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The Labour of Love becoming a Burden: A Study of Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*

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Abstract

India is a male dominated society where individual rights are subordinated to socially constructed gender roles. Even though the Constitution of India has granted equal rights to women as that of men, gender disparity still remains. In spite of many steps taken by the government and by many organisations for the equality and the liberty of women, women are suppressed and discriminated both in homes and in the outside world. Many Indian writers who wrote in English focus on many aspects of human life. Gender disparity is one of the major themes in Indian English fiction. Upamanyu Chatterjee who portrays India through his novels depicts gender disparity prevailing in the Indian middle class society of the contemporary

world in his second novel *The Last Burden*. It is an appraisal of the harsh realities of the Indian middle class woman today.

Keywords

Labour of Love; Upamanyu Chatterjee; *The Last Burden*.

When God created human beings, He created them as men and women and He made them an indispensable part of one another. In course of time, gender became a major division between man and woman, as the two differed in many ways besides being biological individuals. Later they became two social categories of men and women, having two different kinds of psychological behaviour of their inherited genders. Thus gender gradually became a cultural construct. The characteristic features of behaviour were also established according to their belief of the discrimination which is not acquired but inherited.

India is a male dominated society where individual rights are subordinated to socially constructed gender roles. Even though the Constitution of India has granted equal rights to women as that of men, gender disparity still remains. In spite of many steps taken by the government and by many organisations for the equality and the liberty of women, women are suppressed and discriminated both in homes and in the outside world. Many Indian writers who wrote in English focus on many aspects of human life. Gender disparity is one of the major themes in Indian English fiction. Upamanyu Chatterjee who portrays India through his novels depicts gender disparity prevailing in the Indian middle class society of the contemporary world in his second novel *The Last Burden*. It is an appraisal of the harsh realities of the Indian middle class woman today. Simone De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* clearly points out how women, relegated to a secondary position in the household loses her dignity: “A man is socially an independent

and complete individual; he is regarded first of all a producer whose existence is justified by the work he does for the group: we have seen why it is the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity” (416). She also adds that a “woman’s condition is concretely experienced in life – this condition which is characterized essentially by the ‘service’ of the housekeeping and in which woman finds her place of dignity only in accepting her vassalage” (443). This is what is experienced by Urmila of *The Last Burden* throughout her life. She sacrificed her entire life for the family but no one seems to realize the value of her sacrifice.

Urmila, the central character of the novel is the victim of male chauvinism. Shyamanand is the husband of Urmila and he never misses any opportunity to prove his domination. They have two sons Burfi and Jamun. The younger son Jamun, the narrator of the story stays away from the family because of his job and Burfi lives with his wife Joyce and his two children Doom and Pista in the same house with his parents. The novel portrays how these people fail to maintain proper relationships – whether it is between father and mother or between mother and the sons or between father and the sons. What is worse that it also presents a case of domestic violence for which Urmila becomes the victim.

Shyamanand is a self-centred man all through his life. Shyamanand and Urmila do not have a mutual understanding and hence failed to establish a meaningful life even though they lived for forty years together. Reena Kothari evinces the the treatment given to Urmila by the males of the family:

Shyamanand is truly a self centred, male chauvinist and treats his earning wife like a doormat. He lacks the capacity to understand or live with his wife or his sons and daughter-in-law. Though he resents the fact that his son Burfi doesn’t give him enough attention or talks to him, he never leaves an opportunity to insult his wife or his sons when they try to take care of him. Even in his

illness, he goes to the extent of insulting his wife when she tries to look after him. The relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila is of a strange kind. A purposeless squabble between them goes on all the time. In fact she sympathises with Urmila for the treatment she gets after devoting her life looking after him and her sons. (36)

The burden of love and family ties are most evident in the relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila. There is no love or affection in their relationship. Upamanyu Chatterjee brings out the way the middle class women are engrossed in their household chores. She has to wake up at four-thirty daily in the morning even on holidays also. She has to make everything ready for her husband and children and has to get ready for her work also. In spite of all her preparations for others she gets scoldings from her husband for delaying him to office. Urmila comes at six in the evening and continues with her work. She cannot talk about her problems to anyone. She suffers from piles and there is nobody to help her in her work. Hence she complains, "How to explain and who shall listen?"(30).

Though there are people in the house, Urmila feels 'alienated' and 'isolated' in her own house. Among the family members Jamun understands her a little better than the others. She unfolds her 'emotional self' and 'alienated self' to him. In Shyamanand and Urmila one can see the classic case of husband and wife falling out but not separating. Simone De Beauvoir says about the predicament of woman in the hands of her husband as:

Conjugal slavery is chiefly a matter of daily irritation for the husband; but it is something more deep-seated for the woman; a wife who keeps her husband at her side for hours because she is bored certainly bothers him and seems burdensome; but in the last analysis he can get along without her much more easily than she can without him; if he leaves her, she is the one whose life will be ruined. The great difference is that with woman dependency is

interiorized: she is a slave even when she behaves with apparent freedom; while man is essentially independent and his bondage comes from without. If he seems to be the victim, it is because his burdens are most evident: woman is supported by him like a parasite; but a parasite is not a conquering master. (46)

Urmila, who does not have anybody to show love or affection, sums up her destructive relationship with Shyamanand:

...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. (55)

Even though the children know about the relationship between their father and mother, Jamun says that he has never seen any sign of intimacy between Shyamanand and Urmila. He wishes that his parents were together and tells his father: “Why don't you and Ma display at least some signs of intimacy, of charity, towards each other, acquit yourselves a little like some other married couples. Why don't you stop scuffling with each other for the affection of your children, and instead ferret contentment out of yourselves” (161).

Shyamanand had a strange kind of relationship with his wife. He stopped having sexual relations with his wife and he always insults his wife. He needs of Urmila not for her company but to ridicule her. He would talk to her for days, but he would not answer her questions. He finds it difficult to accept that she could be a better human being and he insults her often, he who demands much attention from others without giving others anything in return. He is not ready to bear Urmila's medical expenses and he insists on his sons' sharing the expenses. He has always expected Urmila to nominate his name in her will. He talks about Urmila's money and house but there is no word of praise or love or

appreciation for her. It is only when Urmila suffers a stroke and lies dying in the hospital that Shyamanand shows some concern. Burfi comments, “he loves her only when she is absent and dying” (230). The entire family waits for the death of Urmila. After her death, Shyamanand is the first one to discuss about her will about and settling of the medical bills.

After his mother’s Jamun reflects on his mother’s life and regrets saying that she “didn’t deserve what the years apportioned to her” (274). But all such realizations come when the woman was not there. Patriarchy has allowed all these men to play a dominant role in the family and it has given freedom to them to escape from their responsibilities and put the entire burden on women. Had the woman particularly Urmila been assertive from the very beginning she could have averted so many misfortunes.

The number of compromises a wife has to make and the amount of efforts she has to take to adjust to her husband's style makes her a victim figure because she has to erase all true self and rewrite herself according to the desires of her husband who is her master. This is even seen in the contemporary society.

The Mother is the centre of the Indian family and in this novel Urmila is a powerful presence, even though we see her at her worst. She is trapped in a life-long struggle with her husband Shyamanand. Chatterjee is clearly aware of the disease of middle class life and *The Last Burden* attempts to give a distressing picture of the reality. This state of women should be changed. Simone De Beauvoir speaks about the change that should be brought in woman’s place in the family and society: “We must not believe, certainly, the change in woman’s economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear” (681).

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