CHAPTER V

The Last Burden

In *English, August: An Indian Story* and *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, Upamanyu Chatterjee explored amoral passivity, selfishness, cowardice in the face of moral choices, lack of nobility of mind and spirit, through the impersonal world of bureaucracy. There the antihero appears as a reluctant but willing cog in the bureaucratic wheel. In the novel *The Last Burden* we see the anti-hero as trying to shed the 'burden' of family ties, the terrain of his operation being the personal world of familial relationships. In an interview Upamanyu Chatterjee disclosed candidly his thematic projection of his further creative career as a novelist, which shows his clear vision about the things he considers significant as the vehicle to express his concept of the Indian antihero. This interview took place after his third novel, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* was published in 2000. He said, 'The next book will again be a Last Burden kind of book, and then I'll revert to Agastya. I plan to alternate themes.' (Nambisan 02). This clear-cut idea about alternating themes from a young and promising Indian novelist confirms his commitment to explore more and more the antiheroic Indian urban personality through the twin canvases of Indian bureaucracy and Indian family. These are the two arenas, for Chatterjee, in which the modern English educated urban Indian antihero displays his lack of nobility, disregard for values and his predicament of alienation from the roots as well as his larger community whether symbolised by the common people whom he (Agastya Sen) is supposed to serve or the family which expects warmth and responsibility from him (Jamun of *The Last Burden*). This projected creative
endeavour shows his belief that the alienation and moral degeneration of the Indian antihero are best reflected through his engagement with the two much-vaunted institutions of bureaucracy and family. It is these two institutions in which, in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee the average English educated Indian personality enacts its antiheroism marked by multiple alienation, moral ennui and purposelessness of life. As far as the image of the Indian antihero in The Last Burden is concerned, it can be said that here again Chatterjee comes out as an uncompromising realist. A close reading of the novel The Last Burden suggests that here we have a novel that has been written keeping in view the Indian readers of present time. A host of Indian authors like Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul write books for the western readership, but Chatterjee is one of the few novelists who write for the Indian one. As far as the depiction of India in works of modern Indian English novelists of popularity is concerned, we see that while Naipaul is eternally pessimistic and defeatist and Rushdie amazingly reminiscing, Upamanyu Chatterjee is uncompromisingly realistic. He has captured the widening chasm between urban and rural India brilliantly. The antiheroic protagonist of The Last Burden, Jamun, reflects the average Indian growing up in an Indian megapolis and feeling constantly that he will be more at home in New York or London than in a small place of India. This reflection does not stop at the inability to look toward the warm home; rather it goes further. The crisis lies in his surrender to the alienating forces. And an easy surrender is a mark of the antihero who lacks the power of positive resistance. Jamun basically cares for his mother and want to do her bidding but knows that it is not his cup of tea and gets sucked into the vortex of modern youth’s dream of good life.
The novel, *The Last Burden*, did not find a very high critical favour when it was published. Its reason was that in this novel also Chatterjee appears to have no qualms about leading the antiheroic protagonist and other small antiheroic characters into adventures which many thought were in doubtful taste. One of the views was, ‘The book deals for the most part with wasted, aimless lives and it becomes a metaphor of a monstrous ugliness’ (Sengupta 39). It was also chided for what was called its verbosity. It was charged that the free flow of dialogues gets impeded by the inclusion of difficult words, and they sound unreal and stilted. Dom Moraes called it ‘burden of language and Joyce with a bad hangover’ (Moraes 29). In all the unfavourable opinions regarding *The Last Burden* we find one realisation missing, the realisation that the theme of this novel does not allow the novelist to have a protagonist who is a god-fearing family-loving person, who has no emotional yarns that are complicated, who does not cast dirty looks at a friend’s wife. What is important to note is that the antiheroic protagonist of *The Last Burden*, in his inner heart, hates himself for casting such looks. After all, he is a torn personality, forming part of a family torn apart by conflict and dissension. Loneliness is his essential hallmark, his inability to have a meaningful communication his chief handicap and also the source of his immoral forays into things that look revolting to the readers. For Upamanyu Chatterjee the choice of the operating terrain of the anti-heroic vision is significant. In *English, August* and *The Mammaries* the paternalistic world of Indian bureaucracy with its expected but unfulfilled role of service to the marginalised masses comes under ruthless focus. In fact, this world
becomes one with the bizarre outlook of the people who man it. Further, it becomes a
vehicle of the enactment of the alienation of the westernised urban youth from the poor
compatriots who are, at least theoretically, the purpose of their existence as public servants.
In The Last Burden this terrain comes to us as the celebrated Indian family found on the
rocks of blood ties. In comparison with the institution of Indian bureaucracy, the institution
of Indian family has much more substance in terms of traditional sanctity, modern value as
a source of emotional warmth and sustenance, and in just being simply hoary. The choice of
blood ties, which become as avoidable as a ‘burden’, as the theme of a novel is quite in the
vein of Chatterjee’s artistic conception of the anti-heroic Indian world. Here amorality and
self-centredness translate themselves into a situation, very well described in the very context
of the novel, by Dom Moraes,

