

THE LAST BURDEN

Upamanyu Chatterjee

(1993)

Story

The story of this family saga is very different to that of its predecessor, which was Chatterjee's best-selling debut novel (*English, August: an Indian Story*). Unlike the tongue-in-cheek tone of that first book, the authorial voice here is more sombre, more reflective and more pessimistic. The story opens with Urmila, the mother and wife of the family, in bed after suffering a heart attack and perhaps about to die. The family gathers around her—husband Shyamanand, sons Burfi and Jamun (who takes a few days to arrive), daughter-in-law Joyce and grandchildren Pista and Doom (which are not unusual names). But it is not a happy reunion, and we soon learn that Shyamanand is emotionally aloof from his wife and (after a stroke) physically disabled, too.

Much of the novel then consists of flashbacks and reminiscences, chiefly by Jamun. As he mopes about the unhappy house, we learn that he was brought up by an *ayah* (nanny or maid servant). She was much loved and remained in the family long after Jamun outgrew her, which meant that she, too, became a burden on the family. Other memories tell the story of Jamun's early love with Kasturi, who remains a close friend even after she marries someone else. Indeed, she has had Jamun's child. There is also the tension between this Hindu family and the Christian daughter-in-law, Joyce, who wants to bring up her two children as members of the Christian faith. Another source of tension is the ever-increasing gap between the mounting medical bills and the family's financial resources.

It is Urmila's illness that is the dramatic focal point of the novel, her heart-attack that which draws everyone to her hospital bed, but she is not alone in requiring care since every member of her family is damaged in one way or another. After a prolonged stay in hospital, and the turbulent dramas that erupt between family members, Urmila recovers and is sent home, where the arguments about medical expenses and tensions with her Christian daughter-in-law increase. Then she has another attack, dies and is cremated at Haridwar, the source of the river Ganges. Since her husband, Shyamanand, is both elderly and disabled, the responsibility for the family, that is, the father role, should pass to the eldest son. However, Burfi is neither capable nor interested in shouldering this task, and so younger brother Jamun undertakes that responsibility. Although his feelings towards his father, and also (but to a lesser extent) his mother, are ambivalent, he accepts that he has an obligation to them

In the denouement, Burfi and his wife, Joyce, move to Bombay where she has been offered a high-paying position in an investment company. Jamun stays behind in New Delhi, living with Kasibai, his former maid servant and now lover. In the final scene, Jamun welcomes his father into their apartment, guiding his wheelchair through the narrow doorway, where Kasibai bends over and touches his sandals, in a traditional gesture of respect and servitude. 'Not a bad beginning,' Jamun reflects.

Although Jamun is an unreliable narrator, through his memories and the author's portraits of the family members in the present tense, the novel delivers a painful if realistic picture of middle-class Indian family life in the 1990s. Overall, it is a disturbing portrait of emptiness and meaninglessness, but because this is a novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee, that dark mood is lifted by wry and subtle humour.

Themes

Family The 'burden' of the title refers to the obligations and complications that arise in any family system, but especially in the Indian traditional joint-family. The novel is a forensic dissection of the

failures, disappointments and incompatibilities that plague one particular lower-middle-class family living in New Delhi. The year of publication, 1993, is important because it sets the story squarely in a transition period in Indian social history, when the traditions of family expectations were changing and eroding under the relentless push of modern life. The 'final burden' of the title is the obligation that the family, in general, and the oldest son, in particular, have to look after their aging parents. In the case of this family, that task is made all the more onerous because the two sons dislike their parents, and the parents feel similarly about their children. All the resentment and disrespect seem to stem from the incompatibility of the parents. 'We were never suited for each other,' the mother admits on her hospital bed. As a result, the household is pervaded by an emotional aridity and disconnectedness, symbolised in the absence of sexual relations among the parents for decades. What the novel reveals in painful detail is the terrible suffering that comes from the emotional dependence inherent in a family. Jamun, the younger son, has very ambivalent feelings for his parents, at once both loving and hating his mother. He is attached to her, literally at birth, and through his growing up, he remains attached, at least, in his role as her son. That bond can never be completely severed, the author seems to be saying, although it can turn in on itself and create rancour and malice. There are some heart-rending scenes, in which the two brothers debate which of the two parents they would like to see die first, or in which the parents plead with their sons not to put them in an old people's home. That is, literally, the 'last burden,' the task of dealing with a parent's' deaths.

