

Existential Struggles and Human Dilemmas: An Analysis of Suffering, Alienation, and the Absurd in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*

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Abstract

Human existence is frequently characterized by isolation, alienation, and intense suffering. Pain and distress play central roles in life, having the capacity to either strengthen individuals or drive them into profound despair. This research examines the existential dilemmas and human struggles depicted in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*, focusing on the themes of suffering, alienation, and the human condition. Anchored in existentialist philosophy, the research explores fractured family dynamics, personal disillusionment, and the quest for meaning in an unpredictable and tumultuous world. Chatterjee's narrative emphasizes suffering as a central theme, revealing the paradoxical nature of human relationships, which are simultaneously burdensome and essential. The research demonstrates that the novel underscores existential concerns such as loneliness, estrangement, hostility, despair, frustration, and the perceived futility of existence. Chatterjee paints a bleak yet authentic picture of life, where suffering and death are inevitable, and familial ties often fail to provide solace. He compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the nature of existence, the fragility of relationships, and the inability of humans to reconcile with their existential predicament.

Keywords: *The Last Burden*, Human condition, Isolation, Suffering, Existential crisis, Broken family dynamics.

Introduction

The term 'Existentialism' is notoriously difficult to define due to the diverse range of thinkers and philosophical objectives it encompasses. However, it is broadly recognized that many philosophers associated with the existentialist tradition, despite their differing perspectives, drew considerable inspiration from Kierkegaard's work. His contributions were pivotal in shaping existentialism's emphasis on individual experience, personal choice, and the quest for meaning (Stewart, 2011). Existentialism centers on the individual's experience of existence, perceiving the world as inherently chaotic, with human beings as fundamentally isolated entities rather than social participants. This philosophy grants individuals the freedom to make choices while simultaneously imposing the responsibility to confront their consequences. Existentialism directs human consciousness toward an understanding of the condition and existence of man. Existentialists engage deeply with the fundamental concerns of human existence, asserting that individuals must exercise their freedom to choose and make decisions independently within their unique life situations. By embracing this agency, they argue, individuals can play a role in mitigating the widespread distress, distrust, and discord that permeate various facets of life. "Existentialism lays stress on...anguish, anxiety, alienation, boredom, choice, despair, dread, death, freedom, frustration, finitude, guilt, nausea, responsibility etc." (Singh & Somvanshi, 2017, p. 2).

Upamanyu Chatterjee is a prominent Indian novelist known for his insightful investigation of contemporary Indian society. He has contributed significantly to Indian English literature, authoring several short stories, including *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi* and *Watching Them*. His repertoire of novels includes *English*, *August*, *The Last Burden*, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, *Weight Loss*, and *Way to Go*. His collectively highlight his distinctive narrative style and thematic engagement with contemporary Indian society. His vision of life is dark and tragic. In his fictional works, he has depicted the urban middle class life with pungent satire. He is often compared with Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Milan Kundera and Saul Bellow. "The miseries and disease of life presented in his novels very vividly and vertically" (Verma et al., 2016, p. 132).

The Last Burden, published in 1993, is a story of existential struggles and the human condition, focusing on themes of suffering, alienation, and the absurd. Set against the backdrop of a dysfunctional middle-class Indian family, the novel deals with the intricate dynamics of interpersonal relationships while shedding light on the existential predicaments that define human life. This novel delineates the human life in an Indian family at the end of the 20th century. In this novel, the character, Jamun just drifts and has no purpose in life. Life is portrayed as dark and bleak. One of the methods used by the novelist to highlight the futility of human life is to use the mixture of low and high class language to depict the ridiculous emotions. For instance, when Jamun is criticized for his apparent lack of grief following his mother's death, he responds, "She isn't Indira Gandhi, you know that wives to hurtle out into the street and thwack our tits to voice our grief" (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 48). This remark highlights Jamun's emotional detachment and his rejection of conventional expressions of sorrow, emphasizing his complex emotional state in the face of familial loss. The chaos in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's Assassination is used to show the triviality of life in the context of Jamun's mother.

