



Quotidian Life of Indian Women: A Brief Study of Selected Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee

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Abstract— Women's lives form an integral part of the cultural ethos of a nation. The deification of femininity and motherhood in the form of the Goddess and the omnipotent Mother is inherent to the Indian cultural and religious milieu. In addition to this, during the nation formation period, the projection of the nation as a mother who sustains and succours her children was inevitable to arouse the emotions of the populace. This prominent positioning of the woman gives impetus to study the Indian women's ground realities to understand her status and position in the national milieu. It is a belief that modern Indian women enjoy social and economic freedom and have equal status with their men. However, the yoking of women with a rigid code of conduct in the outer (world) and inner (home) domains is noticeable on examining their daily lives. One way of studying women's quotidian life in a nation is through a study of its portrayal in various media. Literature is one such media through which one gains knowledge of a nation. The novel is a genre that grew simultaneously with the idea of nationhood and was instrumental in the objectified portrayal of diversity within national borders. Thus, the novel is a suitable location for analysing and comprehending the nation's cultural milieu. Therefore, this paper attempts to understand the quotidian life of Indian middle-class women by mapping the women's quotidian lives as portrayed in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels to understand women's position in the Indian social matrix.

Keywords— domain, nation, quotidian, status, women.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, Indian women occupied crucial and essential positions in society and the family. However, there was a gradual change or decline in the woman's position, and the attribution of responsibility for this decline was on the Mughal invasion and their subsequent rule. The later period of colonisation brought in further changes in the status of Indian women when the coloniser began the reformation of the Indian society according to their mission of 'civilisation'. The coloniser's reformation period was concurrent with the nationalist struggle for an independent nation. The nationalist endeavour was to form a nation that would stand firm against the coloniser's policies and reformations.

The Indian national space, as constituted through the efforts of the prominent nationalists, contained two distinct spaces – the outer space and the inner space. Partha Chatterjee's (1997) analysis of the two domains, the inner and outer, where the inner world is the spiritual domain, and the outer is the material domain, showcases

the gender positions, especially the woman's position, in the Indian nation. During India's consolidation process as a nation, the inner domain became the essential domain as this domain housed the spiritual or the true self (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 120). One had to adjust and adapt to the outer material world as an inevitable aspect of daily life, but one had to return to the inner domain for necessary succour and re-establish the self. Therefore, preserving the inner domain, which houses the traditional cultural identity, from the outer domain's incursion became essential. In quotidian life, the inner domain translates into the home where the family resides. The family is the cultural repository, and it is through the systems and practices of the family that the culture is perpetuated and transmitted. Therefore, during nationalisation, the inner domain —the personal domain where one is genuinely present— had to be preserved and protected from incursion.

The outer world is the world of men where the materialistic, profane, scientific, and practical

considerations are main interests and pursuits. The inner world of emotions, purity, spirituality, and national culture is the women's domain. Partha Chatterjee's (1997) postulation that, in daily life, the two domains separate into the world and the home also notes that gendered identification of social roles "correspond with the separation of the social spaces into *ghar* [home] and *bāhir* [world]" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 120). Chatterjee also notes that "as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its identity" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 120). When examined from this viewpoint, the gender roles remain unaltered. However, when we consider the reformation activities during the nation's formative years, women's position within the inner domain becomes nuanced and complicated.

India's history as a colonised nation irrevocably altered the traditional culture in the outer world. For the Indian native, the outer world became a location of acceptance, and the sufferance of the coloniser established humiliation, oppression, and norms. The nationalist's comprehension that the battle for independence would have to take place in the outer world led to the realisation that the inner world (*ghar*) had to be protected and preserved. Simultaneously, they also realised that they "must learn the modern sciences and arts of the material world from the West in order to match their strengths and ultimately overthrow the coloniser" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 121). However, when changes occurred in the outer domain, it was challenging to keep the inner world unchanged since men moved equally in both domains. Therefore, to preserve the sanctity of the inner world, the women of the family became the caretakers of the national culture, one of the constituent elements of the inner domain. Exposure of the women to the outer world was inevitable with reformation. This exposure posed the danger of uncontrolled alteration of the women and their role in the family. Therefore, it was crucial to control women's alteration and keep it dissimilar to the men's alteration to maintain her position as the caretaker of the nation's culture. The emergent "new" woman would have to be under altered patriarchy to maintain some aspects of traditional patriarchy while subjecting the woman to reform, reconstruction and fortification against the coloniser specified reformation. Thus, women's education, refinement, and inculcation of superior moral sense and behavioural patterns took place under the nationalist agenda. In *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1997), Partha Chatterjee's discussion of the "new" woman notes that "the "new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common"

woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, [and] subjected to brutal physical oppression by males" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 127). Chatterjee also notes that attaining a superior national culture through her efforts became the "mark of woman's newly acquired freedom" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 127). Thus, there was a clear distinction of the new patriarchal norms from most people's socio-cultural environment.