Modernity Not all the forces underlying the breakdown of the family unit in this novel are modern, but many are. While the destructive factors of money, status and suspicion are not confined to the late 20th century, they received a boost from the liberalising economy and globalising culture that engulfed India in the 1990s. These changes are reflected in the geographical dispersal of the family unit—consisting of mother and father, their two sons, one married with two children. Jamun lives some distance from the family home. It is not specified, but we know it requires an airplane flight to make the journey back 'home'. Even the married older brother, Burfi, and his wife and two children, do not live in the same house as his parents. Burfi makes explicit his opposition to the traditional obligations of a son by stating that his 'first priority' is his wife and children. His wife, Joyce, is also a 'modern' daughter-in-law in that she rarely takes part in family events and refuses to visit her mother-in-law in hospital. The two sons are similarly products of the late 20th century. Displaced from their Calcutta home, they grow up rootless and restless, with little interest in the traditions that guided their grandparents' lives. As a result, neither is able to define himself in terms of family role, religion or culture. Even their soulless father, Shyamanand, appears indifferent to Hindu customs and ceremonies. The most traditional character in the household is Aya, a servant, who constantly reminds the others about the days of mourning that follow the cremation, the injunction to eat vegetarian food and to avoid alcohol. We witness the impact of modern attitudes in the scene that follows the cremation of the mother in the Himalayan foothills, where the father and the sons go 'through the motions' of a complex ritual. They do not know what they are doing and do not appear to care that they do not. In a tragic-comic scene, driving home from the cremation, the sons and their father do not even talk about the deceased. Instead, they argue about the will, who should get what share. The author's description is vivid: '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.' The task of cremating mother and wife is seen as a final burden to be discharged and then forgotten.

Characters

Shyamanand Shyamanand is the father of the household. He is not a likeable person, tyrannical toward his wife and children and having no interest in anything except money.

Urmila Urmila is Shyamanand's wife, who is seventeen years his junior and decidedly under his thumb. She dies from an illness and is cremated.

Burfi Burfi is the older son, who is a chip off the old block of his self-centred father. He causes tension in the family because he feels no obligations to his parents, focusing instead on his wife and children.

Jamun Jamun is Burfi's younger brother, unmarried and somewhat feckless. He is the main character in this story of family tensions. Unlike the older brother, Jamun shows at least some concern and affection for his aging parents.

Joyce Joyce is Burfi's wife and daughter-in-law to Shyamanand and Urmila. As a Christian, she never really fits into this typical middle-class Hindu family and is very resentful as a result.

Pista and Doom Pista and Doom are the two grandchildren, who are minor characters but follow their parents in their individualistic and self-centred approach to life.

Jamun (Resentful)

Character Jamun is the younger brother and unmarried son, who was or still is bisexual, a confused and remorseful but perceptive person. At times, he shows affection towards his parents, especially toward his mother. When she lies in hospital, he tries to console her, kissing her dried-up face and cradling her in his arms. When she moves, he says, '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.' However, Jamun's feelings are ambivalent, and the tender ones are fleeting. He remains deeply hateful toward both parents, disappointed in their lives and their failures. He is suspicious of his married and seemingly happy older brother; he detests his father's penny-pinching attitude and he finds fault with his mother's weaknesses, too. He had a love affair in the past, which resulted in a child, whom he does not recognise. In the present, he satisfies his sexual desire with a maid servant (Kasibai) in her apartment. Jamun seems to represent the 'new India,' vague on Hindu traditions, burdened by the joint-family and trying to make a place for himself in the new emerging economy of the 1990s. He is also a dreamer, and has 'visions' (a useful narrative technique that allows the author to give us flashbacks, backstories and recollections). The reader wants to like Jamun, but he is a perfect anti-hero in that he constantly undermines our sympathy for him. By the end of the book, there are glimmers that he might be 'finding himself' and 'coming to terms with his family,' but these are transient moments. By the final pages, we understand that he will always carry the 'burden' of his parents, the final burden of his mother's death and his father's impending demise. He is uprooted physically from the family home, living in an unnamed 'distant' city, and never connects with anyone 'back home.' This is ostensibly a *bildungsroman* (a coming of age novel), and the anti-hero does show the possibility of maturation, but it is illusory. At the end of the novel, Jamun is not more reconciled to life than he was at the beginning.

