shyamanand and Urmila seems to be dry, wry or enigmatic one. He treats her merely like a lifeless machine or the doormat. The roots of self-centeredness itself rooted in Shyamanand as he appears to be a male chauvinist. Shyamananda has stopped physical relationship with his wife some seventeen years back. His relationship with his wife seems to be purposeless now. On most of the times his behaviour and treatment with his family members was very queer. Money for him has become the most important consideration even at the time of the illness of his wife. He worries more about the payment of the medical bills than the health of his wife. It was very difficult for him to part with his money so much so that he cannot even bear the medical expenses of his wife and considers his wife the sole

responsibility of his sons so they should share the expenses. "Twenty-five thousand for the pacemaker. Does she need it? Can she bear it? We should consult a second specialist...I don't have twenty-five thousand in ready money. I will be forced to break a bank deposit, borrow or pay interest to the bank for using my own saving."⁴ Despite their forty years of conjugal life they could not build up a significant and strong bond and they have been leading the life in a devastating atmosphere of backbiting, squabbling and allegation. Shyamanand is such an egocentric character that he demands too much from others but in return never ever think of imparting anything to anyone. Old-age is the time when the bond between husband and wife becomes most strong; they remain constantly in touch with other sharing mutual feeling and understanding. Moral support seems to be so very important that the loneliness for husband or wife in old age is considered to be a curse. But in case of Shyamanand the condition is not normal or the representation of the new age realism where existence of a man is limited only up to his own self. Shyamanand is so very unlucky that he himself appears to be the burden for the family and at the same time could not transfer the sense of genuine responsibility among the other members of the family. He insults and humiliates everyone in the family thereby creating a kind of lack of self esteem among the family members. He is painted in the novel as a pitiful character but he never wins the sympathy of the readers. The incidents in the novel appear less fictional but they seem to be the real depiction of the cruel realities of the current day situations. The formative columns of the family are so hollow as if they have been eaten up by the maggots of burden.

The elder son Burfi was like living on the 'like father like son' dictum. He was as self-centered and selfish as his father was. He was living a well defined life in an imaginary circle drawn around him casing his wife Joyce and two sons Pista and Doom only. He never ever puts in any effort to come out of the circle drawn around him. Apart from his wife and kids he thinks everyone else the unnecessary encumbrance or the unwanted responsibility, the obstacle and burden. He hardly cares for his old parents and even does not invite them to the birthday party of his sons. By displaying the kind of family relationship the author throws light on the changing work culture and the time and energy demanded by the contemporary offices and the much talked about dead line. The modern generation is entering the phase when both wife and mother-in-law are working women. They are no longer available to attend the day to day task of family responsibility. For most of the part in the novel Burfi seems to be a toy in hands of his wife. He never goes against the wishes of his wife. He never displeases his wife. He is, like his father, highly money-minded. Everything he considers and reconsiders from the financial point of view. He expresses his meanness while talking about Residence Allowances. "By staying here Joyce and I lose three thousand rupees every month as Residence Allowance! Baba should repay me that. Staying with them is screwing my marriage up."⁵ Even Joyce's relation with her-in-laws was totally like an outsider. Despite being the member of the family she neither communicates with them nor does she expresses

