

## The Subjugation of Woman in “*The Last Burden*” by Upamanyu Chatterjee.

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### Abstract:

Family and marriage are basic structures of Indian society. With the advent of western education and consumerism, there is a collapse of family systems. This has led to the degeneration of the Indian family and this process is captured well by Upamanyu Chatterjee's second novel *The Last Burden*. Everyone in Shyamanand's household suffers from wrong relations. Especially, Urmila struggles to find her existence in micro institution called family. She feels life is bleak and purposeless. But the novel ends with a positive note hinting at the change in Jamun's attitude towards family. He expresses his willingness to take care of his father Shyamanand. But this transformation happens after the death of Urmila. Shyamanand and his two children are responsible for the misery of Urmila and consequently her life ends with tragic note. Thus, Upamanyu Chatterjee has shifted his focus from public issues to private agonies of a family in this novel.

**Key words:** Male domination- Subjugation of women-no real love between couples.

*The Last Burden*, written in 1993, is the second novel of a popular postmodern author Upamanyu Chatterjee. He has created a storm in the Indian literary scene with his first novel “*English, August*”. *The Last Burden* highlights the attitude of the Indian youth who considers any relation is a burden. It gives a realistic picture of the middle class Indian families and the emerging patterns in the joint family structure. In this novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee has shifted his focus from public issues to private agonies of a family. The story revolves around the friction in the middle-class Hindu Brahmin family of Shyamanand, a retired government servant. The family which lives in a town by the sea comprises of his wife Urmila, two sons Burfi and Jamun. The elder son is married to Joyce and has two sons Pista and Doom while the younger son works away from the family. The novel recreates the family life at the end of the twentieth century. When his mother suffers from the heart attack, the protagonist

Jamun returns to his home. It's not at all a happy family reunion. The events at home and his mother's sickness make him recollect the past events of his childhood, the death of Aya, stroke of his father and his relations with Kasturi. The author mercilessly dissects the family and exposes the flaws inherent in Jamun's family.

Danny Yee comments, “*The family members probe each other for weaknesses that can be exploited, fighting over every little issue, real or symbolic. The Last Burden is a family saga of expectations not met, failures of communication, unresolved frustrations and other traumas.*” In this novel, he traces the lives of different people constituting a joint family, superbly portraying their emotions, needs, desires, and frustrations. The novel portrays the financial, social, and emotional issues that make people favor a nuclear family in contrast to a joint family.

The novelist employs how women are subjugated and definitely makes the readers aware of the actual frictions that exist between couples. It is elegantly portrays the decisions and sacrifices made by different people in a family and the frictions and frustrations thereby. It also portrays the struggle of the woman in this new generation in order to move into nuclear family structure from a strictly hierarchical joint family structure. The novel opens at the death bed of Urmila and takes us through the story of this middle class family and how the hard-work of women is underestimated by society and also by family members.

According to S.Chitra and S.Kalamani, the treatment meted out to Urmila by her husband reveals the alienation she suffers,

*Shyamanand is self-centered, inhuman and offensive. Urmila is selfpitying. 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. (1)*

Aya, servant in Shyamanad's house, lost his husband in an accident at a young age. She does household work for Shyamanad's family. No salary is given to her thinking that shyamanand's family is providing food to her. In her last days this family ignores her and hesitates to spend money for hospital charges. It is evident that there is no recognition for the work if it has no salary.

Jamun more or less ceases to acknowledge Aya,

*"When he bounds upstairs or slopes off through the side door, or ushers an electrician to the fuse box, he dissembles to himself that she is only an inanimate accumulation beneath the stairs, a truss of cast-off clothing, and a few blackened sticks. Only her eyes, misted by infirmity and bitterness, jar him. In time, overlooking her existence becomes almost effortless." (The Last Burden, Pg. No. 90)*

Helpless Aya provided domestic services to Shyamanand's family but they ignored her health and joined her in tuberculosis charitable hospital against her wish. *"She lived with for over twenty year. She is part of the family. She doesn't wish to leave the house now. She wants to die at home, she proclaims, literally! She throws away or hides her medicines. Doctor, we can't suffer this to continue!" (92)*

Shyamanand, Urmila and Jamun ferry a most averse Aya to the nearest government Clinic, ten kilometers away. In another context *"Jamun dislikes sitting alongside her. She looks so servant- like; he is disquieted that he might be mistaken for her relative." (87)*

We also observe partiality and negligence towards servants at home. Aya suffers from symptoms of ill-health. Shyamanand's family members neglect for some months she disregarded symptoms of her afflictions, when finally she couldn't ignore them; she hyped up her ailments. *"I am dying, don't you know that."* She would scream at Urmila. Aya died of diabetes, tuberculosis and neglect in a rundown charitable hospital." (86)

Shyamanand supports his behavior by saying, with his family members, "Why are you so upset? If we'd found a hospital earlier, we'd have removed Aya there before. We'll visit her from time to time, and every month. We can send her a little spending money with an office peon." (94)

In providing treatment to Urmila, Shyamanand hesitated in spending money. Of course, Shyamanad's family belongs to middle class. When doctor suggested doing operation to urmila, they reacted, "Is my mother strong enough for the operation...Doctor said, "I see no alternative, there was no choice to the piles operation." Shyamandand thinks, "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'll be forced to break a bank deposit, borrow – and pay interest to the bank for using- my own savings? And on the hospital circuit I'll discuss the contributions with Burfi."(63)