Activities Jamun smokes cigarettes in nearly every scene in which he appears, although he likes to change his brand every so often. He is also a reader, who gorged himself on comic books while a child and now, as an adult, spends long hours with a substantial biography of Gandhi. He also enjoys drinking and smoking marijuana, and often shares both with his older brother, Burfi. He sometimes visits a former maid servant with whom he has sex in her apartment.

Illustrative Moments

Perceptive Although Jamun is as flawed as any character in this novel of a failed family, he is more perceptive than the others. This personal attribute may be a narrative necessity (since we see the action mostly through his eyes), but it also matches his personality as an observer who judges others and himself with considerable psychological depth. An excellent illustration of this power of perception occurs during one of his many visits his mother in the Intensive Care unit in a hospital, where she is comatose after a severe heart attack and is possibly on her death-bed. Looking at her, Jamun realises that 'it is his mother's self-pity that cries out for him. Yet time and time again, he himself, in his childhood raw sentience, itched to be there with her.' Then he looks again and sees the 'method of her living: a bull-headed and dreary conflict because she discerned no choice...head down, neck steeled, but botching and ebbing decade after decade, the point of struggle progressively disputable, never taking stock...what endured is this gentler submerged strife amongst the shards of her life.' This is a brilliantly succinct character sketch of Urmila, his mother, which does not flinch from finding fault when she is vulnerable and dying. Looking at her, Jamun realises that her silent cry for his help and affection is actually an expression of her own self-pity, her own acceptance of her failure as a person. But Jamun's analysis is not devoid of compassion, either, and he also reflects that he had needed her, in childhood, as much as she needed him. Finally, he sums up her entire life with a description of her head: stubborn, yet eroding away year after year, not even knowing why she

struggled with her husband and children, until now, when Jamun sees that what remains of her is a less violent and more invisible form of struggle as her body and mind fall apart. It is a devastating and yet moving portrait of a mother whom he detests and loves at the same time. It is the essence of his family 'burden.'

Confused Jamun is also a confused young (ish) man. Again, this is in part necessitated by the storytelling decision of making him the narrator of a story of a disconnected family. No one in this novel appears rooted or directed or satisfied, and it is fitting that the primary storyteller himself is suitably bewildered by life. One of Jamun's many confusions is the uncertainty over his sexual identity, and a good illustration of that bisexuality occurs in a scene midway through the book. It is another one of his recollections of his teenage years, this time of a 'relationship' with a grocer's assistant, who used to deliver fruit and vegetables to the house. 'He remembers with a sense of lost blessedness his clumsy itch for that man, an older man, balding and buxom.' While the house dozed in the hot afternoons, he had waited for the back door to swing open. He would scamper down and receive the groceries from the man, always managing to squeeze his biceps and rub up against his thighs. He is bewildered by his own urges and actions but doesn't question them. Finally, the man himself complains to his parents, saying, 'You should watch your second son. His hands wander too much.' Jamun lies his way out of any parental censure, which only further embeds his confusion because he cannot face it honestly. However, even if he cannot admit his confusion to himself, he knows that his mother knows he is bisexual. Or is he? He continues to experiment sexually with men and women, never settling on one identity or the other.

