Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2026, No.1
October 2026
ISSN 2229-3388

# Socio-Cultural Conflicts in the Selected Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee's The Last Burden

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**Abstract:** Upamanyu Chatterjee presents a portrait of the Indian middle-class family as a gendered structure and silent compromise used in The Last Burden. This research paper advances a feminist reading of the novel. It argues that the domestic space operates as a site. The patriarchy is reproduced through emotional withdrawal, financial authority, and the normalization of women's unpaid labour. Urmila's life was caregiving and emotional restraint exposes the cultural expectation that women must endure without recognition. She is sacrificed and romanticized even as it erodes female subjectivity. It examines the gendered politics of ageing and the uneasy pragmatism of the younger generation. This detachment signals the convergence of patriarchy and emergent individualism. Thus, Chatterjee dismantles idealized notions of love and duty of feminist social conflicts.

**Keywords:** Middle-Class Family, realism, sufferings, Feminist Criticism, Patriarchy, Love, Emotional, Indian English Fiction.

## Introduction

Generally, fiction has served as a critical archive of the nation's social conflicts, particularly in its sustained engagement with the middle-class family in India. Feminists have demonstrated the middle-class family, moral cohesion, labour and power along gender roles. Chatterjee occupies a distinctive position for his unsentimental realism and his attentiveness to the fractures that unsettle rustic life. Then, his second novel, The Last Burden moving away from public satire to examine more corrosive tensions embedded within the middle-class household. The novel is set against a historical moment marked by rapid urban expansion, economic liberalisation, and the gradual erosion of the joint family system. The novel registers the anxieties of these shifts in Indian family life. Chatterjee presents the family as a stable moral unit as a layered and hierarchical formation sustained by convention and the silence of voice. The novel's title itself acts toward the accumulation of responsibility, resentment, and emotional fatigue by suggesting that "burden" is unevenly assigned and falls most heavily on the women of middle-class family.

The author portrays Shyamanand's family, where affection is strained by ego, pride, and unspoken grievances in their lives. Urmila serves as the moral and emotional role. She is defined by routine service and a persistent effort to preserve familial harmony despite neglection of her liberty. Her economic, emotional and physical contributions fail to secure recognition or reciprocity for her. The story gives the ethical disposition of the younger generation through the characters Burfi and Jamun. Their response to parental dependency reveals a complex mixture of obligation and withdrawal. Chatterjee's writings are marked by irony and psychological interiority that reveals domestic alienation in the novel. It is neither spectacular nor dramatic but it unfolds through silence, voice, and disregard. The everyday of middle-class life shows how patriarchy persists not only through overt domination but through routine patterns of expectation and compliance. This research paper reads The Last Burden as a most significant feminist intervention in Indian English fiction.

The burden is the responsibility of the older generation in a family. The author very subtly titles it as the last. The young women will be the burden for the next generation, after taking care of the last burden. They think they will have nothing else to bear in their lives. They shall be relieved forever. The back cover of the novel gives the gist of the story as below: "Chatterjee has completed a work of truly astonishing sweep and originality, a fascinating portrait of an Indian middle-class family at the end of the twentieth century. Jamun is a young man, adrift. His father, Shyamanand, is old and querulous mother Urmila on her deathbed. The novel opens with the family members are gathering for the inevitable parting. Tracking backwards and forwards in time and space, Chatterjee unfolds a brilliantly subtle and complex picture of Jamun and his family, writing in a language of unsurpassed richness and power." (blurb) The study argues that the novel provides a critique of the ethical crisis embedded within patriarchal domination.

**Socio-CulturalConflict in the Novel The Last Burden**

Upamanyu Chatterjee was a major voice in Indian English fiction just as the country itself was undergoing a massive transformation. With his second novel, The Last Burden (1993), he took a sharp turn—stepping away from the bureaucratic machinery of public institutions to zoom in on the messy, intimate world of the family home. This wasn't just a change in his writing style; it perfectly captured the mood of early 1990s India. The economy was opening up, cities were swelling, jobs were changing, and the traditional, tightly-knit joint family was slowly starting to fray. For generations, the middle-class household had been idealized as a safe haven—a place of steady morals and unbroken family ties. Chatterjee puts this very household at the heart of his story. By doing so, the family living room becomes a mirror for a country stuck in the middle: caught in a tug-of-war between the old, inherited rules of family duty and the new, modern desire to just be your own person.