Chatterjee (1993) explores familial relationships by subverting traditional views of human existence, addressing themes of isolation and the breakdown of communication that reflect broader existential dilemmas. The narrative frequently employs language to convey the sense of existential emptiness inherent in human life. The novel is steeped in a pervasive tone of black humor, which is especially prominent in its depiction of Urmila's illness, Shyamanand's impotent and feeble response to his wife's suffering, and the detached, emotionally distant attitudes of their two sons, Jamun and Burfi. These characterizations underscore the novel's portrayal of existential futility and human powerlessness. Despite Urmila's prolonged suffering and eventual death, the reactions of her immediate family—her husband and sons—reinforce the novel's bleak view of existence. Their responses highlight the apparent lack of any deeper meaning or significance in human life. The narrative portrays existence as a transient journey, where the mundane routines of everyday life take precedence over even the profound loss of a loved one. Urmila's prolonged illness serves as a central and transformative force in the narrative, profoundly shaping the familial interactions and dynamics. Her declining health disrupts significant family events, such as the planned celebration of her thirty-seventh wedding anniversary, which was to include a communal lunch. The novel presents a stark portrayal of her

final days, drawing attention to the emotional detachment of her family members, who appear largely unconcerned with her suffering. In contrast, Jamun becomes acutely aware of this indifference and reprimands his family for their preoccupation with life's fleeting pleasures while their mother endures immense pain. During a moment of reflection, Jamun envisions his mother lying in her bed, speaking to him in a dreamlike state, an experience that evokes deep emotional resonance. This poignant vision prompts Jamun to contemplate the existential futility and impermanence of human existence.

Research Questions

1. How does Chatterjee portray the themes of suffering, alienation, and absurdity in *The Last Burden*, and what do these themes reveal about the existential struggles of contemporary Indian society?

2. In what ways do familial relationships in *The Last Burden* reflect the disintegration of traditional values and the psychological alienation of individuals in a modern, materialistic world?

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the depiction of existential struggles, including suffering, alienation, and the absurd, in *The Last Burden*, with a focus on Chatterjee's use of black humor and vivid imagery.

2. To assess the disintegration of familial bonds and its implications for the characters' existential dilemmas in the context of shifting societal and cultural values.

Literature Review

Issack and Margaret (2020) point out that *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go* by Chatterjee offer a depiction of Indian middle-class families, focusing on their daily struggles, emotional entanglements, and cultural nuances. They depict the compromises that define the lives of ordinary people, emphasizing their fraught relationships and familial responsibilities. Chatterjee's use of Indianness—evident in his incorporation of cultural elements like food, traditions, and colloquial phrases—grounds his *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go* firmly within the

Indian milieu. The choice of character names, such as Jamun, Burfi, and Pista, serves as a playful yet symbolic commentary on the complexities of family dynamics. Chatterjee “brings out the emotional bondages of the members in the middle class family and about the relationship of the people in the postmodern generation in the Indian society” (Issack & Margaret, 2020, p. 12).

Kaur (2016) argues that *The Last Burden* portrays the emotional dynamics of a family as akin to a battleground, where conflicts and tensions pervade every interaction. The atmosphere within the family is marked by doubt, distrust, and latent animosity, reflecting a deeper critique of the traditional familial structures in Indian society. While family is a central institution in India, often revered and idealized, Chatterjee highlights the misinterpretation of familial responsibilities and the emotional toll of such misunderstandings. The novel captures the universal presence of characters like Burfi and Jamun in middle-class households, with their relatable choices and struggles. Chatterjee addresses the theme of familial relationships and blood ties, portraying how these connections, rather than offering support, become a source of burden for the protagonists. The characters experience these ties as oppressive, intensifying their struggles and contributing to their sense of entrapment. “The choice of blood ties, which becomes as unavoidable as a burden, as the theme of the novel is fairly in the vein of Chatterjee’s artistic conception of the modern world of youngsters” (Kaur, 2016, p. 846).