Family life, as Chatterjee seems to see it, is an arena where all barriers are
down... Dependence and the process of destruction it holds within it are the material
of the novel. The various interlined protagonists suffer each other. The seal of blood,
the last burden, keeps each member of the family hermetically locked within it. It
compels emotion of affection or love, but hidden under these are sensations of
boredom, dislike, contempt, and even the burden of the geriatric father to be borne,
and the further burden of the children of the house, to be brought up into the same
vicious cycle (Moraes 28).
It is the unbearable burden of family ties, as Jamun the antiheroic protagonist comes to realise when he returns home after being informed that his mother is critically ill, that is the thematic load of the novel. After the mordant satire of *English, August*, Chatterjee turns to a far more inward-looking narrative in *The Last Burden*. This inwardness is because of the family setting around which the narrative of the novel revolves. It is not a simple inwardness of emotional warmth and attachment; rather, the inwardness here is shot through by a sombre hovering of hatred and revulsion. And it is by design. In an interview, Chatterjee was as explicit as he could be regarding his intention behind this novel. He says, 'I wanted to write about the suffering that family members inflict on each other and the terrible responsibility of emotional dependence, I wanted to describe the burden, I suppose, of attachments' (Ghosh 5). Dom Moraes, in his above-quoted comment calls all the characters of the novel 'interlined protagonists' who suffer each other. To call them all protagonists is significant in the fact that *The Last Burden* is not, unlike *English, August*, a novel where one person suffers and experiences more than other characters. Here the suffering and mutual cruelty are experienced by almost one and all. We can say that all the characters who belong to the family of the suffering father, Shyamanand, are sufferers in equal measure. Sometimes one has the uneasy feeling that the burden consists not in attachment but in the unreal world that the novelist has created. One is tempted to think that he has overdone the confused and often destructive relationships within an Indian family, even though it belongs to the nineties of the last century. A tradition-bound Indian reaction might run along the line: the novelist has glibly depicted the characters wallowing in self-destructive futility, and so appears cynical
and unnecessarily sweeping in his portrayal of the sanctified institution of Indian family. One reviewer has called it ‘the residue of decay, the crud of companionship gone sour’ (Ahmed 7). But the success of the novelist lies in his grip over the theme of emotional acrimony which turned into an admirable piece of art.

At the centre of the novel The Last Burden is an Indian family that is peopled with middle class human beings deeply despairing, cynical, lacking in warmth, violent and divided, but not without their small redeeming acts that at once are uplifting but tragic. The destructive relationship between father and mother, between the mother and the two sons, between the father and the sons and the elder son’s wife and finally, between the elder son and his wife, point unmistakably to the existence of a family that is pitted against itself. It seems that the anti-heroic has taken the shape of an Indian family for whose identity the adjectives ‘loveless’ and ‘violent’ appear to be the only markers. The only saving grace of the novel is a glimmer of maturity that dawns upon Jamun towards the end of the book. Lovelessness is the enveloping presence in the entire spread of the novel. Its plot is a paltry thing; or as Dom Moraes points out, there isn’t one. Two pettifogging government servants who have an unhappy marriage, two sons, one of whom is bisexual (Jamun), a Christian daughter-in-law (Joyce, via Burfi), two impudent grandsons (Pista and Doom) and a house of their own after years of saving towards it. Ma’s bad heart kills her, Baba eventually elects to live with kinder, gentler Jamun, and ‘not a bad beginning’ (203), muses Jamun in the book’s last line. As the reader follows the lives of Shyamanand and Urmila (significantly without surname) and their two sons, Pista and Doom, set in a city by the sea (significantly again without a
name), it becomes a painful but necessary incursion into a world that is palpably real. We are led into a world whose reality we cannot deny, on a close reading, because we are its creators. It is characteristic of the social realism of Upamanyu Chatterjee that he creates a fictional universe that refuses not to seem factual. He reminds us throughout his work that, as a perceptive critic has remarked, ‘Art is not created in a vacuum, it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important because articulate part’ (Scott 124).

Antiheroic Rearing-Home is the Hell

Now it is commonly accepted regarding the Indian novel in English that the elder writers were concerned with issues like national upsurge, social evils and rural problems; the recent novelists seize upon the more recent problems of sex, conjugal clashes, cultural chaos, loss of identity and other dilemmas of individual characters. The anti-heroic protagonist of The Last Burden is born into a family which is extremely hate-filled. It is a novel about an ordinary middle class family. Shayamanand, a retired government official and his wife Urmila share a house, built on their ‘own clod of earth’ (12) with their son Burfi and his Christian wife, Joyce. Urmila’s other son, Jamun (the protagonist, through whose life and memories we see the working of the anti-heroic vision of the novelist unfold) lives in a far away town. The novel opens with Jamun preparing reluctantly to go home after hearing that his mother has had a heart attack. His reluctance to see his dying mother is
linked to his past spent in the family dominated by parental discord and rancour. The novel ends with Urmila’s death mourned perfunctorily by the sons and the husband. In between Jamun’s preparation to go home and the mother’s death are woven his memories of an almost uniformly shabby past: of a drab home with dirty tea cups and limp curtains, of Shayamanand’s habitual derisiveness and Urmila’s tired sobs, of a far away hospital all of which is filtered through the English language and the world of ‘hamburgers and Levis, blues and heavy metal’ (135). the legacy of Jamun’s westernised education. A critic remarks,

What makes this novel about ordinary affairs quite extraordinary is the bleakness of its vision. Chatterjee’s is a world where dawn breaks with the “tint of ashes”, and people “yawp” and “squawk” at each other. The bleakness of the imagery, the ugly sounding prose express not so much some abstract existential gloom as disgust at a society that is aggressive in its self-destructiveness... (Sen 55).