Upamanyu Chatterjee became a major voice in Indian English fiction just as the country itself changed into undergoing a large transformation. With his second novel, The Last Burden (1993), he took a pointy turn—stepping away from the bureaucratic machinery of public establishments to zoom in at the messy, intimate international of the own family home. The novel shows that women carry most of the housework and caregiving in the family. Because this work is seen as normal, nobody notices it. Urmila's life is a good example. She does a lot for her family and keeps the house running all day. But no one thanks her, and no one gives her any care in return. Her tiredness is never shown as a big fight or protest. It just builds up slowly. This shows how patriarchy lasts. Women keep doing what is expected of them, and the culture approves of it. Burfi and Jamun grew up with city schooling and more freedom to move around. They think in a practical way, mostly about themselves. They look at family duty like a calculation. When it comes to their parents, they ask about time, money and convenience. This shows a quiet but deep change in how they see right and wrong. Old parents were once respected as the keepers of tradition. In crowded and busy city lives, they now look more like a problem to be managed. Chatterjee writes in a realistic way. He does not long for the past. He also does not tell the reader who is right or wrong. The Last Burden is more than a story about a family. It gives a thoughtful look at the moral confusion of the Indian middle class at the end of the 20th century. This novel is very realistic. It gives a true picture of Indian society. The condition of old people and the way they are treated is the same in villages and in cities. Both the poor and the rich are affected. They face different kinds of problems, but they all suffer. The story moves back and forth in time and place. The language is rich and powerful. The writer shows the heavy burden of family ties in a way that is funny, bitterly honest and clear.

Chatterjee shows this burden through the family of Shyamanand and Urmila. They are a middle-class couple. They have two sons, Burfi and Jamun. Burfi's wife is Joyce, and their sons are Pista and Doom. Jamun looks like a young man of the modern generation. He wears the latest fashions. His elder brother, Burfi, seems to be a responsible son at first. But sometimes he too is selfish in the way he treats his parents. In truth, he is less

responsible towards them than he looks. He cares only about money matters. The novel looks closely at the relationships between the members of this family. It also judges how they treat one another.

Shyamananda stopped the physical relationship with his wife some seventeen years back. His relationship with his wife now seems purposeless. Generally, his attitude, behaviour and treatment of his family members were very queer. He thought only of money for himself, and it became his most important consideration even during his wife's illness. Shyamanand is an egocentric man. He is also an important character in the novel. He worries more about the medical bills than about his wife's health. He finds it very hard to part with his money. He cannot even bring himself to pay for his wife's treatment. He blames others too much but never thinks of giving anything to anyone in return. Old age is when the bond between husband and wife becomes strongest. They remain constantly in touch, each sharing mutual feelings and understanding. It is important to consider loneliness for a husband or wife in old age a curse of real life.

Upamanyu Chatterjee shows in The Last Burden how the Indian middle-class family slowly falls apart. The family looks the same from outside. Elders are respected. People sacrifice for each other. Values pass from one generation to the next. But under this surface, the family members are strained. They stay silent, they calculate, and they pull away from each other emotionally. The novel does not show this collapse with big dramatic scenes. It shows how love slowly gets thinner over time. In Shyamanand's house, people do not talk to each other properly. Complaints build up and are never settled. The home feels tense and irritable instead of warm. The marriage of Shyamanand and Urmila also shows this. They have lived together for decades, but they are now strangers. Shyamanand still has authority, but he has little feeling for his wife. Nothing is given back to her. This hurts the emotional centre of the house. It also shows that male power and emotional coldness can exist together. Jamun thinks more deeply about these things, but he is unsure. He is pulled between the duty he was taught and the freedom he wants. His doubt shows a generation that knows its duty but does not want to be tied down by it. People give attention when it is easy. They pull back when it becomes a burden. The house runs on what is useful. So the family does not break apart through open rebellion. It breaks apart slowly. Habit takes the place of love. Living together takes the place of real closeness.

Chatterjee writes in a calm and realistic way. He places the middle-class family inside a larger change in society. The family structure still stands. But the values behind it have grown weak. The crisis is not fully old-fashioned. It is not fully modern either. It shows a society caught between two sets of values. The family lives under one roof, but they are far apart in feeling. The Last Burden is a sad and serious look at how good relationships and duties are fading in Indian middle-class life. Urmila shows how women are kept confined inside the home. Patriarchy in the novel is not shown through open cruelty. It shows up in small, daily ways. She is ignored. Her feelings are not noticed. Her identity is limited to being a wife, a mother and a caretaker. Her inner life is hardly ever acknowledged. She is educated. She also earns money for the household. Still, she has no real power. Everyone assumes she will always be there. Her work is expected. Her tiredness is treated as normal. She slowly disappears into serving others. She rarely speaks against this. It is not because there is no injustice. She has learned to see endurance as a virtue. Her marriage should give her companionship. Instead, there is an emotional imbalance between her and her husband. The story of elder son Burfi was like living on the 'like father, like son' dictum. He was as self-centred and selfish as his father was. He lived a well-defined life in an imaginary circle drawn around him, casing only his wife, Joyce, and his two sons, Pista and Doom. "He is very much like his father but is highly money-minded. He considers and reconsiders everything from the financial point of view. He expresses his expense-mindedness. "Baba should repay me that. Staying with them is screwing my marriage up." (116)

