

Language Component and Shift in Narratives in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*

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Abstract: Upamanyu Chatterjee is a powerful emergent voice in Indian postcolonial literature. He has written a handful of short stories and novels. His second novel, *The Last Burden*, appeared in 1993 which depicts familial relationships in an Indian middle class family at the end of the twentieth century. In the 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 favour a nuclear family in contrast to a joint family. The novelist employs somewhat strong language but definitely makes the readers aware of the actual frictions that exist within the joint family structure. It elegantly portrays the decisions and sacrifices made by different people in a family and the frictions and the frustrations thereby. It also portrays the struggle of the newer generation in order to move into a nuclear family structure from a strictly hierarchical joint family structure where even the elders have an even more elderly person who dictates the terms, having two fold structure of patriarchy of the Indian society, of the State and family. The novel tells about Jamun, a work less young man and his old father, Shyamanand and, his dying mother, Urmila. The novel opens at the death bed of Urmila and takes us through the story of this middle-class family. The emotions and seriousness bind the readers to the story and keep him engrossed till he is through it. The paper would like to explore about the narrative technique and style of the novel *The Last Burden*.

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Language is the medium of expression and style is its mode. A harmonious balance between the two evokes and creates the desired effect on the reader; the opposite brings the opposite. A lofty style, therefore, needs lofty words to create transcendental sublimity and lofty and hyperbolic words used in lower style creates mocking humour. In every age, the language and with it the style, have changed according to the demands of the changing society. In short, 'the old order changeth, yielding place to new' rule may be applied in the literary world too. In fact, the selection of words and the manner of their presentation have great significance, as it shows the level of the writer. Style is the physiognomy of the mind, and a safer index to character than the face. Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels present a variety of language canvas but the colours are more or less selected. He does not care for 'what readers would say or what critics would say like sentiments. What he decides, he does, be it the selection of words, style, theme or whatever. When he thinks that he would write in common language, in understandable manner, he does it, and when he thinks that he would take the opposite road, he does that too, using Olympian range of non understandable, obsolete words, that would make the readers consult heavy dictionaries every time, in almost every sentence, till they get exhausted, and would prefer rather to go to bed, than to finish the book, and then abruptly, Chatterjee would decide to be balanced in selection and presentation, and would surprise all, with his award winning writing. However, he uses only one brush to fill up his canvas, and that is the brush of fun and comic if not frolic. He has this exceptional gift for presenting even the ugliest, the most horrible side of human nature with the brush of the comic, made from the synthesis of humour and satire.

His second novel *The Last Burden* is entirely different from the previous one in both the text and texture. There are many differences but the most striking ones are in the field of his use of language and style. Chatterjee has

been very vehemently criticized by the critics so far as his selection of words is concerned. C. Sengupta comments, My second concern in the analysis of the novel is with the ‘burden’ of language. Chatterjee has deliberately and consciously used complex language, overgrown wilderness of words.(LB.23)

Criticising Chatterjee’s use of language in *The Last Burden*, Dom Moraes writes,

He uses surprising and unexpected words. But he does not use them precisely, and he uses them where they are not necessary. As a result much of his prose seems a conscious effort to impress and amuse, and it succeeds in neither. (LB.24)

Take the example of the following sentence where the school teacher is punishing a small boy, Jamun: Mrs. Jeremiah deduces that Jamun is being saucy, therefore she clobbers him till her meatloaf arms enervate and he mellows into a puling ruin, his lubricity having pelted Kuki’s way with her very first whack. In his school diary, she, carps, ‘Has taken to impertinence lately. Also has some difficulty with his vision.(LB.25)

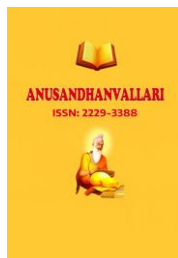
Chatterjee is a great and competent writer. He very well knows what he is doing and whatever he does, it is never without any purpose or intention. After the grand success of his first novel, questions were raised on his lucid and simple style and also on his competence on writing on some grave subject in a serious and sombre style. So he does it with *The Last Burden*. He deliberately and consciously uses this complex language, overgrown wilderness of words with a definite purpose and intention.

Chatterjee ably carries on his forebears’ mission to rescue valuable words from obsolescence words such as ‘globose’, ‘pawky’, ‘ravening’, ‘sudorific’ and ‘valetudinarian’. He has a poet’s talent for transforming known words into new parts of speech (“vibed”, “rubescent”, “sinistrality”). And he only creates new words after due consideration (“leucodermic”, “nulating”, “pule”). For all the fetor and strider of *The Last Burden*, the elaborate language is somehow supremely condign. It is disappointing that Chatterjee introduces few words from Hindi, Bengali or other Indian languages. One, however, “ratnagarbha” will fill a significant vacancy in English dictionaries.”