Sangeetha and Selvapriya (2016) observe that *The Last Burden* provides a striking depiction of life in an Indian middle-class family at the turn of the twentieth century. The novel explores familial relationships, particularly those between father and son and husband and wife, within the context of modernity’s evolving influence. Chatterjee offers a complex portrayal of the modern world, juxtaposing themes of progress and growth with the inevitability of death, decay, and personal alienation. He emphasizes the struggles faced by younger generations as they navigate the shift from traditional, hierarchical joint family structures to the more independent nuclear family model. The novel highlights the dual layers of patriarchy in Indian society, both within family settings and broader social frameworks. It portrays the destructive dynamics between the father and mother, the mother and her sons, the father and his sons, and the elder son and his wife, ultimately illustrating a family torn apart by internal fragmentation and competing desires. Through these strained relationships, the novel reflects deep-seated

conflicts within familial bonds, portraying a household at odds with itself (Sangeetha & Selvapriya, 2016).

Ezhilarsi and Shibila (2018) point out that The story of *The Last Burden* revolves around a middle-class Hindu Brahmin family consisting of Shyamanand (the father), Urmila (the mother), and their two sons, Burfi and Jamun, set in a coastal town. The narrative examines the interdependent relationships within modern Indian families, exploring the reasons behind the shift from the traditional joint family structure to the more independent nuclear family model. The middle class faces numerous struggles—financial, mental, emotional, and physical. While these challenges are inevitable, the novel suggests that people worldwide, despite the hardships, find ways to cope and adapt to these changing familial dynamics. “Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *The Last Burden* gives sharp insight into the struggles of the middle class Indian family life” (Ezhilarsi & Shibila 2018, p. 1)

Kondababu and Karmarkar (2022) point out that *The Last Burden* portrays the struggles within Shyamanand’s household, where all members endure the consequences of dysfunctional relationships. Urmila, in particular, grapples with a sense of purposelessness and alienation within the family structure. Her life, marked by despair and neglect, ultimately ends in tragedy, with her suffering exacerbated by the actions of Shyamanand and their two children. However, the novel concludes on a hopeful note with a shift in Jamun’s attitude, as he expresses a willingness to care for his father following Urmila’s death. This change suggests the possibility of redemption and reconciliation, albeit at great cost. Through this work, Chatterjee moves from addressing broader societal issues to exploring the private struggles and emotional complexities of familial relationships. “The novelist employs how women are subjugated and definitely makes the readers aware of the actual frictions that exist between couples” (Kondababu & Karmarkar, 2022, p. 4328).

Although *The Last Burden* has been extensively analyzed for its depiction of middle-class Indian family dynamics and patriarchal structures, its existential dimensions remain underexplored. Existing studies often overlook the intricate portrayal of suffering, alienation, and the absurd as central to the characters’ lived experiences. This gap highlights the need to examine the novel through the lens of existentialist philosophy. By focusing on themes of despair,

alienation, and the search for meaning, this study aims to deepen the understanding of existential struggles in the context of human relationships and modernity.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, literary analysis approach to examine themes of suffering, alienation, and the absurd in Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*. Grounded in existential philosophy, particularly the works of Kierkegaard, and Sartre, the research focuses on how these themes reflect the characters' struggles with meaning and existence. A close reading of the novel will identify narrative techniques that illustrate the characters' internal and external conflicts, particularly their confrontation with death, illness, and emotional stagnation. Secondary sources, including critical essays on existentialism and *The Last Burden*, will complement the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Existentialism, a key philosophical movement of the 20th century, focuses on the individual's role as a self-determining agent, accountable for their choices and actions. At the heart of existentialist thought lies the affirmation of individual autonomy and the importance of unique, subjective experience. A central concept in existentialism, often called "the existential attitude," conveys a deep sense of disorientation or uncertainty faced by individuals when confronted with the complexities and ambiguities of the world around them. Existentialism is a highly diverse and multifaceted philosophical tradition, yet several central themes are commonly found across its various interpretations. Among the most prominent are:

Existence determines essence in the sense that it is act and through it the essence has being, but on the other hand, existence as act, is determined by essence, as potentiality to be the existence of this or that kind of essence (Tripathi, 1987, p 12).