Remorseful Jamun is also full of regrets. Even at the comparatively young age of 30-something, he feels his life has stalled and stagnated. The reason for much of his failure, he thinks (and the author suggests), lies in his relationship with his parents, and more specifically with his mother. These feelings bubble up at various points in the story, but perhaps most explicitly when he first visits his mother in hospital after her heart attack. His guilt even precedes his arrival because he has delayed coming for several days, not due to important business or personal commitments, but simply because he 'deferred.' Standing her hospital bed, he whispers to her, 'Ma. It's Jamun. I deferred for four days. I'm sorry.' Befuddled, he smooths down the grey strands over her ears. 'He feels eerily vulnerable and does not know whether he should weep in atonement.' He leans in and places a kiss on her cold forehead, 'reflecting that it is due from him and that perhaps he should have kissed her earlier, much earlier.' Then Jamun sinks into remorse about his failures toward his mother, how he should have found time to speak to her before she had the attack. He tries to fight back through the 'heavy slabs of time' that prevent him from reliving his life with his mother. He wishes he could have spent days with her, somewhere on a beach or on a park bench, just jabbering away, chatting about nothing and everything. Even as a teenager Jamun felt for his parents 'a love that was only the tenderness of remorse, just a sorrow, a shame at their unhappiness.' And now, in the present, he tries to encourage his mother to speak to him, to tell him all about herself, the self that he never knew and will never know.

Urmila (Embittered)

Character Urmila is a deceptively complicated character, appearing at first as the victimised wife, the emotionally abandoned woman and the unappreciated mother. As the story progresses, however, we learn a great deal more about her through her son Jamun's recollections and the author's flashbacks. Most of it is not flattering. Urmila turns out to be, and to have been, an isolated person, incapable of forming any deep personal relationship. She has a peculiar trait of talking a lot and speaking to no one, of unburdening herself, a catharsis that doesn't actually relieve the deep sources of her unhappiness. She also has the knack of picking out someone's point of vulnerability and attacking it when she argues with them. But she is not simply an angry or malicious person. In the numerous flashbacks, she always seems to be in a muddle, flustered, overcome by decisions and her inability to organise herself. She doesn't trust the servants, calls them 'ingrates' and manages to offend almost everyone she comes in contact with through tactless speech and unpredictable behaviour. Her heart attack and general failing health turn her into an even more irascible old woman, who comments on everyone's worst traits. As the story moves forward, she regresses, loses her memory and her bodily functions, until she dies.

Activities Urmila loves to talk, to drink tea and to read the newspapers, from where she derives more material for her meandering narratives about the pitiable state of the country, the younger generation and the world in general. She also has a special love for a 'shandy' (a beer mixed with lime juice). In addition, she likes to play bridge, although she feigns displeasure if she loses.

Unfortunately, she suffers from piles and spends a lot of time in the bathroom, in pain. While in hospital, she sleeps a lot but manages to chatter when awake. When she comes back home, she resumes her churlish comments about her husband, sons and daughter-in-law.

Illustrative moments

Alone Although Urmila is constantly surrounded by people, not least in the hospital where her family visits her daily, she is essentially alone. After decades of marriage, she still only exchanges platitudes with her husband and empty words with her sons. It is not that she is incommunicative or keeps things to herself, but rather that she feels the need to talk, to get things off her chest, almost like throwing off a blanket when she wakes up. A clear illustration of her isolation, even while talking, occurs one evening outside the family house. Urmila slips out of the house at dusk, carrying the rubbish bin to tip into a large communal container. Then she sits down on a low cement wall by the side of the street. She has decided to stay there for a while because when she returns to the house, she knows that she will face the responsibility of feeding a family. If she waits, however, her husband and sons will find things for themselves in the fridge. Her son Jamun follows her outside, afraid that she is not right in her mind. She tells him to sit down beside her and then provides him with a snapshot of her life. 'I rise at four-thirty every morning,' she tells him, even though he already knows this. 'Every morning. Holidays. Sundays, nothing, no variation. I ooze out of a bone-weary sleep. Lurch into the kitchen, warm the milk, make tea for myself. Scared of going to the toilet because of my piles. How to explain and who shall listen?...Tea again, for your father...whip up breakfasts for you two [her sons].' More and more details of her domestic drudgery emerge, followed by her daily routine at the office. After several paragraphs of this detailing of her life, we realise that she is not speaking to Jamun, who sits beside her, or to anyone. Instead, she is unburdening herself, letting the words go, more like a physical release than a desire to form a personal bond, almost like the lavatory habits she describes in embarrassing detail. Although her son is right next to her, Urmila is still alone, unable to reach out and enter another person's world.