Throughout the novel Chatterjee engages in deliberate and conscious writing striving for effort so that the prose becomes stilted and forced. Dom Moraes calls this burden of language, Joyce with a bad hangover and Rashmee Z. Ahmed dubs it verbiage. She goes on to say, The essentially simple story about Shyamanand and Urmila’s decaying marriage, dark home and decamping children, is littered with multiple objectives, seven-clause-within-a-clause sentence, slangy verbs like ‘gawped’ and ‘yawped’—all thicket of words, unpurged, shaggy about the edges.³¹

Following is an example of above said seven clause-within-a-clause sentence which reminds the readers of the opening paragraph of Milton’s *Areopagitica* with none of its nobility and loftiness:

Scattily mumbling and squeaking her strictures, Urmila, spectacleless yet Argus-eyed, inches past the hovels (of brick, mud, asbestos, pilfered boards, cardboard, canvas, jute sacking, motley flapping polythene, yesteryear’s newspapers) crested by TV antennae, the yawning sewers of rank, pestilential ooz the tint of pus, the scrum of roundeyed urchins, with turgescient tummies and moustaches of snot, frolicking, playing hopscotch, marbles, a sort of cricket, the standby and laidup dinghies, scummy, mouldering, at close quarters disagreeably large and seemingly unwieldy, the fishing nets, their measureless rhom boids of cord somehow resembling a sea of sloughed off snakeskins desiccating in the sun; the paan stalls, all mirror and white tile, like a loo for the villain of a Bombay movie (but with a paanwala in it! perhaps crosslegged on the commode, with his paan leaves in the sink), whinnying out the trendiest Hindi boogie-woogie; about the stalls, dawdling the lotuseater generation, in Ulhasnagar Calvin Kleins, painstakingly scruffy, mincing and posturing as though odelling for cigarettes, aftershaves, condoms, shunning till lunch their warrens, their mothers and the chores that’ve been deferred for weeks, clutching, cuddling, squeezing one another’s hands, waists, thighs, arses, genitals, in that lubricity wherein anything will momentarily sate, even a straggling pig, as long as it tussels; the sickly, knackered palms;



the yard of washing on the shingle behind the shanties; the squash of housewives in the quagmire around the handpump, scouring pulling toddlers who forget to blubber when they spot Doom's tricycle; the fearsome pong of a billain fish parching on perplexing cement slabs the size of double beds; the strider of shrewish bickering of matrons snarling at plastered husbands, of a hundred bicycle bells, the unthinking yawping of dulled hawkers, cubs squealing bawdry and arraigning one another with cheating, the undying Hindi film muzak, which, by the time Urmila fetches up at the hem of the row, has melted into a syrupy ghazal with a timbre whose opulence seems to ooze from the wrinkles between the crooner's anus and scrotum; then, sensing before feeling on their skins the muggy breeze, they tack with the compound wall to squint at the colloused sands and a steelish silver of sea. (TLB, pp. 171-172)

The above exhausting sentence ends after seventeen clauses making the readers breathless and weary and also giving the readers a taste of filth. It is indeed a good example of Joyce with a bad hangover. Like his earlier novel, *Chatterjee* in this novel too is involved in using prurient and scatological language. Actually here he goes two steps forward and his words and phrases are capable enough to shock his readers who are expecting him to write the way he does in the *English, August*.

To disconcert and distress her, Jamun declares, as though inadvertently: "True. But Kasturi's terrific in bed". ... 'You are the cruelest person I know. As though in my womb you'd loved in *Venom*.' (TLB, p. 74-75)

Chatterjee has an uncanny knack for willowing in filth. The novel is filled with many such incidents which are not necessary also. One feels at the verge of vomiting to read the descriptions of Jamun having sex with his elderly old maid servant Kashibai and later with his adolescent son, Vaman. The novelist could have saved the readers from these two unnecessary filthy and scatological descriptions. Again he describes the feelings of a son about his mother in the most perverted manner which is actually hard to believe also. How can a son muse about his mother's sphincter, thus—... Haldia will take away her sphincter and perhaps hawk it to a snooty restaurant, where it might well be used for an hors d'oeuvre, a phrase which its customers will not fathom unless pronounced as whores dee overs, like Punjabi streetwalkers at cricket. (TLB, p. 4)

