



THE STRUGGLES OF MIDDLE CLASS FAMILY IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *THE LAST BURDEN*

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ABSTRACT

The struggles of middle class family is a well known fact all over the world. Upamanyu Chatterjee's The Last Burden gives sharp insight into the struggles of the middle class Indian family life. . It is a story of a middle class Hindu Brahmin family comprising Shyamanand, the father, Urmila, the mother and their two sons Burfi and Jamun, set in a town by the sea. It analyses the ties of dependence among modern Indian families. He explains why the majority of populace abandons the traditional joint family structure in favour of a nuclear one. The middle class people struggle financially, mentally, emotionally, physically. Though it's an inevitable thing to be changed somehow it is managed by the people all over the world.

INTRODUCTION

Struggle is a common factor in day-to-day life. When it comes to the families, major victims are the middle classes. Families of various class, ethnic, racial and regional backgrounds exhibit various styles of marital and familial relationships. But the middle class struggles are an unavoidable thing everywhere.

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one among the new voices who has shifted his emphasis from the public issues of society to the private agonies of the family members. *The Last Burden* deals with a very serious and real life subject. The characters portrayed in the novel are very real and can easily be found in Indian middle class families.

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Chatterjee explores the dark side of kinship and family ties. It is a story of a middle class Hindu Brahmin family comprising Shyamanand, the father, Urmila, the mother and their two sons Burfi and Jamun, set in a town by the sea. It analyses the ties of dependence among modern Indian families.

It portrays Jamun, a young and sensible bachelor in a middle class family who returns home on receiving the news of his mother's heart attack. His family consists of his father Shyamanand, a retired government official and his mother, Urmila, a chronic patient. They live in house built on their own. There are hot exchanges between Shyamanand and his sons on money matters.

Chatterjee has portrayed the corrosive destructive relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila realistically. It is hard to imagine such a relationship possible between two creatures 66 years living in the same house. They have no respect for each other as they are always quarrelling for something. Even after more than thirty five years of their marriage, they have not been able to establish a meaningful relationship. Indian social custom are also responsible for their present cataclysmic relationship. Urmila has to marry Shyamanand not because she has loved him. She is married to a person for whom she has no feeling of love or affection. Jamun could not make up his mind about marriage. "Why don't you and Ma display at least some signs of intimacy, of charity, towards each other, acquits yourselves a little like some other married couples. Why don't you stop scuffling with each other for the affection of your children..." (LB 161) Jamun says "Kasturi my parents don't exactly bicker and wrangle—they don't chat to each other at all, not like other people, like you and I natter-of the day,... They swap just a handful of phrases per day. Dinner is ready... Have you signed the cheque for the electricity?... This tea is cold. Beyond these expressions squats the silence." (LB 162) Jamun observes the strange intimacy between his mother and father. In his seventeen years, Urmila and Shyamanand have never gone to bed in the same room. Unlike any usual normal couple they have never celebrated their birthdays or marriage anniversary. Hence Jamun does not know even the dates. He has to tell a lie before Kuki.

Urmila in spite of all the bickering and wrangles with Shyamanand is just a typical Indian married woman, who adores her husband like God and wishes to die before him. She feels guilty for not being with her husband when he has the attack. She immediately comes to look after her husband.

While going to the hospital with Jamun she mumbles, "I should never, never have gone away. He needed me, though now he'll never concede it." (LB 205) At that time, she seems to be a completely dedicated wife who is anxious about the health of her husband. Her anxiety to know everything what happened when he has the stroke shows her concern for her husband.

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She asks Jamun, “Could Haldia get closer to the exact time of the stroke, to how many minutes or hours passed between the attack and your discovery of him? No? Because that’s crucial, I was told...” (LB 205) When Urmila is in the ICU, no one likes to stay there with her in the hospital in the night. When she dies she was all alone in her cubicle fighting with the ultimate and her sons and husband were taking rest in the house.

The question of money arises in the family when Urmila falls ill. According to Burfi, “His money’ll damn him and as though he’s going to carry his money over with him when he croaks.” (LB 64) When Urmila falls ill, the true faces of her husband and sons come out very bitterly. The father and sons quarrel at the expenditure of the medical bill of the person who devoted all her life to them. Shyamanand and Burfi argue over the issue of sharing the medical bill of Urmila. Shyamanand is of the opinion that Joyce should also contribute in Urmila’s treatment which Burfi opposes bitterly. He 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.” (LB 44)

Shyamanand tries to make Burfi realize that the person about whom he is talking is his own mother and being her elder son he also has some responsibilities to fulfil. He screams, “But you’re her sons! Are you not her sons?” (LB 44) Chatterjee has depicted the true picture of a lower middle class Indian mentality when he comments that the costs of Urmila’s rehabilitation have already blighted Shyamanand’s savings plans. Jamun, the most sensible of the family members, suggests his father that he and Burfi should also contribute to the treatment of their mother. Once Urmila tells “Jamun, money’s never within your reach, when you need it the most. I’ve witnessed how the itch to hoard dominated both my father and yours.” (LB 71) Jamun gives twelve thousand rupees to Shyamanand for the treatment of his mother. He feels unburdened, blessed.

After the death of Urmila, the life of Shyamanand changes completely and he finds himself weaker and isolated. Chatterjee comments, “Doubtless, Shyamanand misses his wife, but for sure not in the manner that his sons wish him to. You’re going to bounce back. You’re going to snap out of this. Shyamanand is gabbling clenching Urmila’s shoulder like a predator...” (LB 252).