Jamun’s parents share little in common, but they continue to live together stewing in mutual resentment and competing bitterly for the son’s allegiance. Quarreling is the central organising feature of the novel, the experience around which a great deal of its action revolves. A typical evening when Shayamanand and Urmila return from work begins with his demanding something to ‘lull his peptic ulcer with’ (19) ‘rapping out on the decolam’ (23), ‘a signature tune of impatience’ (34). It ends with Urmila struggling to keep her balance amidst ‘the enervation of a long day, its sapping mugginess...her piles’ (112). In Shayamanand
and Urmila we have the classic case of a husband and wife falling out but not separating. 

'They are actuated partly by the itch to woo their brood away from each other while straining to demonstrate to it, in a thousand oblique ways, the general beastliness of the spouse' (263). The relationship between the protagonist's parents, Urmila and Shayamanand, is corrosive to the maximum limit. Even though married for about forty years, they have not been able to establish a meaningful relationship, and live in a destructive atmosphere of squabbling, bickering and accusations. The perspective of bitterness in the relationship becomes nastier when we learn that when Shayamanand was courting Urmila, 'the virginal, innocent girl' (8), he couldn't make up his mind about marriage and she had to abort twice, and that Jamun was conceived when Shayamanand mistook his wife for one Shireen Raizada of his office. Urmila seems to sum up the whole corrosive basis of such a relationship: 'rancour for one another; the most guileless event milks froms us our watchful malice—living together merely to thrill in unkindness, marrying, mounting and spawning because we are all afraid of being corporeally alone' (54).

The sufferer in Urmila diagnoses the sickness; but her suggestion of corporeal aloneness does not fully explain the conjugal predicament. Actually the plight in which the couple, rather the entire family, suffers is the tragedy of loneliness. Loneliness is the pain, the agony of inner separation, the state of isolation when one as an entity does not fit in with any thing, neither with the idea of family, nor with wife, with children; one is completely cut off from others. This is the crisis of the the emotional estrangement that Shayamanand,
Urmila and their brood suffer from. They cannot relate with one another at any significant level. We can say that the problem of relating is the central problem in the novel The Last Burden. We’ve Upamanyu Chatterjee’s own words in this vital connection:

My new novel, The Last Burden, is concerned not with growing up but with family ties. It takes a close look at an Indian family, the complexity of relationships and how these change as a cataclysmic event occurs (Mattoo 29).

The social realism of Chatterjee turns its focus to the issue of relationship in an ordinary middle class family, thereby exploring the state of Indian antiheroic personality. He feels that the writer’s work is done in projecting what the relations are and not as they ought to be, what emotions are and not as they ought to be. As a social realist he is ruthless in his examination of the relationship, because his belief in the importance of relationship as the essential medium through which human beings express themselves is reflected in his creative intensity. With him we come to believe that, in the words of J. Krishnamurti, ‘....relationship is one of the most—or rather the most—important thing in life. That means that one has to understand what love is’.(Krishnamurti 69). The personality of a human being finds its most authentic expression in the way it handles personal crises and relationships. This handling links that personality to the problems of all other personalities, and so expands into a manifestation of the larger face of humanity. Therefore, human relationship especially within the family, forms the primary bedrock of human existence. To quote the philosopher,
J. Krishnamurti, again, ‘The problem is not the world, but you in relationship with another, which creates a problem; and that problem extended becomes the world problem’ (Krishnamurti 26)

It is this problem of relationship within a family gone uncontrollably intractable which forms the milieu in which a growing mind, i.e., Jamun the antiheroic protagonist of The Last Burden, shapes his development. As discussed above, the parental rancour and hatred do form the primary agents in the emotional development of the antiheroic Jamun, but it must be noted that besides the parents, even the brother and his wife, Burfi and Joyce, are also not healthy in their relationship. They, too, are a loveless couple, though not as absolutely as Shayamanand and Urmila, which lives in a state left unirrigated by the elixir of love, empathy and sympathy. They also suffer the drab and dry existence of their loveless relationship. Jamun perceives in Burfi-Joyce relationship a kind of disagreement similar to the parental discord, but with a slight difference. Here Joyce replaces Shayamanand and Burfi, Urmila. On the surface, theirs appear to be a happy marriage, but in reality they both bear themselves idiotically. As far as their attitude to Shayamanand and Urmila is concerned, it is hellish, considering the expectations from Indian men and women. Burfi, the elder son of his parents, bluntly tells them that ‘staying with them is screwing my marriage up’ (116). His wife Joyce, who is an outsider, goes one step further. In the five days Urmila has spent at the ICU, Joyce hasn’t visited her even once. She justifies her action in her own alienated way, ‘...I’m not a fraud. To bob about her bed looking pathetic, while speculating every
second when it'd be okay to glide away, that's how you all behave there anyway’ (234). It would be quite appropriate to say about the prevailing emotional structure of this family that it is like an arena where everyone fights everyone. The entire family ambience is of doubt, suspicion and hatred. One critic, while emphasising the emotional corrosion dominating in the family, points to the ‘choice of names’ of the characters of this novel, and concludes that these names are an ingredient in this attrition and corrosion. He writes, ‘This choice of names seems to echo a dominant theme of the book: the devouring nature of family relationship’ (Dayal 4).