Sartre (1948) argues that existentialism is grounded in the concept of individual agency. He asserts, "in a lifetime, each person must make countless choices" (p. 4). While these choices may reflect one's past experiences, they ultimately represent the individual's exclusive responsibility. Sartre (1948), further, emphasizes that even when faced with two options, one of which might be imposed by dire consequences, "it remains his choice and his choice alone" (p. 4). Sartre's (1972) phrase, 'Existence precedes essence,' encapsulates a core tenet of

existentialism: that existence is a process of self-creation within a given situation. This assertion means that individuals are not born with an inherent essence or predetermined nature that dictates their actions, values, or identity. Rather, humans possess radical freedom to act autonomously, free from external constraints or influences. Existentialists argue that individuals shape their own nature through their choices and actions. To Sartre (1948), we are first thrown into existence, devoid of an inherent essence, and only later do we define our essence through the decisions we make and the way we live our lives. For Sartre (1972), the ‘absurdity’ of human existence arises inevitably from our efforts to seek meaning and purpose in a universe that is indifferent and devoid of concern for us. In the absence of God, there is no ultimate or absolute perspective from which human actions or choices can be deemed inherently rational or justified. Without a higher power to provide a definitive framework for understanding our existence, we are left to navigate a world that offers no predetermined meaning, thereby confronting the inherent absurdity of our search for purpose.

Søren Kierkegaard is widely regarded as the founding figure of modern existentialism and the earliest European philosopher linked to the existentialist tradition. He was the first to introduce and employ the concepts of “existence” and “existentialism” within a philosophical framework. In rejecting the prevailing political, social, and religious ideologies of his era, which aligned individuals with the state, society, and church, Kierkegaard radically transformed the foundational principles of existentialist thought. His work placed a profound emphasis on individual autonomy and the subjective nature of human experience. Kierkegaard’s writings present a wealth of concepts that would later become central themes in existentialist thought. His explorations of ideas such as anxiety, despair, freedom, sin, the crowd, and sickness evolved into key motifs within existentialist literature. As Stewart (2011) notes, “[Kierkegaard’s] analyses of concepts such as anxiety, despair, freedom, sin, the crowd, and sickness all came to be standard motifs in existentialist literature” (p. x). Kierkegaard asserts that individuals are constantly confronted with immediate possibilities, compelling them to make a choice rather than retreat into neutrality. This perspective challenges the notion of Christianity as the inevitable end of a linear, universal progression or “progressive revelation” that would position it as the ultimate culmination of human history. By critiquing attempts to ground Christian ethics—whether through personal conviction or larger philosophical systems like intuitionism, Kantianism, or

utilitarianism—Kierkegaard rejects any effort to establish ethical principles detached from individual faith and commitment. He argues that Christian ethics demand a personal, immediate engagement that resists systematization or rationalization through external ethical structures. Consequently, his approach emphasizes the need for an existential choice, free from reliance on philosophical abstractions or moral systems.

For Kierkegaard, existence is essentially a process of becoming, where the individual's primary task is to realize their true self through a relationship with God. Failure to engage in this relationship leads to despair, whether or not one is consciously aware of it (Hall, 1980). According to Gardiner (2002), Kierkegaard emphasizes the necessity for individuals to freely choose their own paths, recognizing that their freedom is uniquely personal. Each individual faces distinct challenges rooted in the concrete realities of daily life. The central existential question Kierkegaard raises is, 'How can I exist?' He contends that choosing one option inherently excludes all other possibilities, requiring individuals to focus intensely on their goals and pursue consistency, while rejecting distractions that might interfere with that focus. "Kierkegaard takes no pride in the progress of freedom or science. Modern man's achievements, far from solving our basic problems, are distractions" (Kaufmann, 1980, p. 205).

Textual Analysis

The Last Burden commences with the illness of Jamun's mother, Urmila, whose deteriorating health serves as a central motif throughout the novel. Upon learning of her heart attack, Jamun, who has been living away from his family, decides to return home. Chatterjee (1993) portrays Urmila's condition, employing vivid and unflinching descriptions that evoke a deep emotional response from the reader. Through her illness, the novelist not only highlights the universal experience of human suffering but also reflects the indifference of a world preoccupied with its own concerns. Urmila's medical struggles, initially marked by suspicions of cancer and later culminating in a heart attack, highlight the inherent fragility of human life. Rather than uniting the family, her illness becomes a source of stress and separation. As the narrative unfolds, Jamun and Burfi engage in practical discussions regarding the costs of treatment, while Shyamanand's indifference to Urmila's suffering becomes apparent. It is only after her heart attack that Shyamanand expresses any semblance of concern, marking a subtle shift in his

emotional response. Burfi says,” ... he loves her only when she is absent and dying” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 230).