The alterations that came into force during the nation-building years of the pre-independence period changed the emergent middle-class women. These changes placed the woman in a complicated role where she had to be both traditional and modern. The independence struggle saw the "new" woman selectively participating in the outer world while simultaneously maintaining the home's traditionality.

II. SCOPE OF STUDY

Middle-class women in India have internalised and normalised the new patriarchy set during the nationalist period of nation formation. Modern Indian women enjoy social and economic freedom and have equal status with their men. However, the yoking of women with a rigid code of conduct in the outer (world) and inner (home) domains is noticeable on examining their daily lives. Kinship networks within the Indian household become a crucial element in determining men's power in the home and the world while simultaneously determining women's status both within the home and the outer world.

Analysis and comprehension of the daily life of women is an essential step in understanding the nation. According to multiple analyses of the nation, historical territories, ethnicity, shared memories, myths and cultural practices constitute a nation. Though bound by a geopolitical boundary, a homogenous community of people who exhibit shared values, religion, and language constitutes a nation. Benedict Anderson's postulation of the nation considers this homogenous community and terms it an "imagined community". One of the elements of understanding the nation is studying and comprehending the quotidian life of the "imagined community". Analysing the entire Indian "imagined community" is beyond the scope of this paper. Women's lives form an integral part of the cultural ethos of a nation. The deification of femininity and motherhood in the form of the Goddess and the omnipotent Mother is inherent to the Indian cultural and religious milieu. In addition to this, during the nation formation period, the projection of the nation as a mother who sustains and succours her children was inevitable to arouse the emotions of the populace. This prominent positioning of the woman gives impetus to study the

Indian women's ground realities to understand her status and position in the national milieu.

One way of studying the cultural ethos of a nation is through a study of its portrayal in various media. Literature is one such media through which one gains knowledge of the "imagined community". The novel is a genre that grew simultaneously with the idea of nationhood and was instrumental in the objectified portrayal of diversity within national borders. The novel's structure mimics the nation's structure with its distinctly bordered jumble of styles and languages (Brennan, 1989, p. 8). The novel is also the "logical literary vehicle of a culture" (Watts, 1957, p. 13). The reading public finds an echo of their society in the fictional community, thereby ensuring a comparable social environment. Thus, the novel is a suitable location for the analysis and comprehension of the nation's cultural milieu. Therefore, this paper attempts to understand the quotidian life of women belonging to the Indian "imagined community" by analysing the "new" women's quotidian lives as portrayed in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels.

III. DISCUSSION

Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels focus primarily on the daily life of the male members of the 'imagined community'. This aspect itself is a portrayal of the marginalisation of women within the community. A study of the novels presents a clear pattern that articulates women's position in the community and their daily life. Examining the women's quotidian life in Chatterjee's novels enables comprehending the actual status of both the "new" and "common" women. However, this study shall limit itself to examining the quotidian life of the "new" woman and her position in both the outer and inner domains to understand the "new" women's position in the nation.

The first novel, *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988), presents to us a common way of looking at women in the community, through the eyes of the male, i.e., Agastya, who has just finished his academic years and finds himself in Madna as a trainee in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Through his memories and epistolary interactions with his father, Governor Madhusudan Sen, we note that his father is a constant advisor and mentor in his life. The other members of the IAS admire Agastya for his parentage since his father is a Governor. However, Agastya's mother is a hazy memory, and he knows nothing about her or her family except that they are Goan Catholics. Agastya, losing his mother at the young age of three, has no memory of her, and we realise, through Agastya's reminiscences of his daily life with his father, uncle and aunts, that his mother was not kept alive in their memories or conversations. If at all she was

mentioned, it was to deride her for her late motherhood. Whenever Agastya encounters a query about his mother, he answers in deliberate and imaginative falsehoods that deprive his mother of any identity. Significantly, there is no mention of her name throughout the novel, which also leaves her without personal identity. She is remembered only as Gov. Madhusudan Sen's late wife, a Goan Catholic, and Agastya's mother.

The woman as a wife has no identity of her own. There is an obliteration of the woman's name, and her identification is only as someone's wife. Most of the women Agastya interacts with at Madna are introduced to him through their subordinate status as a wife, unlike men's introduction where there is an explicit mention of their names. We see this aspect across all classes of the society at Madna. The Rest House caretaker Vasant's wife remains nameless throughout the novel, and whenever she appears in the narrative, she remains "Vasant's wife" (*English, August*, 1998, p. 99-100). Women are usually rendered invisible in quotidian interactions. There is an emphasis on the woman's invisibility when Agastya meets the RDC, Mr Joshi, and his wife in the marketplace, where she is neither introduced nor made a part of the conversation between Joshi and Agastya's group of men. She stands aside when the men spend some time conversing inane (*English, August*, 1998, p. 79).