After a close textual analysis, one can’t help the impression that in the novel The Last Burden the family relationship itself appears to be a hideous anti-hero. It assumes, as it were, a palpable form of pain and emotional exploitation being inflicted by the family members upon one another. The relationship, which normally works as a background for human actions, here seems to break its bounds of abstraction and comes as a reality with its own force to make itself felt as a concrete presence. Along with this presence in the reader’s mind, there hovers the unmistakable suggestion that the bitterness in relationship is the product of the inexorable sense of separate individuality on the part of the respective persons. The separative existence of the individual gives rise to his separative actions in relation to others. He seems incapable of recognising that his consciousness is the consciousness of all others. His incapability becomes a cause for his failure to participate cognitively in the larger spiritual reality that one individual consciousness is the consciousness of the rest of mankind; though biologically we may differ, psychologically,
our consciousness is similar in all human beings. If one once realizes this not intellectually but in depth, in one's heart, in one's blood, in one's guts, then one's relationship to another undergoes a radical change. It is this realisation which appears to permanently elude the antiheroes of the novel The Last Burden. The result of this permanent elusion is, as captured beautifully by a critic, that the individual

'...is no longer the hero or the maker of his own story but is the man of the story seeking to come to terms with himself as he is catapulted by the currents of change into which he is sucked in without his making any conscious option' (Hema 49).

Decultured Existence

It is quite notable in the context of Upamanyu Chatterjee's concept of antihero that he is a product of the so-called modem educational system whose unfairly trumpeted success lies in the production of an assembly line of men and women uprooted from his nativity. We can say that the antihero comes out as a severe indictment of the English-based formal institution-centric education of the Indians. All the antiheroes of Chatterjee are the products of English medium stream of educational training. Their clumsy conduct of life shows that their education has not equipped them for the sublime business of living. It has not taught them what it means to be oneself, clarity regarding one's values, priorities and aim or direction as distinct from one's sociolization or cultural conditioning. The life of the antihero
suggests that education as guidance and direction that does not estrange or alienate but puts one onto the path of meaningful learning and realizing one's true self has not been his good fortune. The schooled antihero does not worship at the altar of truth, goodness, love and beauty. He worships at the altar of success measured by pelf and status, pleasure and convenience. The concept of a good life for him is no longer measured by commitment to truth, goodness or justice, but by access to success, pleasures and convenience. The antihero is an illustration of the project of the modern Indian educational system that has become nothing more than an exercise in human resource management. It has grossly neglected the inner area of the human self, resulting into alienation from the self as well as the non-self symbolised by the larger community of family and society. It has happened because, as Ivan Illich in his path-breaking book Deschooling Society has suggested, the formal educational institutions have taken on new functions of role selection and indoctrination. They mould us into an uncritical acceptance of mainstream values and practices. At no point is there any attempt to trigger an attempt to test the validity of radical alternatives to the dominant norms of society. These norms, as we see in the realistic fictional depictions of writers like Upamanyu Chatterjee, are the norms of seeking pleasures of individuality at the cost of collectivities. The antihero, Jamun of The Last Burden is an illustration of this norm.

One of the most visible common threads that bind all the three novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee is that all his protagonists have been alienated from their native cultural roots. And in this alienation and deculturation, the English education which they have received
plays the most significant role. In The Last Burden, it is the constant complaint of Shayamanand, the father of the protagonist, Jamun, that Urmila (Jamun’s mother) has not seen to it that their sons were brought up well according to the traditional norms. His scorn on this point blazes forth thus.

You’ve goofed everything. You have not fostered your children rightly. They have discounted their traditions, culture, parents—because of you. As a mother, as a mortal, you are a disaster (74-75).

Shayamanand further thinks about their sons, Burfi and Jamun,

They seem brand new and alien, in jeans and T-shirts of dubious shades, and articulate a puzzling species of English, whereas Urmila and he had ripened in an earlier, illusorily genial world..., wherein, mawkish that he is, he reckons that the bonds of family had been sturdier, and parents more revered (108).

The novel The Last Burden is, on the surface, simply a story of family bitterness and the resultant disintegration. But the artistic finesse of the novelist lies in the fact that he transforms this ordinariness into a fascinating graph of what Harry Haseltine calls the ‘structure of emotions’ (Haseltine 147). In this ‘structure’ the strand of deculturation brought about by the so-called modern and progressive education of the concerned persons
is very interestingly visible. This strand helps the novelist in probing the complex problems of the complex age of our contemporary Indian society.

