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'Missing' Shyamanand: Death and Age in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Way to Go*

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ABSTRACT:

The paper focalizes Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Way to Go* (2010), the less-discussed sequel to *The Last Burden* (1993), through the lens of ageing. Prima facie, such a reading would traditionally be expected to interrogate the characterization of Shyamanand, the ailing father, much like how the prequel pivoted on the degenerating health of his aged wife, Urmila. However, moving beyond such simplistic gerontological enquiries, the paper would, instead, excavate nuances of the father-sons bond that propels narrative action: Jamun and Burfi's love-hate relationship with Shyamanand not only contours their emotional responses to the father's disappearance and ageing, but also highlights the fraught understanding of their own anxieties around growing old. Undergirding plotlines are the broader cultural expectations encrusting the ageing body in an Indian context. The attempt is to introduce newer axes for analytical forays into Chatterjee's work in particular, and Indian writing in English in general.

KEYWORDS:

Death, Ageing, Gerontology, Ageing in Literature, Ageing in India, Indian writing in English, Upamanyu Chatterjee.

Relinquishing 'the last burden', Chatterjee mulls the 'way to go' in this literary offering, where irreverent black humor confabulates with a belated searing tenderness to posit a complex take on death and ageing mediated through the slippery crevices of a father-sons relationship. Unlike other popular texts with ageing characters where the specter of impending demise is obliquely negotiated, *Way to Go* revels in its obsessive philosophizing about life and its end. Liberally populated with murders, suicides, disappearances, the novel confronts the fearful reality head-on through an acerbic, absurdist superstructure that pokes relentless fun at "the fuss we make about...death and dying" (Chatterjee interview in *Hindustan Times*).

The self-assuredness of the work's tone, however, is complicated by its fragmented narrative structure. The first two sections of the novel are refracted through the consciousness of Jamun, Shyamanand's youngest son; a character in the vein of Chatterjee's earlier 'loser' types, with a raging libido and a fetish for morbidity that lends the story its overarching deathly pallor. After Jamun's departure, it is Burfi, Shyamanand's elder (and reportedly favourite) son who is forced to shoulder filial and narrative responsibility in the third section of the text. Violent, moody, and a reluctant claimant to the mantle of paternal duty, he helps frame Jamun and Shyamanand's mutual cynicism through his own take on life's mysteries. Where Jamun's sections are more meditative, reflecting on attitudes to death and his own middle age, Burfi's arrival immediately spurs the characters into action, with shocking developments and discoveries all occurring within the span of that one section. Together, the two brothers not only offer different personality types, but also, ultimately, a divergent approach to dealing with death, age, and loss.

Jamun's sections are ripe with liberal use of a macabre comic tonality, with no topic free from being grist for his satiric eye. Hobbling through his own midlife crisis, Jamun's witticisms, his violent desires, and convoluted memories of Shyamanand provide means of coping with his changing temporal landscape, as well as dealing with the concept of an inevitable death. The father's aged, out-of-control body inspires profound anxieties in Jamun who has always believed that he had too much of Shyamanand in his own personality: "It was quite like living in a confined space with two Jamuns; one was merely a visitant from forty years in the future." (630) In some ways, Shyamanand is Jamun's memento mori. Jamun's already nihilistic character traits are heightened when he moves in with Shyamanand; he even dates his depression to that

same time period. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the duo bond over their many discussions of death, a topic that holds importance for the ageing, ailing Shyamanand who has returned to his own house to die, and Jamun, who is pushed to navigate complex emotions vis-à-vis his father's past, present, and future.

Shyamanand, beginning from his paralytic stroke, right up to the present day where he is rendered a slave of his belligerent digestive system, resorts to mooning over Monotosh Roy's muscled physique that shits like clockwork as a direct response to the suffering bequeathed by an aged body that refuses to cooperate. On the other hand, Jamun's disquiet over his growing physical similarities with Shyamanand's declining body, finds outlet through internal monologues characterized by a verbal excess that dwells on fanciful scenes of imagined brutalities like slashing his own wrists, burning Naina Kapur with his cigarette, and sexual grotesquery as in the image of Kasibai's corpse returning to claim him. Sex, a life-affirming act of pleasure becomes intertwined with his death fetish, a la 'la petit mort' (referring to the death-like state achieved during orgasm); elaborate daydreams about Kasibai, the AIDS scare, the voyeurism, all then lend another element to Jamun's masochistic confrontations with his ageing body's desires and its inevitable dissolution through death. The parodic, the pathetic, and the morbid copulate in these ruminations where death, suicide, and murder become part of Jamun's framework of cynicism.