The two brothers, Jamun and Burfi, are portrayed as being deeply entangled in the absurdities and trivialities of life, while their father, Shyamanand, remains indifferent to the profound and serious concerns of existence. Urmila's illness emerges as a central motif in the narrative, dominating the storyline and symbolizing the broader existential condition of humanity. The author's depiction of her sickness employs language that transcends her personal plight, rendering it a metaphor for the collective afflictions of the human condition. The world presented in the novel appears to be plagued by ailments of every kind, mirroring a universal struggle with suffering and decay. Urmila's deteriorating state, as described by the novelist, resonates as a reflection of the shared existential plight of humanity: “At the hospital, Urmila trudges crabbedly, drearily, clutching tongs like Jamun's wrist bones for reinforcement. Underneath her sari, her leg will be wan and spongy, with veins varicose like a bluish subcutaneous skein” (Chaterjee, 1993 p. 22). In a moment of fleeting intuition, Jamun perceives that Urmila is dead, though this realization is quickly assuaged by a fleeting sense of relief,” a kind of balm sprinkles his entrails” before guilt overtakes him. However, Urmila is not dead but rather breathing fitfully, prompting Jamun to reflect on the dismal prospect that, should she pass, his first reaction would likely be a sense of “deliverance.” The grim reality of their situation is underscored by the repeated and futile medical interventions, where “damaging- at best ineffectual- chemicals” are administered to prolong her life. These treatments, instead of offering any genuine hope, merely extend the agony, rendering her existence an ongoing struggle within a deteriorating vessel. Jamun contemplates how, under their care, she will inevitably transform into a “thing querulous and unrecognizable.” The progression of her decline is uncertain, but what is clear is that both the affection they once shared and the resentment that now exists will be tested by her inevitable transformation into someone unrecognizable, as they contend with the “fatigued distaste” for the person she has become. In the end, she will “wail for succour,” only for her children to respond with frustration. The family's cruel indifference is palpable, and even in the youngest child's brief fantasy of her death, which “for an instant, felt eased,” the undercurrent of familial hellishness is revealed. (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 111)

The Last Burden is imbued with a pervasive sense of black humor, particularly evident in the depiction of Urmila's illness, the ineffectual response of her husband Shyamanand, and the detached indifference of their sons, Jamun and Burfi. These depictions accentuate the existential themes of purposelessness and helplessness that pervade human life. Despite Urmila's prolonged suffering and eventual death, those closest to her—her husband and sons—react in ways that highlight the novel's bleak perspective on existence. Their responses, marked by apathy and inadequacy, highlight the absence of any profound purpose in human life. Life is depicted as a transient experience, where the insignificance of daily concerns often eclipses even the profound event of a loved one's death. Her husband Shyamanand's responses to Urmila's illness and death further emphasize this sense of life's fleeting and ultimately inconsequential quality. In the concluding hours of her life, the patient experiences "a succession of explosions in her skull," a series of minor strokes (Chatterjee, 1993 pp. 238–239). Her physical condition has significantly deteriorated, with her body showing signs of advanced decomposition.

The Last Burden explores the shared experiences of a family as they navigate the challenges of Urmila's illness, intricately blended with Jamun's introspective reflections on the past. Chatterjee (1993) adeptly captures the complexities of familial dynamics, employing a blend of humor and profound emotional insight. Through Jamun's evocative memories, the narrative delves into the intricate nature of family ties, offering a critique of traditional perceptions of human existence and its inherent existential complexities. At the time of the attack, Urmila is alone upstairs, in a restless slumber typical of those nearing the end of life. The scene unfolds on a hot and oppressive Late-August afternoon. Burfi's elder son, Pista, returns from school and, evading his lunch and the *Aya*, meanders through the house. He conceals his uniform in a hiding spot, which he only reveals once he perceives enough of her anger to warrant the disclosure. He, then, proceeds to rouse his grandmother, attempting to provoke her into a game of chess. He calls her name, then hoots into her ear, nudging her awake. Meanwhile, downstairs, Shyamanand is pulled from his anxious stupor by the sharp sound of a bell. Pista, standing beside him and holding the bell typically kept near Urmila, calmly announces, "Takoma has snuffed it." Shyamanand, however, takes an unusually long time to respond. When he reaches her, he stares at Urmila and, with the first sign of her passing, experiences a strange sensation, as though "an ice-cream sky with tendrils of chilled cloud" has entered the room. In a