In The Last Burden, as it is a tale of unstoppable rancour and bitterness in one family, the decultured antiheroes form inherent parts of the vicious and tragic family drama. The burden of blood ties becomes all the more hideous in the acrimonious relationship between the parents and the two sons, and the elder son’s anglicised wife. Displaced from Calcutta, their cultural home, the sons Burfi and Jamun, have grown up into Westernised, rootless individuals, each in his own way, unable to form lasting relationships. Neither are they able to define themselves in terms of their culture or religion. The attitude of Burfi, the elder son, is simply too callous. He is utterly devoid of any filial sense of responsibility to his parents. His first allegiance is to his wife. Through the conjugal characters of Burfi and Joyce, the novelist has tried to capture the rising breed of those Indians whose lives are marked by a centrifugal energy, taking them away from the cohesive warmth of the traditional joint family. Nuclearisation of family is the net result of this centrifugal movement. Being a realist who is capable of catching the dominating pulse of his time, he is firm in his opinion that the poison of deculturation which produces Agastya Sen and Jamun is not to stop its effect in the near future. Rather, the pace of the process of being uprooted will advance, taking into the clutch of its march more and newer sections of Indian human mass. When Chatterjee asserts about devoting his creative career to exploring the worlds of English, August and The Last Burden, he means that the Indian antihero like, Agastya Sen and Jamun
will continue to occupy his attention as a novelist. His acute sense of realism tells him, and quite rightly, that coming years for Indian urban youth will be a time which will belch Western influences out of its cultural womb. As we embrace the market morality, the same breed that rules the roost in western countries is beginning to flex its muscles here also. Suited and booted financial planners, consultants, management experts, and computer specialists, who have learnt the tools of their trade from the West, partake of the 'hotel lobby culture' described by Cornel West so beautifully (Lal 27). It is at their business seminars and lunches that they hatch those schemes designed to render the future of India like the present of the West. As we see in the novel, The Last Burden, the chief thrust of Chatterjee's concept of antihero lies in the tragic attenuation of the sustaining power of nativity. The life of his westernised antihero is to live someone else's life, to dream someone else's dream, to inhabit someone else's skin, and to become someone else's merchandise. The severity of the problem of deculturation of Indian metropolitan youth has been captured by a postcolonial commentator, Ziauddin Sardar in one of his perceptive analyses of future in the non-west:

'The future has been colonized. It is already an occupied territory whose liberation is the most pressing challenge for the peoples of the non-west if they are to inherit a future made in their own likeness....' (Sardar 16). The Last Burden of Upamanyu Chatterjee is concerned with the prognostications of that colonisation, as we find disconcertingly apparent in the Indian metropolitan life and society. As illustrated in the personality of the antiheroes of this novel, the life dominated by a centripetal desire towards the West is marked by a tragic loss of connections with the root. Here being connected through technology is a substitute
for being a real community. The denizens of the antiheroic decultured world may look like being connected on the surface, but the question hangs heavily—do they have something to say to one another? While diagnosing the failures of the Englishman in the colonies, E. M. Forster came upon the idea of being connected; but his idea of connectedness was an attempt to be able to have a meaningful level of communication between the West and the East. But our modern form of connectivity through technology is only a travesty of the feeling of community that Foster sought. Its reason is the loss of plurality owing to the acceptance of the Western paradigm of development and civilization as the dominant category of the conduct of life and society. It has led to a dull homogenisation of culture, which, in turn, has made our life devoid of confidence in our own mode of thinking and perception. Everyone knows that antiheroes lead a life marked by loss of confidence in his own way of mind.

The flatly antiheroic personality of Jamun’s elder brother Burfi, in The Last Burden is an exaggerated version of the excessive attraction toward the things and styles known for their western brand. A conscious and flagrant disregard for the traditional Indian values like caring for the aged elders of the family, sacrificing one’s desire for a materially prosperous life for the richness of emotional experience got from service of community are traits of Burfi. The world he wants to remain sidled into comfortably is the world of his Jesuit school cronies who have mothers puffing long cigarettes and fathers who tip at clubs. It is a world inhabited by the rootless, far removed from any spiritual impulsion. Burfi’s subservience to his circumstances is unthinking and total whether it be to his schooling and
its accompanying borrowed package of culture or to the pseudo-sophistication of his wife, Joyce, who tells him that all that was unanglicised and natural about his behaviour bespoke his lower middle class origins. All that he is concerned with is getting the best of what the family can give with the least trouble and spending on his part. His concerns are limited; his desire to chart out an identity of his own stops at the frontier dictated by his rootless wife and cronies. Therefore, his equation with himself is unproblematic. That is why, in the novel, Burfi appears too flat to qualify for the load of being a protagonist, howsoever antiheroic.

Jamun's situation is different, because his equation with himself, vis-a-vis his deculturation is not unproblematic. It is for this very reason that the novelist deploys his memories to convey and chart out the sufferings of an uprooted but sensitive urban individual caught in the trip of a random family relationship. It is through Jamun that we come across the uneasy coexistence of inherited native values and adopted aspirations, the tension between the movement away from the roots and that towards them. He is the central character in the novel, a young man, unmarried and staying away from his family comprising of his parents, his elder brother, his Christian sister-in-law, his nephews and an old aya. He lives in an urban space that is physically clean and orderly but socially and spiritually dead. His story is one that begins with the modernist desire for the city, a desire to live openly with the split and unreconciled character of his life, and to draw energy from his preferred inner drivings towards independent but alienated existence, away from the space called home. In
it, Jamun represents the emergence of a new class of city-oriented aspiring Indians, powerful and assertive, whose course of life is invariably accompanied by a new cultural style, one which the traditional mind-set finds vulgar, if not despicable. On the positive side, this class believes that, as the sociologist Dispankar Gupta say, 'Modernity is an attitude which represents universalistic norms, where the dignity of an individual as citizen is inviolable and where one's achievement counts far more than family background or connections' (Gupta 12). On the negative side, this class, as its representative in the novel The Last Burden, Jamun, shows by his life process, finds itself unable to turn its aspirations into heroic ones and lives an anti-heroic life. It becomes self-centred and defiant of time-honoured values regarding family and society. This failure, in the case of Jamun, is highlighted by his lack of filial piety and responsibility towards his parents. Disregard for the values leads to anomie and rootlessness. Deculturation takes the form of, as it were, an alchemical dream of changing one's personality, remaking, remodelling, elevating, and polishing one's very self. Additionally, the pursuit of personally defined happiness becomes the sole mantra of life, and hedonism guides the actions of daily living. In the context of the novel The Last Burden, the unhinging of the traditional moorings under the impact of deculturation is reflected brutally in the effacement of the importance traditionally attached with the institution of family. The decultured antihero like Jamun tries to wean himself away from the truth that families have always held a place of pride in Indian society, their importance being handed down from one generation to another. This weaning away means, in practically relational terms, the phenomenon which is called conflict of generations, a conflict and maladjustment
between parents and their offspring. This conflict gets nourishment from the lack of love and respect for one another.