The Last Burden (1993) illustrates the quotidian life of most middle-class women. Urmila is a wife, a mother of two sons, a mother-in-law, and the grandmother of two grandsons. Urmila's introduction to the reader occurs through her older son Burfi's letter to his brother, Jamun, apprising him of Urmila's illness. A cogent point noticeable in this letter is the father's financial concern, where he is reluctant to pay his wife's bills and indicates that the bill should be divided equally among the five family members, including Urmila. Significantly, the omniscient narrator informs that Urmila "had to combat her hypertension, her piles, corns, arthritis, heart, marriage, her mind" (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 4). The revelation of Urmila's life in her marital home eventuates through Jamun's memories. Urmila dines alone after the other members of the family finish their meal. The male members of the household gorge the meat pieces in the gravy, and when Urmila sits to eat, she gets only the gravy and the potatoes even when there had been enough meat in the dish for everyone. She eats the leftovers uncomplainingly.

Urmila arises every day before sunrise, "at four-thirty every morning" (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 29), including holidays and Sundays without variations, makes tea for herself, all the while nervous and scared of visiting the lavatory due to her piles, a painful affliction. Since she

needs a considerable amount of time in the lavatory, she has to awaken before dawn to avoid her husband's time of ablutions and leaves the lavatory before he wakes up to make his tea. She then battles with her sons to awaken them and send them off in time for school, prepare breakfast and lunch boxes for everyone, make the beds, instruct and hand over the money for essentials to the house help while simultaneously brewing innumerable cups of tea for her husband, rush off to bathe and have her breakfast, both which she says she does "virtually at the same time" (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 31). Meanwhile, her husband, who is still in bed, has had several cups of tea, read the newspaper and only then leisurely goes off to get ready for his departure to the workplace. Urmila has to be waiting at the garage door before he arrives to manage his impatience and then wait for him to back the car out of the garage, which he does slowly, wasting about ten minutes which delays her arrival at the office. She has to wait to close the garage doors while her "tummy [is] tight with disquiet, wrath and worthlessness" (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 31). When she returns home in the evening, Urmila longs for some rest and respite, which are perpetually out of her reach. She has to feed the family some evening snacks with tea, especially the father, "else the ulcer in his belly detonates through his jaws" (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 31), manage the laundering of the clothes, and think about the dinner menu and cook it ignoring her headache and tiredness, and finally prepare the house for bedtime. Her extreme exhaustion makes her unable to sleep when she is finally in bed.

Urmila's quotidian life is one of constant unappreciated toil with no occasion for joy. Whenever she complains of ill health, her husband declares her a valetudinarian and derides her for disturbing him. On such an occasion, a sick Urmila lying on her bed after dinner while the other members of the family gather in the living room for some revelry, cannot get out of bed to adjust the fan's speed and calls for Jamun to help her. Jamun, involved in a spirited conversation with his brother, takes his time to come in to help her. Urmila's repeated calls disturb her husband, who is in bed reading in another room, and he yells at her to stop bawling and swamping his reading (*The Last Burden*, 1993, p. 46).

The Indian traditional cultural setup—which the women of the family had to maintain and perpetuate under the "new patriarchy" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 127)—dictated that it is the responsibility of the family's women to manage the activities of the household. Simultaneously, she had the freedom to gain employment in the outer domain as the "new woman" and support her husband's material pursuits. In contrast, the male family members managed the affairs in the outer domain (world) for

material gains. Since the household men are predominantly in the outer materialistic domain, it is the responsibility of the male head of the family (husband and father) to manage the family's monetary resources. In *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1971), Henri Lefebvre analyses the quotidian life of a middle-class family where he notes that the husband/father doles out an allowance to the women of his family to maintain the household and saves the rest in banks or investments with minimum risk and maximum gain. Lefebvre also posits that a "good father founded the family fortune or increased it" (Lefebvre, 1971, p. 34). Urmila's husband underscores Lefebvre's postulations as he diligently saves the family's income in saving schemes. However, he does not give any household allowance to Urmila. Urmila, a subject of the "new patriarchy" (Chatterjee, 1997, p. 127), theoretically enjoys equal status to her husband and toils under the expectations of being a supportive companion to her husband in both the domains. However, according to the cultural tenets, the household duties' management is the wife's responsibility, which according to Urmila's husband, she has shirked since she has employed a woman to help her in her household chores. Since she must manage the household chores, Urmila's husband does not give her any money to pay the woman she has employed. Therefore, Urmila routinely borrows money from her colleagues and those at lower strata in the office's social matrix. Owing to her debt, she is constantly embarrassed at the office and suffers from continuous insult from most people at the workplace and constant barbs from her husband at home. Her near-death experience has not wrought any alteration in her husband's behaviour towards her. He refuses to bear her medical costs alone and insists that the other household members, including Urmila, share equally in bearing the expenditure.