frantic attempt to revive her, he strikes her chest with his right fist, the panic rising with each blow. Eventually, he collapses to the floor, overcome by emotion. Pista, who could never have imagined his grandfather in such a vulnerable state, watches in confusion as his grandmother continues to “inhale and wheeze like snorting wheelwork.” He is instructed to call his parents’ offices, but neither is available. Shyamanand’s tears overwhelm the boy, who scurries to find the *Aya*. After an exhaustive search, they find Dr. Haldia’s phone number, and Pista is captivated by the answering service. Shyamanand, exhausted and collapsed on the floor, waits for any form of mercy. The *Aya* brings water and wipes Urmila’s forehead. Pista wishes to listen to the answering service once more. The *Aya* steps out to seek advice from her neighbors, with a hesitant Pista following her. As Shyamanand watches, he observes the water dripping from the cloth onto Urmila’s ashen hair, covering the ear, the rigid mouth, the gray skin at her temples, and the deep lines carved by the passage of time. Her eyes remain hidden beneath closed lids, while the sagging skin at her throat and disordered sari emphasize the vulnerability of her condition. The sight of her hands, withered and cracked, and the once-bright bangles now dulled to pewter and burgundy, completes the image of her physical decline (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 13-14).

Urmila’s prolonged illness takes center stage in *The Last Burden*, profoundly influencing the experiences and interactions of those around her. Her declining health disrupts pivotal family moments, such as the planned celebration of her thirty-seventh wedding anniversary. The portrayal of Urmila’s final days starkly highlights the emotional distance of her family members, who seem indifferent to her suffering. In contrast, Jamun recognizes their apathy and chastises them for indulging in the pleasures of life while their mother endures immense pain. Upon returning to her room, Jamun imagines his mother lying in bed and speaking to him—a moment that deeply affects him. This reflection triggers an emotional shift, prompting Jamun to contemplate the inherent futility of human existence and the transient nature of life. “Needing a son’s arm to be guided to bed~ this was the end of the wheel of life, its full circle, its fatuity before one’s eyes when father became child in the years before dying” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 214). The novelist masterfully portrays the futility, absurdity, and intrinsic lack of meaning in life with remarkable depth and lucidity. Through his narrative, Chatterjee (1993) emphasizes the unavoidable realities of illness and mortality as central aspects of human existence. The characters—Jamun, Burfi, their father Shyamanand, and their mother Urmila—serve as

embodiments of a life fraught with pain and sorrow. Their personal and shared experiences encapsulate the universal human experience, characterized by relentless struggles and emotional distress. As Chatterjee (1993) poignantly observes, “Existence has trundled along for thousands of years and will chug on till Time itself peters out, and its hellish and dreadful designlessness is at last immaculately clear when one witnesses, at close quarter, the sickness of death” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 226).

Chatterjee (1993) offers a realistic depiction of human relationships, which have become casualties of modern lifestyles. She portrays a world characterized by strained parent-child dynamics and a pervasive lack of communication. Familial gatherings often require negative catalysts to occur. Urmila, burdened by stress and unhappiness, retreats early each night only to endure restless, sleepless hours, marked by “writhing and twitching on the bedlinen till morning,” a routine emblematic of her existence. Shyamanand, despite his aversion to alcohol, uses the pretext of a birthday celebration to bond with his sons, viewing “tippling” as a rare opportunity for familial closeness amidst their disconnected lives. He laments their fragmented routines, noting how days pass with only fleeting encounters as his sons rush between their professional obligations and mundane activities like retrieving the morning newspaper (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 15). As the narrative unfolds, the profound suffering and pain in Shyamanand and Urmila’s lives become evident, deeply rooted in love, possession, and familial ties. Jamun reflects on whether Shyamanand acknowledges his contribution to Urmila’s misery or shifts accountability to others, even in the face of her death. Chatterjee (1993) offers a cynical portrayal of grief, presenting it as transient and exposing the fractured family dynamics early in the story. The narrative’s oppressive tone highlights the toxic dynamics and emotional inertia that dominate the characters’ lives. Jamun’s inner turmoil is poignantly expressed in his introspection: “Jamun convulsedly—within him the butterflies of contrition set aflutter by remembrance—isn’t evidence enough for the debt that I owe my begetters, then nothing in this existence is meaningful” (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 193-94). The novel thus critiques the superficiality of familial bonds and the existential dilemmas they evoke. Urmila and Shyamanand’s relationship is devoid of emotional intimacy, despite their long years of cohabitation. This lack of connection is evident in the way they interact, or rather, fail to interact meaningfully. The novel, at its core, explores the family’s shared experience in grappling with