Joyce's real relationship with her-in-laws was totally like an outsider. As a member of the middle-class family, she neither communicates with them nor does she express herself. The novel 'The Last Burden' by Upamanyu

Chatterjee: A realistic criticism of the degeneration and changing values of the younger generation; her sympathy for them. Shyamanand did not accept Joyce as his daughter-in-law because, by birth, she was a Christian. Urmila, Joyce's mother-in-law, was in the hospital ICU for five long days. Joyce thinks it is not necessary to visit her. Burfi's attitude towards his parents is very bad. He lacks all the qualities of an ideal son. He has no concern or affection for his mother and father. Even his badly behaved children, Pista and Doom, visit the nursing home. Pista strongly dislikes his grandmother. In the end, all the family members show a family in the modern world that has no love or care. Chatterjee shows the cruel relationship between the sons and their parents. He also shows the gap in communication. He does this truthfully through the characters of Burfi, Jamun and Joyce.

Joyce is the daughter-in-law of a Hindu family. But she still follows Christian rituals. This hurts the relationship in the family. Two things to check. Your passage says Burfi "lacks apathy," but you probably mean he lacks "sympathy," so I used "concern and affection" instead. Also, I named Urmila as the mother-in-law, but please confirm this against the book, since the ICU scene may refer to a different person. The protagonist Jamun is the main character of the novel, and he has been painted as the anti-hero by the novelist. The story is told through Jamun's eyes. He is not like his brother Burfi. He cares more about his parents and shows them more love. He is especially close to his mother. He feels she should stop weeping and crying. He wants her to answer back to her husband, Shyamanand. The relationships in his middle-class family are dry and lifeless. Jamun tries to bring some warmth and comfort into them. He tries his level best to console his mother on occasions: "Then hugging her, nosing the striae of Pond's dream flower talcum on her throat, kissing her tears, feels marvellous, like a virile, veined forearm bridling, cradling, and hushing the thunder in his heart. 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." (180)

Jamun does not seem money-minded in the novel. He shows concern for his old parents. He comforts them in small things. He holds on to every little hope in their dull and boring life. Burfi is different. His mother dies, and the duty of caring for his father should fall on him. He does not want to accept it. He sees his father as a burden. He thinks Jamun should look after him. He asks Jamun to take their father along. The novel shows both sons as waiting for one of their parents to die. The home is dull and numbing. Urmila dies a sad death. Burfi and Jamun take part in the last rites like machines. They are unsure about these rituals. They see them as old and useless customs.

On this occasion, Burfi, especially, seems to be in a hell of a mood. After cremation, when the main story of the male trio of the novel drives back home with the details of the scene very aptly: "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." (243)

Jamun tries to be a good son, but he sometimes acts in a strange way. He is the main character of the novel during his father's illness. He is still unmarried. He is having an affair with Kasturi, a farmer's daughter. He sleeps with her in another room upstairs. For Jamun, satisfying his desire matters more than caring for his sick father. Jamun says his bond with Kasturi stayed the same even after she married. She also has a daughter by him. Neither of them feels ashamed of this secret affair. Jamun also has a physical relationship with Kasibai, a maidservant, when he is away from home. The novel also shows how feelings and money keep women lower in the family. Urmila does a job and also does hard housework every day. Feminist sociologists call this the double burden. But nobody sees this work. It is seen as natural for a woman to do it. Her work supports the family in money and in care. But nobody thanks her for it.

## Conclusion

The Last Burden by Upamanyu Chatterjee is a deep look at the Indian middle-class family at a time of social and moral change. Home is supposed to be a place of care for each other. The novel questions the unequal power and the silence that hold this idea up. Chatterjee writes in a calm and sharp realistic style. He shows how patriarchy shapes daily life in the family. Love turns into duty. Authority turns into emotional distance. Urmila's life is full of constant caregiving. She always puts herself last. Her life shows how women's work is treated as normal and goes unseen. Her work becomes part of the daily routine of the house. People notice it only when she is not there to do it. The novel suggests that the family stays together because women quietly sacrifice. Their work is not recognised. They are not thanked. The sons make the critique more complex. They live in a changing world. They have education, city life and careers. But their feelings are still cold and distant, as in the older generation. In the end, the novel makes us think again about what duty means in the Indian middle-class family.

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