Urmila's daughter-in-law, Joyce, suffers neglect and scorn from the other household members, especially her father-in-law. Joyce and her husband, Burfi, have their dwelling on the upper floor of the family house. Coupled with the parents-in-law's neglect and exclusion, Joyce has to suffer domestic violence from her husband, who routinely slaps and punches her. Joyce, who is in the workforce in the outer domain, also manages the expected household chores. The only family member who treats her with respect and amicability is her husband's younger brother Jamun. Significantly, in *Way to Go*, Joyce leaves with her two sons, initiating a separation from her husband, and lives with her female friend. Interestingly, the narrative in *Way to Go* hints at a lesbian relationship for Joyce, but the inclusion of lesbianism is inadequate and prefers to showcase the relationship between the two women in ambivalent terms of friendship between the two

women while fleetingly referring to their cohabitation and relationship.

Chatterjee's novels contain detailed descriptions of the men and their work in the outer domain. However, the description of the women's work in the outer domain remains unclear and obscure. In *Way to Go*, Kasturi, Agastya's wife, is a popular and successful television soap opera producer. Her production, *Cheers Zindagi*, is a common topic of conversation during interactions across the country. However, the novel only focuses on her as a mother or as Jamun's ex-lover turned friend. The narrative shows her managing her daughter's birthday parties or attending school meetings and functions. There is no description of her working in a professional capacity except to reveal that she uses her life and Jamun's experiences as topics in her soap opera. Her television drama is autobiographical, underscoring the notion that the only voice a woman has is limited to speaking about her daily life, as in a memoir.

Examining the life of women who are limited to the inner world with either no interaction or with limited interactions with the outer world, we notice that they usually remain either without freedom or have to take recourse in subterfuge and subversion to consolidate their position within the household. In *Fairy Tales at Fifty*, Nirip's mother, Manasa, is the wife of a powerful gangster turned politician. Nirip's mother has to contend with a parade of her husband's mistresses. To remain in his household, she has to produce a male heir, which she has been unable to do. She takes recourse to subterfuge to produce the heir. When her sister, Shivani, becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she appropriates one of the twin sons. In an elaborate deception of her husband, she pretends to be pregnant and registers Sivani under her name in a maternity clinic and takes away one of the babies at birth. Providing her husband with an heir ensures her permanent position within the household and society. Manasa also takes refuge in the exotic to retain power and respectability. She exudes an aura of witchcraft with her affinity to plants and animals and her innumerable concoctions and balms. Becoming a successful advisor to her husband through her "supernatural" powers, Manasa becomes indispensable to her husband. She ensures social respectability for her husband and his household through her timely interventions to obscure her husband's criminal activities. Her presence in his life also accords him the status of a respectable householder in his political endeavours and aspirations. Despite her efforts, she remains powerless in her marriage since the husband commands her to accept, train, and mentor his innumerable mistresses and his child with one of them. Manasa's home

remains a harem where she is the enthroned yet powerless queen.

IV. CONCLUSION

The examination of the elite and middle-class women's quotidian life bridging both inner and outer worlds reveals that their positions in the social order are at a lower stratum than the men. Subjugation and exploitation of the women in these households belie the belief that the "new" woman has found freedom, individuality, and an equal position with the household's men. The quotidian life of the women of the elite and middle-class households is fraught with complications, misery, and a lack of personhood. The Urmilas and Manasas of modern India struggle under the yoke of the "new patriarchy", compelling them to hegemonically function simultaneously in both the outer and inner domains with little hope of freedom, individuality and happiness.

In the current Covid-19 and work-from-home scenario, the woman's duties and responsibilities change yet again. With the undeniable incursion of the outer domain into the domestic milieu, there is a compelling necessity to redefine women's role and status. Women like Joyce, who could find relief from the domestic environment in the external world, are denied access to this temporary solace. The work-from-home scenario problematises and complicates their quotidian life. Now, every "new" woman must find the necessary means to adjust and adapt to a loss of geographic and emotional locations. Therefore, there is a necessity to analyse the inner domain afresh, keeping in mind the changes wrought in the past while redefining the women's position in the outer and inner worlds. This article attempts to aid in the redefinition process by briefly mapping the actual quotidian life of "new" women in the Indian nation.

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