Urmila's declining health and Jamun's reflections on the past. Jamun, though not without fault in his treatment of Shyamanand, comes across as less cruel than Burfi, whose attitude toward his father is particularly harsh. Shyamanand, on the other hand, exhibits a callous disregard for his wife, Urmila, treating her with a complete lack of empathy, as though she were an object to be ignored and dismissed. This is especially evident in his behavior when he resents the neglect he perceives from his son, Burfi, yet he himself never hesitates to belittle both his wife and sons, even when they attempt to care for him.

Jamun and Burfi, while exhibiting care in their unique ways, are ultimately self-absorbed, though in distinct manners. Burfi, mirroring his father Shyamanand, demonstrates a pronounced preoccupation with material success and wealth, reflecting a pragmatic and self-serving approach to life. His obsession with money is so consuming that he avoids discussing the sharing of his mother's medical expenses and shows little regard for his parents' emotional needs. He fails to invite them to social gatherings or offer them the warmth of familial celebrations, a stark reflection of the changing values in the younger generation, where parents are increasingly seen as burdens rather than sources of care or affection. After Urmila's death, Burfi continues this trend by viewing Shyamanand as an inconvenience, even requesting Jamun to take him away. He also places the blame for his own selfishness on Urmila, accusing her of having spoiled him. In contrast, Jamun is less concerned with material matters and harbors a genuine wish for his parents to remain together. His care for his mother's well-being is sincere, though it is complicated by his own emotional entanglements. While his father, Shyamanand, struggles with life, Jamun is preoccupied with his own desires, particularly in his relationship with Kasturi. Even after Kasturi marries, Jamun's connection with her results in a child, yet he still finds himself in a complex emotional position, torn between his duties and his personal life. Despite his resistance to the idea of his father infringing upon his privacy, Jamun ultimately accepts Shyamanand's presence and tries to fulfill his responsibilities as a son, marking his growth and a shift towards familial duty.

Chatterjee (1993) delivers a strong critique of familial relationships, particularly the parent-child dynamic, portraying them as inherently fraught with flaws and burdensome obligations. The destructive nature of these connections is portrayed not only as overwhelming

for the characters but also as a significant burden for the author. As Chatterjee (1993) notes, Burfi's observation about leading multiple existences highlights the idea that individuals often live lives that are largely unknown to or barely understood by their closest family members (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 268). This notion serves as a reflection of the alienation and moral decay of the Indian anti-hero, which Chatterjee (1993) believes is best represented through the character's interactions with both the bureaucratic system and familial ties. In *The Last Burden*, the portrayal of the Indian anti-hero is notably realistic. For example, when Jamun visits Urmila in the hospital, the depiction of her deteriorating condition is so vivid that it brings the entire hospital scene to life for the reader. Chatterjee (1993) seems particularly adept at capturing the essence of illness, and Urmila's portrayal as a "vacant incarnation" emphasizes the existential despair surrounding her. The novel's broader existential themes are reinforced by describing all human beings as "sinking monkeys," underscoring the inherent futility and degradation of the human condition. (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 36-37).