In this novel the incongruity between the two generations—parents and son—is hideous. As can be naturally expected from the heartless elder brother, Burfi, his actions patently reveal the hideousness of the generational conflict. One authorial comment is sufficient to delineate the ridiculous doldrum in which Burfi finds himself in,

Burfi routinely has to vindicate his parents and his wife, one to the other; his parents and his wife seldom communicate straightforwardly. (101)

This antiheroic flitting between parents and wife leads to Burfi not being loved by his adored wife. But the irony is that he thinks that the responsibility for his loveless conjugal life lies with his parents. He hellishly says that staying with them is ‘screwing my marriage up’ (116). The beastly acme of deculturation generated generational gap and conflict is reached when Burfi, while participating quite perfunctorily in the post-death rituals of his mother, cannot restrain himself from saying, ‘How the fuck am I going to exercise with this outfit (the traditional handloom dhoti and vest) on...’ (243). It must be noted that this remark is not the expression of an enlightened disregard for superstitions. Indeed, Burfi’s mind is far away from things like intellectual questioning of superstitions. He is simply a rank decultured character who lies shorn of any regard or respect for his mother, both in her life
and after her death.

Ambivalence Toward Roots

As far as Jamun, the antiheroic protagonist of this novel is concerned, his generational conflict is not so unproblematic. It is true that both the brothers wait eagerly for the death of one of the parents, i.e., the mother, Urmila, in a destructive atmosphere of squabbling, bickering and accusations, Jamun’s attitude is much more cruel to his father than to his mother. Further, the home which he has left pulls him; and this is the cause of his suffering. The pull of the family which he cannot avert takes him apart from his elder brother as an antihero. Jamun lives in a boomtown waste where he tries hard to reproduce the home atmosphere by buying the same brand of refrigerator and geyser as at home. Ever since he hears of his mother’s illness he is closeted in his room reading Robert Payne’s biography of Mahatma Gandhi and listening to the rainfall outside. The dismal weather outside reflects the bleakness of his own predicament. He remembers with a pang in his heart the lurid prognostications made by all in the family about the mother’s illness, and laments the loss of four days that he awaits for his departure. His long, long wait is agonising. He senses that his mother is crying out to him and recalls the bondage that all flesh creates. He realises that...

...in extremity one’s duty must hurl one first towards one’s blood. To hold true to one’s blood is more noble than to combat General Smuts in a remote country. Hearken unto thy
father that begat thee and despise not thy mother when she is old. So his friend and lover Kasturi had cited. That night she had also given a fleck of herself away. “In my pregnancy I am safe, I feel defended, only here, at home with my mother” (8).

Jamun the antihero of the novel The Last Burden is a victim of the trauma of dispossession and migration. His trauma is intensified by the fact that his movement to the city with its promise of unlimited prosperity is sharply followed by a failure to create a brave new world. This failure lies at the heart of the antihero’s insularity, and becomes an agent pushing him to the home that he has left behind. Marshall Berman, in his perceptive study, All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity, identifies this obsession with the home, family and neighbourhood as a moment in modernity, as a characteristic feature of modernism of the 1970s which had come about when ‘the gigantic motors of economic growth and expansion stalled and the traffic came close to a stop; modern societies abruptly lost their power to blow away their past’ (Berman 332). This assessment of Berman is grounded in the European experience of modernity, but it has a resonance in the modern Indian condition. It must be remembered that Upamanyu Chatterjee’s The Last Burden came out in 1993. It tells the story of what happens to familial ties in the fast-changing socio-economic scenario created by the cataclysmic hurrying of India into modernity. The additional significant fact is that its setting is the middle class Indian family. And it makes the tale all the more poignant, because peeping out of all the rancour and bitterness in the family is the suffering of a young man who has no control over the circumstances. His lack of control
flows from his lack of the qualities traditionally associated with a heroic mind, like nobility of purpose sense of higher responsibilities and self-sacrifice. Though the sublimity of filial warmth flickers in one small corner of Jamun’s heart, he is unable to gather himself and shun the alienating attitude which hinders him from devoting himself to his parents and roots.