Burfi and Joyce take all the advantages of living with the family. They do not spend single penny and they show before others as if they are making a great sacrifice because of their parents. Shyamanand and Joyce do not communicate with each other directly. He has disliked her from the beginning even before her marriage to Burfi. “Shyamanand runs on, for years, hatching fresh protests against his daughter-in-law even after the marriage, enraged and befuddled at the rage and befuddlement of his son.” (LB 126). The relation between the



father and son gets worse after his marriage to Joyce. “Shyamanand is saddened, naturally, that his rapport with his eldest son crumbles with his marriage.” (LB 129)

Joyce never addresses her father-in-law, father, uncle or something like that. She always addresses him as your father and Shyamanand too avoids calling her daughter and always addresses her as your wife. This shows the amount of hatred which both of them have for each other.

Burfi requests Joyce, “Joyce, perhaps you could call Baba ‘uncle’ or something, and not ‘Mr.’, which sounds sort of queer... Yes, ‘Uncle’ is odd enough, but if you just can’t call him Baba, then Uncle’s better than Mr.-or maybe you shouldn’t address him at all...” (LB 127) The relation between Urmila and Joyce is equally bad and both hate each other. She was also against this marriage. The bickering between the father and sons gets worse and worse trading charges and countercharges. “He is queasy, as though a vigorous talon has gashed through his muzzle down to his belly and is foraging in his guts.” (LB 51) Burfi’s attitude towards his father is even crueler. When Urmila has her first heart attack and Shyamanand decides to spend some of his own hard earned money on her treatment, had come Burfi’s caustic remark. “Baba’s first love, his money, will now be gobbled up by this hocus-pocus to extricate his first hate, his wife.” (LB 63)

On the contrary, the two sons seem to be the burden on the parents. They never expect their sons to behave with them so rudely and inhuman manner. Shyamanand aspires, “Perhaps we should’ve spawned daughters instead.” (LB 130)

The Last Burden is a record of the clash between two generations. The difference can be noticed in physical as well as in mental attitude. Many clashes take place in the family owing to this generation gap. The older one is not ready to adjust itself according to the change that has come in the pattern of life and the new is not willing to follow the old.

Chatterjee has raised the human question of the deserted old parents by their sons and daughters. The parents devote their whole life but once the children grow up, stand on their own feet, get a job and life partner and do not hesitate to leave them on the mercy of their own fate.

Urmila says, “Why are the old abandoned? ... You must foster me, for I fostered you... For hundreds of years, generation upon generation, why’ve the old been abandoned...” (LB 104) Some parents who have thrown away all their property in getting their children educated are compelled to go in the shelter of court for the maintenance from their children who have abandoned them. Urmila recalls the news published in the newspaper, “I read that derelict

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parents nowadays are prosecuting their issue for maintenance...” (LB 105) If sometimes the young generation lives with the older one it is for some other reason.

Burfi lives with the family to save his money. The position of the father becomes just like the unpaid servant. Shyamanand, is the head of the house but his condition after retirement has become like a watchdog.

While returning from Haridwar after immersing ashes of Urmila, Shyamanand raises the question of Urmila’s will. Burfi reminds his father that in that case “Hindu law will apply. They all will share equally. The family splinter with Urmila’s passing”. (LB 265) Shyamanand feels that he is abandoned by his sons. Shyamanand also gets paralyzed after the death of Urmila. He becomes all alone and perhaps the last burden to Jamun. His brother Burfi, gets transferred on the advice of his artful wife, Joyce. They go far away. Jamun is unmarried. So he takes up the responsibility of looking after his father.

Our middle class society does not let a divorcee woman live in peace. The same happens in case of Kuki’s mother. So many vulgar talks spread about her. Without the company of a male, they are considered, weak and helpless. Urmila, an experienced woman is very well aware of the troubles which she might have to face if she remains unmarried. A woman needs the support of a male companion even today to live a trouble-free life. She says to Jamun, “You remember the buzz about Kuki’s mother, and she was only a divorcee”. (LB 57) She decides to live alone and bring her son up instead of bowing to the indecent demand of her father-in-law.

A middle class person does not earn so much to get a house erect during his service period. Shyamanand and his wife too wait for their retirement to have a house of their own. They have to take loan from many sources. Shyamanand represents the common Indian working class people having a fondness for savings and they keep it a secret from their children. Burfi says to Jamun:

None of us has any accurate idea of how much cash Baba’s squirreled away in his bank deposits... the life time hoard of a commonplace creature, which never had the daring or the adroitness to speculate. Of such a dismal lower middle-class exercise, a babyish sport-to mothball the interest on a Fixed Deposit—never to wade into it—with that interest after months to archly open a Recurring Deposit, and with the interest of the Recurring Deposit to start some Term Deposit, or National Savings—like playing Trader or Monopoly. (LB 64)



Shyamanand's disintegrated of the united middle class family is the emblem of the arriving post-modern era. It shows that the storm has started and its dust and dirt have already arrived. It portrays a dark and gloomy picture of an Indian middle class family.

It is a well-known fact that family is the strength in Indian society. The relationships among the members of the family are so strong that they last long. It does not mean that the relationships are always cordial and characterized by love and devotion. There are quarrels, bickering and violence in day-to-day relations. Even after this the family as an institution has survived.

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