Chatterjee (1993) portrays interpersonal relationships, highlighting the profound lack of trust that permeates human connections. Even a mother, who has devoted her life to maintaining the family, feels that her sons are incapable of understanding the complexities of her experiences. This emotional distance is particularly evident when Jamun visits Urmila in the hospital. She confides in him that she cannot recount her life to him, as she believes he would be unable to comprehend the depth of her suffering and sacrifices. This moment underscores the novel's exploration of alienation within family dynamics and the inability of individuals to truly connect with one another, even within the closest of relationships. "One day, when I am at ease and not tuckered out, I shall recount to you my life, what actually occurred," Urmila repeatedly promises her disinterested sons over the years, both individually and collectively (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 37)

The characters grapple with a profound sense of guilt for their inability to truly connect with one another. Jamun and Burfi, in particular, lead existential lives, where the choices they have made shape the relationships they will endure throughout their lives. They are caught in a paradox: while they are unable to escape the immediate circumstances that define their existence, they simultaneously wrestle with the guilt of not being able to bridge the emotional distance between them. Shyamanand, for his part, views death as a means of escape from the ongoing

suffering he endures in his life. When Jamun returns to care for Urmila, Shyamanand recounts the challenges he faced in the absence of his sons, highlighting the strain of caring for Urmila without their support. This narrative underscores the emotional isolation within the family and reflects the characters' internal struggles with guilt, duty, and the limitations of their connections. However, the response of Jamun is such that the reader feels the disinterestedness of the son in the sufferings of the father. Jamun and Shyamanand “subside in the uncomfortable garden chairs. Shyamanand has no idioms of solace for anyone” (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 53).

The existential condition of life is poignantly explored through the experiences of the characters, particularly in Urmila's death. The novel suggests that all the characters are plagued by a sense of meaninglessness, a pervasive force that defines their existence. Urmila, yearning for fulfillment and purpose, desires a life of completeness, yet such fulfillment remains unattainable in the human experience. According to the novel, life is characterized not by fulfillment, but by an endless cycle of desires and unfulfilled wants. It is only when faced with death that the true nature of existence becomes clear to the characters—an inevitable confrontation with the limitations and absurdity of life. In the portrayal of Urmila's death, Chatterjee (1993) captures this existential realization, illustrating the profound sense of futility and the inescapable truth that fulfillment is not possible in the human condition: The moans grow in intensity, quickening with urgency. The deep furrows in her temple intensify with the struggle, her eyes half-closed, but sightless, her lips part from her teeth, and her skull thrashes about like a fish scooped from a stream and cast onto the rocks to die. Burfi grasps her shoulders, his hold as much an attempt to steady himself as it is to steady her. “Ma, what is it? What do you want, tell me? Do you want water? Ma, are you thirsty?” The shift in the pitch of her moaning and its rhythmic adjustment signals her response: no. “She understood me, God, what a relief... Ma, is the room too muggy? Shall I open another window? ... What, do you feel cold? Would you like me to switch off the fan? ... I can't follow you, Ma, what are you trying to say? ... Do you want a third pillow? ... Are you comfortable? Or shall we roll you over? ... Is the light upsetting you? Shall I draw the curtains? ... Maybe she'd enjoy a cold-water compress ... Is some part of your body chafing you? ... Oh shit, what an idiotic question...” (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 223-224). This passage vividly captures Burfi's frantic yet ultimately ineffectual attempts to ease his mother's suffering, emphasizing his confusion and helplessness in the face of her overwhelming agony.

The escalating urgency of her moans, combined with the disjointed rhythm of his questions, reflects both his desperation to provide comfort and his inability to comprehend or alleviate her distress. Chatterjee's (1993) depiction poignantly underscores the torment of witnessing a loved one's pain while being powerless to relieve it.

Conclusion

The Last Burden focuses on the existential burdens of human relationships and the inherent suffering of life. It, through its vivid and often stark portrayal of Urmila's prolonged illness and eventual death, serves as a metaphor for the fragility of human existence and the disintegration of familial bonds. Chatterjee (1993) masterfully employs black humor and vivid imagery to highlight the absurdity, futility, and meaninglessness of life. The strained dynamics within the family—manifested in Shyamanand's indifference, Burfi's selfishness, and Jamun's reflective yet passive demeanor—highlight the erosion of traditional family values in a modern, materialistic world. Urmila's physical decline and the family's reaction to her suffering expose the alienation and moral decay permeating their lives. Chatterjee (1993) paints a bleak yet authentic picture of life, where suffering and death are inevitable, and familial ties often fail to provide solace. He compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the nature of existence, the fragility of relationships, and the inability of humans to reconcile with their existential predicament. Through this unflinching depiction of life's harsh realities, he highlights the enduring, universal burden of existence that each individual must bear.

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