Oedipal Orientation of The Antihero

It is written all over the surface of the novel The Last Burden that Jamun, in his attitude, is much more cruel to his father than to his mother. Through a careful reading one discerns here a vein of Oedipal relationship, a la Paul Morel and his mother in D.H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers, between Jamun and his mother. The bickerings between father and son get worse and worse, with trading charges and countercharges, and the novelist evokes the sense of exhaustion on Jamun’s part through a nauseating image:

He is queasy, as though a vigorous talon has gashed through his muzzle down to his belly and is foraging his guts. (51)

Through cutting edges of words Jamun tears his father into pieces ‘too old, jadedness has coated his soul... how he had looked for alleviation from his father who so bitterly needed alleviation himself’ (53), ‘mentally worn, futile, too late her (his mother’s) protector,...’ (59).
As we have noted, the character of Jamun is not as flat as that of Burfi, the elder brother. Despite all the confrontation with his father he sees with pain, sometimes, the sight of the father unsuccessfully trying to woo the attention of his elder son’s sons, i.e., his own grandchildren. His abortive efforts distress him, because, despite all the emotional estrangement, Shayamanand touches him somewhere as his father. And it makes the antiheroic personality of Jamun interestingly enriched. But the especiality of his emotional bonding to his mother is unmistakable, and which can be described, in the words of the critic Harry Haseltine, as ‘the most palpably important relationship’ (Haseltine 147) in the novel. At least at this plane, _The Last Burden_ parallels Lawrence’s _Sons and Lovers_ and also Hal Porter’s (an Australian novelist and short story writer) _The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony_. The common denominator among Chatterjee, Lawrence and Porter is the importance of relationship recorded between son and mother. Another parallel which intensifies ‘the important relationship’ is the autobiographical element in these novels. _The Watcher_ records Porter’s account of his mother’s death and funeral which can be compared with Paul Morel’s tearing grief which is the climax of _Sons and Lovers_. Coincidentally, Chatterjee’s mother died during writing of _The Last Burden_. He seems to find an echo of his grief in Jamun’s predicament.

Chatterjee stresses the Oedipal relationship between the protagonist and his mother, and suggests that he tugs at his bondage and thinks ‘that at her death he probably...tastes deliverance’ (111). Jamun’s emotional ‘bondage’ to his mother makes it impossible for
him to enter into a responsible and independent life of relationships of his own. He doesn’t marry, for in marriage he senses a certain betrayal of his parents. His relationships with women are all perfunctory, for he is incapable of relating to anyone in a manner that would take him beyond himself. As a friend extending warmth and understanding he has Kasturi who is married to another man. She is the friend and lover, bears his child, is always available whenever he needs her. Yet the fact that he did not have to cohabit with her released him from any kind of responsibility to her. Jamun is bereft of any kind of obligation to her. This unattached relationship with Kasturi does not, quite naturally considering his antiheroic amorality regarding sexual norms, set any inhibitions on him regarding tumbling with his maidservant Kasibai and her asinine son. This amorality links Jamun to Chatterjee’s another antihero, Agastya Sen, of his debut novel English, August: An Indian Story. The arrangement with Kasibai is perfect as it makes no demands on him emotionally. His urbanity at times makes him disgusted by the boorishness of Kasibai and her son; and he tries haphazardly to educate them for his own peace of mind. But he does not make any conspicuous progress principally because he isn’t interested in them as fellow creatures. The sense of guilt, however, pursues him constantly. He wrestles with failure to relate with anyone meaningfully. He rationalises in his antiheroic way:

...I’m not yoked to them by blood, or the nurture, or the years. In any case, all these shackles can splinter; what endures is only a blind and unreasoning notion of duty. If we acquitted ourselves with others as they merited, then we wouldn’t have abandoned our aya in a charitable
hospital with just her TB and diabetes for company. She wasn’t us, so we exonerated ourselves.

(287)

Jamun struggles hard to free himself from the burden that relationships had become to him. His antiheroic condition is such that he could do this only by relating himself to Kasturi and Kasibai in the most perfunctory manner possible. Since he reckons that relationships become bondage only through ‘blood, nurture and time’, he is careful to steer clear of any such situation in the human environment that he builds for himself. He deliberately alienates himself from anything that would bind him emotionally, be it a home or a wife or even a sense of duty to his servant. His mother’s death is an apparent release, yet it reinforces in him the inescapable tangle life places one in. The thought that he would have to look after his father is not pleasant to him, but he cannot break himself free from his sense of filial duty as his elder brother manages an escape from the task of caring for the old man. The rustic, amoral yet dependable Kasibai makes light of his difficulty when she declares that she would take over the care of his father for she knew that nursing old people was a human duty. In this gesture of Kasibai is contained the message of tradition where the old people are lovingly venerated. Jamun skilfully appropriates it to his immediate advantage, thereby expertly, but antiheroically, managing the problems arising out of his painful yet persistent awareness and inescapable sense of love that is very much part of him. He does so by commodifying its various aspects and carefully distributing them among the women he is associated with. His antiheroic success lies in making all human relationships manageable.
As a close reading of *The Last Burden* suggests, Jamun does not find fulfilment in relationships owing to his inability to relate with anyone meaningfully. And it appears that his way of relating with his mother inhibits his fulfilment. But it must be noted that whereas in Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* the mother-son relationship is that of a possessive lover and always demanding on each other, in *The Last Burden* the mother is not possessive and the son, Jamun, does not suffer from neurosis as is the case with Paul Morel. Rather, he, after his mother’s demise senses her ‘everywhere in a comfortable way’ (252). He reflects in, as it were, a sudden strain of maturity:

All parents die, so every human being must experience the anguish or the discomfiture of their passing, of the snicking of a cord. No obviously not every. Not those without memory. One’s reaction to such a death was controlled by one’s maturity and one’s closeness to one’s parents (253).

Jamun is unlike Paul Morel in the famous closing scene of Lawrence’s book: “Mother!” he whispered—“mother!” she was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him... (Lawrence 464).