Chatterjee lets loose a flurry of interesting verbs. People constantly bellyache rather than complain and pule rather than whine. Exams are luring when they're menacing and Jamun sees a woman endulating rather than merely swaying. There are interesting adverbs too—pawkily, joshingly, edaciously and fascinating adjectives—someone is 'aguish' with lust, a performance is 'contumelious'. It is not only with the words but Chatterjee has made the deliberate experiments in the use of idioms too. Mrs. Hegiste, the Maharastrian housewife says, "Home is the hanky-panky of memoryhoneyed, quilted—a fabulous once-upon-a-time lull." (TLB, p. 8) This incredible sentence makes one resist not just Mrs. Hegiste but a good number of the novel's succeeding pages. Urmila, effusive on her way back from the hospital asks, "In our time, in how many homes do three generations stay together without baring towards one another a beastly malignity." (TLB, p. 104)

Chatterjee has the ability to write evocative prose when he is not wallowing in crude and crudities. The examples of such scenes are the hospital scenes where he is describing the condition of Urmila which is of course from his own experience which he felt when his mother lay dying.

Urmila's eyes are now leaden, with unfocussed dots of amber. The striated desert face toasted gashed lips that won't cap her teeth, and the extremity of a whitish tongue that whisks over the ruts of her lips like a gecko's. Shyamanand evens the silvered hair away from her forehead. 'How long you all took to come and see me', she mumbles. Jamun nears the top of her bed. She pirouettes her head at the movement. 'Jamun?' Her eyes centre above his left shoulder, but for an instant her features splinter into a childlike smile. 'Jamun'. An ashen hand on the coverlet throbs heavenward. Jamun touches it. Her fingers hug his like chilled talons. Chhana detonates into sobs. A silver of Jamun's mind ruminates whether it's right that a husband's niece rather than a son should, at such a moment, bawl so. (TLB, p. 58-59)

Much like the works of Salman Rushdie one finds that many of Chatterjee's flourishes are excellent and woven in throughout rarely simply authorial preening. Chatterjee has shown his poetic talent at many places in the novel by making musical use of language on rainpelted, flooding streets. He writes: "auto-rickshaws continue to squirm through, like flitting lifers ducking flack." (TLB, p. 10) Sometimes his choice of words is not quite right, but he still puts together marvelous sentences and descriptions throughout the novel. The following paragraph is sufficient to prove the point where even his most stilted passages have their charms:

The fan groans more torpidly and sonorously. Its axial disc, like a giant, waxen carrom striker with three fine, concentric, silvery hoops, and its circumambient chalky blur, which is like a whitish gramophone record when at suppressed, decelerates to a three-limbed figure cartwheeling at the same spot. The brims of the arms of the fan are maculated with measureless fly droppings. (TLB, p. 47)

Chatterjee has made a good use of imagery in the novel since he is striving for effect the images have a caloying effect on us. Followings are some examples of imagery used by Chatterjee in the novel:

1. The description of Mrs. Jeremiah: "She is Mrs Jeremiah, meaty and baleful... she bawls, and struts up to him, udders and hams jouncing like illcongealed pudding." (TLB, p. 19)
2. The woman ophthalmologist has been described with her, "...bull lips that will not bestride her teeth, and a tumid face that for the burgeoning Jamun resembles the nob of a sprouted phallus". (TLB, p. 23)
3. The palms that fringe the airport road lurch in the gusts from the sea like spellsound women votaries with haunchlength hair, bedevilled by some shaman's philtre, corkscrewing their heads and arms about to a bacchic drum. (TLB, p. 35)

So far as symbols are concerned Chatterjee has introduced many like images but the most effective and important are the following three:

1. Aya's passing away. It symbolizes the death of closeness in the family.
2. The Maroon Cinema Hall. It becomes the objective correlative of the protagonist's essential loneliness in the family torn apart by conflict and dissension.
3. The cactus plant. It symbolizes the essential rootlessness of all the characters.

Chatterjee has used the stream of consciousness technique in this novel. Jamun ruminates over Aya's passing, his schooldays memories and so on. Even Urmila also thinks about Belu, his brother and the incident which took place with him. When it comes to imagination and relativity Chatterjee proves himself to be a master. Throughout the novel he holds the grip over the readers. This is really fascinating. All the characters written by him are so real that one can easily bump into them on way to work or the shop around the corner. They start living inside the readers as the novel progresses. Chatterjee makes it a point that his readers should be at ease with characters and also tries to make them sympathise with the situations he puts them in.

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