her sympathy to them. Shyamanand never accepted Joyce as his daughter-in-law because by birth she was a Christian. Even when her mother-in-law was admitted in the hospital in ICU for five long days, Joyce thinks that it is not necessary to pay a visit to her. Further she explains her point of view by saying: ‘‘She doesn’t like me—and I am 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.’’⁶ Barfi’s attitude towards his parents was hellish. He lacks all the attributes of an ideal son. He lacks apathy, concern and affection to his mother and father. Even his ill-mannered children Pista and Doom have paid visit to the nursing home only once. Pista in particular has very strong feelings of dislike for his grandmother. Thus all the members in the family depict a kind of family in modern world that lacks affection and care. The cruel relationship and communication gap between sons and parents is projected very aptly and realistically by Upamanyu Chatterjee through the characters of Burfi, Jamun and Joyce. Joyce still observes Christian rituals though she is a daughter-in-law of a Hindu family that adversely affects the relationship in the family. Jamun is the protagonist of the novel who has been painted as the anti-hero by the novelist. The action of the novel and narration is presented through the Jamun’s eyes. He is unlike his brother Burfi in concern and affection for his parents; especially he is very affectionate to his mother. He feels that his mother should stop weeping and crying and retort back to her husband Shyamanand. He tries to create an oasis like condition in the dead and dried up relational atmosphere of his family. He tries his level best to console his mother at occasions, ‘‘Then hugging her, nosing the striae of Pond’s dreamflower talcum on her throat, kissing her tears, feels marvelous, like a virile, veined forearm bridling, cradling, hushing the thunder in his heart. What’s it this time, Ma? Please tell me. I want to see you smile. Through your tears, I want to see you smile like the sun.’’⁷ Unlike Burfi he never appears to be money minded in the novel. He expresses his concern for his aged parents and tries to comfort them in little things. He always tries to cherish every ray of hope in their lackluster unexciting life. After the death of his mother the responsibility of father morally goes on the shoulders of Burfi but Burfi never intends to accept the responsibility. For him his father was a burden that Jamun should take care of. He requests Jamun to take father with him. In the pages of the novel both the sons were painted while waiting for the death of at least one of the parents in the mind-numbing atmosphere of the family. After Urmila’s wretched death both the sons, Burfi and Jamun, only mechanically partake in the last rites. Their ambivalent attitude about these superstition or formalities appeared them only as conservative good for nothing custom. On this occasion Burfi, especially, seems to be in the hell of the mood. After cremation when the main male trio of the novel drove back home the novelist details the scene very aptly; ‘‘The three of them drive home in a kind of sad, relaxed quietness, as though they are returning from a railway station, to which they’ve frenziedly careened to get a beloved friend to board on time, fearful throughout the rush that they won’t pull it off, and after they’ve made it, have

been thoroughly sucked out by the backwash of tension.”⁸ Jamun tries to be a considerate son but behaves somewhat strangely at times. At the time of the illness of his father the main character of the novel who is still a bachelor makes love with his former love interest Kasturi in another room upstairs. For Jamun the satisfaction of his sexual desire is far more important than taking care of the health of his ailing father. Jamun’s relationship with Kasturi remains intact even after her marriage and she had a daughter from him also. Both never feel ashamed of their illicit relationship. Apart from Kasturi Jamun satisfies his physical desire with Kasibai, his maid servant away from home. Thus Jamun pioneers the generation of Information Technology Age that is to change the entire social set up and all set to redefine and restructure the relationship as found in the novels of the likes of Chetan Bhagat. One may talk in terms of morality while discussing the character of Jamun but talking about the morality of the characters of Chetan Bhagat will be a kind of sheepishness in part of a critique where a young man dare to talk to a girl in such a straight words like “deti hai to de varna kat le.”⁹ It is but the sheer magic of the pen of Upamanyu Chatterjee and his foresightedness that he has painted a character like Jamun. Jamun may be the making of the characters of the generation of Chetan Bhagat who partially respect their parents but are never ready to tolerate any kind of interference in their carefree life style.

“Chatterjee is a mercilessly gifted observer,”¹⁰ who very realistically and sardonically brings to the readers through ‘The Last Burden’ that distress or anguish is just transitory as he writes about the discussion of Shyamanand and his sons right after the ritual of the immersion of the Urmila’s ashes in Haridwar on the way back and the topic was the will of Shyamanand. The outsiders and seemingly unimportant characters in the novel seem to have some sense as they are sensible and they follow the set and expected tradition. Aya is one of such characters who time and again reminds the Burfi, Jamun and Pista dos and don’ts of custom and tradition. She reminds them that for the days of mourning they’ve to eat plain, vegetarian food, and to stave off Urmila’s spirit, wear iron next to the skin.¹¹ The author tries to bridge the gap between old and new by bringing in the observance of custom as suggested by the Aya. All in all, the depiction of old people in their solitude is the theme of the novel as the young lot is engaged in preparing for their old age; the same kind of solitude by their self-centeredness, lust and greed for money.

‘The Last Burden,’ is one of the most exceptionally written novels by any Indian author. Language wise the term ‘burden’ keeps its effect intact throughout the pages of the novel as one has to encounter the bombast of the words hard to understand and even for some words the dictionary uploaded in a computer says ‘sorry’. For the likes of the readers of Chetan Bhagat, this is not an ideal piece to pick up. James wood appropriately writes in his book review of ‘The Last Burden’ that “A lot of strange and foreign words appear in ‘The Last Burden’ like a Russian General and his medals, it wears them somewhat dementedly,

with a chaotic and stuffed pride. But this panel of victories and campaigns wearies the poor spectator. There is too much here and too much there in the nature of self-reward.”¹²

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