Thus, the difference between the Oedipal complex of Paul Morel and that of Jamun is that the former’s is neurotic and corporeal, while the latter’s is rooted basically in his sympathy
for the mother who is battered emotionally by her husband. It can be said with justification that Jamun’s complex has no Freudian ring. Instead, it fits into Karen Horney’s view concerning this complex, that it is caused by ‘an anxiety on the part of a child to compensate for hostile tendencies in a frustrating home situation’ (Brown 138). It does not need to be repeated that ‘a frustrating home situation’ is the ruling miasma of the novel The Last Burden. Further, the Oedipal orientation of the emotional make-up of Jamun has an unmistakably Indian imprint. As the famous psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakkar, while examining the Indian men’s emotional world, says in his book, The Inner World:

Whatever the reality may be, the original perfect image of the mother remains untainted by reality, which is a part of the iconography of (the) Hindu inner world...The child’s differentiation of himself from his mother is structurally weak and comes chronologically much later than (in) the West and the mental processes characteristic of the symbiosis of infancy continues to play a relatively greater role in the personality of the adult male. (Mulchandani 50-54)

So it can be said that Jamun, the antiheroic protagonist of The Last Burden is frustrated in his attempts to relate with any woman in a fulfilling way, and its reason is his inability to break free from his emotional bondage to his mother. But this bondage is not the replica of the bondage of the much talked about Paul Morel. He is an authentically Indian antihero who suffers tragically owing to the non-fulfilment of his emotional needs as a normally
mature male adult. His character is an illustration of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s concept of the Indian antihero, whose central idea is the Indian urban educated personality gone astray into the ditch of suffering and emotional chaos.

Part of a Pessimistic Vision

Chatterjee is too pessimistic a writer to attribute the pervasive, taken for granted ugliness within familial interactions to any specific, removeable causes. His is a world where dawn breaks with ‘the tint of ashes’ (130). What turns this tale of ordinary family affairs into an admirable piece of literature is the bleakness of its vision. This bleakness is not so much some abstract existential gloom as disgust at a society that is aggressive in its self-destructiveness. Jamun’s family, which is the central subject of the novel, is not protected from, but shown to be constituted by, the terrible tension of the society of which it is a part. In it the exploitation and meanness of the world outside become entangled with the demands and resentments of domestic life to produce relationships that rot but never break. Amid all the emotional attrition and exhaustion Jamun, the antiheroic central character of the novel, does not seem to grow toward a constructive direction or dignified transcendence of his woes. Although he, like the hero of the classical bildungsroman, grows from boyhood to maturity, in fact this process of maturation turns out to be illusory. He never really goes
through the process of real growth. Indeed, the novelist did not intend him to grow. In an interview Chatterjee said, 'My new novel, The Last Burden, is concerned not with growing up but with family ties' (Mattoo 29).

In the above-quoted interview the novelist clarifies explicitly what is in fitness of his concept of antihero—the protagonist who is not capable of being noble despite hating and understanding meanness. It happened with Agastya Sen; it happens with Jamun. In it lies the crux of Chatterjee's social realism which has two dominant features rooted in the recognisably contemporary Indian milieu. First, there is the unavailability to his antiheroes of options in life that earlier generations had found viable; and secondly, reflection of larger issues in what seems to be an intensely private struggle. The urban consciousness, as it has manifested itself in his novel, is a pointer to its rootedness in the contemporary Indian reality whose complexities and the involved pressures resist simplistic stances and facile value judgements. This resistance makes Chatterjee's vision pessimistic. In The Last Burden this pessimistic vision is basically enacted in the field of human relationships. Ideally speaking, relationship is a process of self-revelation in which one discovers the hidden causes of sorrow. But the relationship which we find here is in reality a process of isolation because the so-called bonds are tools of exploitation for egoistic gratification. This situation, when tuned with lack of nobility, collapse of traditional values, and absence of spiritual impulse, makes inner growth in the personality of the antihero impossible. Therefore, the maturity that he arrives at is tired and inane, devoid of any flash of
enlightenment at the inner emotional level. Jamun reflects antiheroically:

...The world is indeed composed of these cyclical well-worn tracks that every generation shambles about on, age upon age, that nothing that falls to one's lot is new, that maturing and growing old really signifies encountering in the particular, what has already occurred in numberless times in the universal. (236-64)

What makes this apparent maturity all the more empty of any real significance is its inherent sense of dramatic irony. Jamun thinks that he has grown but the reader knows that growth and maturity are not his cup of tea. It is a predicament which can be attributed to his being a product of a culture which views education as the economization of learning, which transforms learning into the consumption of a commodity called knowledge. Despite being educated in the commonly accepted conventional sense of the term, he tragically lacks the vital competence to live with meaning and grow in maturity. He has lost his capacity to maintain a creative relationship with his world symbolised and constituted by his family and fellow human beings. He has lived an ersatz existence. He has been unable to realize that to know and be mature is a personal experience, and the only way to know, to widen the competence to mature is to learn from the world, not about the world. He is lonely, narcissistic and decoupled from community ties. For him consumption of material goods related with good stereotyped life is the ultimate value, a guarantor of social belonging and status. He compensates for an empty social life by consuming. This habit of consumption
he has received from his educational and cultural upbringing. A mature insight into the vital issues of life and relationships is beyond his capability.
Works Cited

4. Chatterjee, Upamanyu. The Last Burden. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993. (All the references to the text are from this edition; the member in bracket is the page number).