Embittered Urmila is not a happy person. Embittered by her unhappy marriage and unsatisfying office job, and also by her own lack of resourcefulness, she is as much a victim of her own failures as of other others' demands. Throughout the novel, she complains about her family, her ailments and the shortcomings of her friends, but a particularly expressive example of her bitterness occurs in an early chapter. She is accompanying her son Jamun to the hospital for an eye test, which makes her think of her own problems. She 'trudges crabbedly, drearily, clutching Jamun's wrist for reinforcement.' She scrutinises every bit of the ground beneath her, mentioning her corns and her arthritis. 'When I was a schoolgirl, though,' she says with a little laugh, 'I was quick as the wind.' Then she starts in on her husband, who has been watching them from the house. 'Your father's surveying us, isn't he?' she asks of Jamun. 'To check up that I don't mess things up. That I don't pick the wrong auto rickshaw. How shabby is that? Why doesn't he escort you to the hospital? When you grow up, you'll realise how unforgivably idle and self-absorbed he is. Rather than take you himself, he prefers to belittle me, much more convenient for his petty mind. He will belittle me until I die. If, that is, he allows me enough time to die.' The author comments on this moment, saying that Urmila shows 'not acrimony, but a kind of blithe untrammelling...to a listener.' To most readers, however, Urmila's unburdening of herself reveals a deep layer of bitterness.

Money-obsessed Money—the need for cash, the desire for more and the inevitable anguish of loans and debt—is never far from the surface of events in this novel. All the characters are burdened by money, but it is especially true of Urmila. Her twisted love/hate attitude toward money is expressed in a scene toward the end of the book, when she is talking with her son Jamun. She tells him how, in her younger years, in her office, she detested money because she spent her days borrowing it and avoiding the loan sharks. 'I hated money,' she says, 'because of the domination. It squatted over me.' Over the years, she explains, she has hoarded new bank notes in a trunk, which is now full, holding thousands and thousands of crisp notes. As she explains, 'You see, Jamun, I can't spend money that looks so clean. These notes are like starched, lily-white saris after a dozy bath on a warm winter morning.' From her extended description of her past life, we understand that her attitude toward money, her desperate need for solvency, has been moulded by her own father and by many years of humiliation when she was younger and needed money. Now, in her old age, money is no longer an anguish, and she feels only contempt for it, even repugnance. 'You'll notice, Jamun,' she says, 'money's never within your reach when you need it most. I've witnessed how the urge to hoard has dominated both my father and yours...I used to think, foolishly, that if I spent lavishly on necessary things, that my kitty would replenish itself.' This is a somewhat unexpected element of

Urmila's character, something we are more likely to attribute to her husband, and, in fact, Urmila has inherited this constant concern with finances from her father. She grew up through the middle decades of the twentieth century, in a lower-middle-class milieu, which was dominated by money. Urmila's obsession with cash is central to the author's searing indictment of the social class, in which he himself grew up.

Shyamanand (Bullying)

Character Shyamanand is the father of this dysfunctional family. Now in his old age, having to care for an ill wife, we see all the layers of his character stripped away. What is revealed is a self-centred man, a typical Indian patriarch, obsessed with money and his own public image. He rarely has a kind word to say of anyone, least of all his sons, who (to him) represent the lazy, immoral younger generation that is responsible for the overall decline in the country. He reserves special sarcasm for his wife, blaming her for example, for counselling their sons to hate him. Shyamanand is also an inflexible person, wedded to his memories that have built a distorted, rose-tinted picture of Indian society and himself several decades earlier. He is also prone to self-pity, revelling in sympathy and blaming others for his misfortune. He is painted in the novel as a pitiful character, but he never wins the sympathy of the readers. On one level, 'the final burden' of the story is the filial obligation to care for and ultimately to cremate one's parents. But for the father himself, the burden appears to be the long history of a bitter marriage and cold relationship with his sons. At the same time, he loves his sons and his wife, and he yearns for their affection, unaware that his character is what repels them. In fact, he convinces himself that the reason his sons prefer their mother is some primal sexual bond of the Freudian variety. It is, in the end, the portrait of a tragic man.