If it happens to Aya people may think that she is not their family member, so they thought of money. But more or less the same situation arises when Urmila is hospitalized. Burfi says, ".... My mistake, own Jamun, I confused matters. You'd have written that Baba'd proposed that we should divide the piles surgery costs, not this stroke." (44)

Burfi and Shyamanand speak of sharing the hospital costs of Urmila by throwing the responsibility to others to avoid spending money which is surprising even to Urmila. "In one letter you let out that we were bickering over who ought to share how much, should we split the costs by five, why should Joyce contribute. One of us can clear accounts now, afterwards we can square up."(43)

Jamun contributes his part for hospital charges of his mother, "That night Jamun reports to Shyamanand that his sons will share the costs of Urmila's healing. Jamun himself can immediately part with twelve thousand rupees. 'Yes' falters Shyamanand, 'that'll great help.'"(70)

Burfi speaks with his father. He asked Shyamanand should pay those bills because he used the services of his wife. Further he exploited the hard work of his mother and she is in miserable condition because of Shyamanand's attitude. Burfi says to his father, "It shouldn't be an issue at all! She's your wife. You hatched her maladies. You should pay for them." (44) As a son Burfi didn't think what he has done to his mother. Ultimately Urmila suffered and died. In this context it is worth to remind the role of mother in Indian family system. Mother took the responsibility of doing work at home. Many family members thought mother is idle at home because she is not doing job. Urmila tells her position to Jamun. More or less this is applicable to many families, "I rise at four-thirty every morning, long before the Sun, every morning, holidays, Sundays, nothing, no variation. Four-thirty, in the murk I ooze out of bone-wearying sleep. Lurch in the kitchen, warm the milk, make tea for myself, skull pulsing." (30)

In many families of lower middleclass mother eats only leftover food and she adjust with remnants. "...that only Urmila and Jamun have yet to eat, and that his mother will never bleat over the dole of a leftover dinner) crammed down the best of the mutton. If there is mutton, when Urmila eats alone, wretchedly, she gets much gravy and many potatoes." (29)

About the condition of Urmila the following words by Jamun will explain, "Why doesn't you escort you himself? When you grow up, you'll realize he's unforgivably idle and self Absorbed. No, much cushier not to help in any way, instead to inconvenience and belittle till your wife wants to die, yet not permit her enough time to die." (22) while Urmila struggles this way, Shyamanand spends hours together at home, "...meanwhile, your father, lolling in bed, has sipped several teas and inspected the newspaper with disrelish, grieving once in a way, perhaps that the tea is cooled." (30) Husband-wife relationship is also a kind of unidentified fight for domination over the other in many families. Husband sits at home all the time thinking that he works hard in office. By not doing any work at home, even though wife suffers, consequently husband lost the real heartfelt love from wife.

All family members except mother pay no attention to neatness and order of things in home. Children and husband spend the time by "make the beds, tidy the rooms. By the time dinner comes around, you'll have mewled fifty times to me that we should eat like Kuki....By dinner time your father's belly will have thickened with snacks." (32)

Urmila's difficulties, her problems and everything she shares to Jamun. But she feels disappointed thinking that Jamun is not upto her expectations as her beloved son. So Urmila says, "Perhapes not to you, Jamun, you are too passionless, unforgiving. May be I shall tell Burfi. For all his unsteadiness, he will salute my survival, he's warm." (37)

For the revolt of children against parents, Shyamanand blames his wife, and expresses his anger against Urmila, "Savour your handiwork, our sons, fostered for decades to hate me. You're the saint and I the demon, but notice, they damn you too." When Jamun expresses his anger over his father Urmila says "Jamun, he's worthless husband, but a good father, Jamun, the anger of parents is never anger." *The Last Burden*. (52)

Burfi married against the wish of his parents. Jamun didn't and cann't get mary. Shyamand blames Urmila for the unwanted happenings. He calls it as wrong upbringing of the children, as though it is her sole responsibility, "Their wives are older than they- and one's even a christian! Our grandsons being reared as Catholics, have been Baptised, and their measly father has not demurred! Now Jamun's scented out for himself another nymph, first rate. Then Baba'll again you, his whipping boy. You've goofed everything. You have not fostered your children rightly. They've disconnected their traditions, culture, and parents- because of you. (74)

Shyamanad and Urmila were separated emotionally also because of one incident particularly. "... but that on one feverish July night, Shyamanand, unrecognizably drunk, had tottered into Urmilas's room and on to her bed, mumbling, spluttering, 'Shireen, you can't, you will, Shireen, like a calm mother you will, my Shireen' had mounted Urmila, who'd struggled confusedly under him for the two minutes that he had taken." (301)

In many families, people cannot understand the importance of the person as long as they are alive. After they passed away, there remains vacuum. That emptyness will remind the dead person. In the case

of Shyamanad's family, there are some things which remind Urmila, "At home, the void of Urmila's absence is abominably dislocating. Each thing- tea in the early morning, the sere flowers in the vases, the dust on the face of the T.V., the reckoning of the dhobi's monthly dues-reminds her husband and her sons of her. (76) Thus throughout the life of Urmila, she is subjugated and exploited in her house. Her death only relieved her from her bondage.

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