Activities Shyamanand is an old man who spends most of the day pottering around his apartment, going to doctor's appointments and to the hospital to visit his ailing wife. When at home, he also loves to get lost in the scientific periodicals to which he has subscribed for the past fifty years. In the evening, he likes to play a particularly combative form of bridge, called 'cutthroat bridge,' and to drink whisky.

Illustrative moments

Nostalgic As an aging man, with an ailing wife, Shyamanand is fixated on the past, inflexible to the present and forever luxuriating in memories. Sometime this transmutes into a softness toward his wife, whom he generally mistreats, because he recollects their past together. A good example of this misty, dewy-eyed nostalgia occurs one afternoon when Shyamanand is visiting Urmila in the hospital. 'You're going to bounce back. You're going to snap out of this,' he declares proudly, as if he himself would work a medical wonder. He brushes her silver hair from her forehead and continues, 'Then when you get back home, we'll blink at the TV, and we'll play Cutthroat Bridge before dinner. You'll sham an unwillingness to join us and all through the game you'll never concede that you enjoy it.' He goes on to describe in more detail how they will replay the past, revelling in his understanding of his wife's little pretences and his reactions to them. It is a poignant moment in an otherwise dismal account of an unhappy family. And it seems to suggest that Shyamanand's nostalgia is a kind of soporific, administered like a pain-killer in the hospital where he speaks. His 'endearing prattle,' in the author's words, serves to block out the rumble of discontent that would otherwise be deafening.

Bullying One of Shyamanand's many unpleasant traits is his bullying. He takes pleasure in ruling the roost at home and in bossing around anyone he can find outside the house. A good illustration of this tyrannical streak comes in a scene, in which Jamun recollects a previous event. This time, the family is moving from a small flat into a larger one, and the removals men have arrived to shift their possessions. The scene begins uneasily with Shyamanand ordering the men not to smoke in front of 'their superiors.' It gets worse because in India, as in any society, this drama of moving house is ripe with the possibility of argument: there is always one piece of furniture that cannot be easily removed. In our case, it is a very large potted cactus tree. When the removals men refuse to move it 'because it's not furniture,' Jamun appeals to his father to forget it. But Shyamanand will not countenance backing down and shouts at the 'coolies' (as he calls them) to 'get on with it and stop whining.' Then he relaxes into the role of a vindictive overseer watching his underlings struggle and sweat with the unwieldy plant. As the author describes him, '[h]e began to enjoy the whole unpleasant business of moving to another flat because it gave him the chance to bully some lumpen proletariat.' This example of his tendency to bully others in order to shore up his own sense of failure is excruciating to read.

Avaricious Like all the major characters in this novel, that is, all the members of a blighted family, Shyamanand is obsessed with money. But each character is obsessed in their own peculiar way. While his wife, Urmila, liked to hoard new bank notes like 'crisp, lily-white saris,' Shyamanand is more masculine in his attention to the 'bottom line.' This does not mean that saving money was not a pleasurable sensation for him. This is made clear in a moment of narration by the author when he explains that '[c]onserving money was an exhilaration for Shyamanand. Forenoon after forenoon, fortified with litres of tea, he has calculated and notched up figures in a large black diary, and has striven to sway his sons into sharing his enchantment with those numbers.' The diary contains the particulars of his bank accounts, tidily jotted down in distinctive inks—'green for name and location of bank, blue for rate of interest and duration of deposit, red for amount deposited and date of maturity, black for the run-of-the-mill reckoning, the withdrawals and accretions.' Even without the black diary, Shyamanand spends hours punching away at his pocket calculator. Now and then, he whacks the table or his thigh if his calculations prove profitable. And if the computations augur against him, he will remain glum until a further study of them 'touches off another brainwave about how to increase his savings by a thimbleful.' After this description, we are not shocked when Shyamanand baulks at the prospect of having to spend money on a pace-maker for his dying wife. 'Does she really need it?' he screams. 'We should consult another specialist. I'll be forced to pay interest to the bank for using my own savings.' Stories of men obsessed with money are numerous in Indian (and world) literature, but few of those men are as fanatically fixated on their black diary as Shyamanand.