Tova Gamliel, in her anthropological study on ageing titled "The Macabre Style: Death Attitudes of Old-Age Home Residents in Israel", highlights a crucial role that black humor plays in the articulation of responses to mortality by ageing subjects:

As repression represents the more extreme manifestations of denial, so the macabre style represents the more extreme manifestations of acceptance...The repression effect totally rules out any discussion of one's own death, even as an indirect object; the macabre style, in contrast, points to a direct and consistent engagement with the subject... (Gamliel 506)

It is important to note that Gamliel's findings (based on an Israeli sample) are not directly transposed onto our discussion willy-nilly, but a key inference regarding the attitude to death is contextually likened to the kind of worldview held by Chatterjee's protagonist. The burlesque, self-deprecating comicality that Jamun brings to his treatment of his fears regarding his ageing body, and his guilt at not having been a good son to an ailing father seeking companionship, provides one way of dealing with death and age in the novel. Burfi, the elder son, who shares an even more tenuous relationship with Shyamanand, posits a tentative alternate vision of tackling grief engendered by the lost father and brother. His narration of Jamun and Shyamanand's companionable bonding contours what we already know about the duo's love-hate relationship through Jamun. The entire family demonstrates a proclivity for the dramatic, with Burfi, too, having shared wry jokes with his brother about death and suicide. (Eg. The conversation about Hadley Chase titles, and the earlier half-serious discussion on how the surefire method to get away from keeping Shyamanand would be to kill oneself).

Both sons respond to the family's dysfunctional inheritance with violent excess, Jamun's of the verbal, Burfi's of the literal. Burfi beats his wife and children brutally, a practice that gets apparently aggravated after Shyamanand shifts in with them. Burfi seems to harbor greater hatred of the father because of the coldness with which Shyamanand had treated Urmila throughout their marriage; a frigidity that had decisively concretized post Shyamanand's stroke. Relations got utterly frayed during Urmila's subsequent illness and death. The ageing body, then, has been at the centre, and often cited as the source of, disintegrating relationships.

"He could've gone downstairs to chat with his father but didn't, couldn't, too depressing, like the signs of the end of his life." (3932) Burfi's relationship to Shyamanand, then, also suffers from mixed feelings: associations with past resentment, forced acknowledgements of self-ageing, nagging responsibilities to an aged parent, and emotional upheaval due to the father's disappearance converge to feed an already convoluted situation. However, it is Jamun's disappearance, and not Shyamanand's that ultimately draws Burfi out and fully forces him to confront his filial demons. Where Jamun's sections are lethargic, Burfi springs into action upon his arrival. The latter does eerily retrace many of the same scenes that Jamun had played out post Shyamanand's disappearance. The missing report, the Popat Kaka morgue scene with the

ululating woman, the dithering over what to do with the house, but the differences start creeping in when Burfi takes decisive steps in dealing with issues of death, and life after death.

Interestingly, Shyamanand's disappearance triggers a crisis of identity for Jamun's consciousness, whereas it is not so much the father's but rather Naina Kapur's murder and Jamun's disappearance that ultimately drive Burfi. Right after lodging the missing report Burfi decides to find Jamun himself, an active movement hinting at a transformative attitude to life and death that attains its apotheosis in the saving of Naina Kapur's ashes and the scheme to murder Monga. Jamun, before leaving, had himself sought Monga out in an attempt to confront the builder about his shady dealings: armed with an insulin injection, he thinks of threatening Monga but ultimately desists. Burfi, on the other hand, **uses** the cultural construction of death to reach an ideological space wherein he is able to acknowledge the inevitability of the death-life cycle and return to the business of living. He smears Naina Kapur's ashes on his body, dons the garb of a 'sadhu' and mingles with the devotees at the beach not to slip into oblivion, but to finish what Jamun couldn't with Monga the 'murderer'.

The body, then, as the site of ageing anxiety is unequivocally acknowledged and accepted through the guise of the Aghori, a Shaivite sect that participates in postmortem rituals of the human body owing to an "altered consciousness" (Wikipedia) of the human condition. An epiphanic moment for Burfi occurs twice in the narrative; once when he looks at Naina Kapur's ashes and realizes that it is not only death that is inevitable, but also the continuity of life that must be simultaneously affirmed. The second instance occurs later, when he meets up with Jamun at the holy city, spend some time there, accomplishes the grieving process and returns to his life: "And Burfi? Always the more active of the two brothers, he left when he was ready to return..." (5427)

In a surprising turn of events towards the end of the novel, the last interaction between Jamun and Shyamanand, right before the latter mysteriously disappeared into thin air, a scene that has hitherto been played and replayed in parts throughout the text, is finally laid bare for the reader to uncover what really happened that night. It is revealed that Shyamanand had indeed "gone" (5251), passed away of a heart attack in the dead of the night, alone, while Jamun sulked in the upstairs room over the fight that they had had in the morning. Unable to reconcile

himself to the fact that his father had been claimed by death's unbidden hand, Jamun constructs an elaborate trance-like situation wherein Shyamanand 'disappears' rather than dies.

It helped him in part to bear the strain and guilt of his father's passing, to create slowly, accretively, an image of the person that he felt Shyamanand ought to have been...It did not lose any of its secret beauty even when with time he could admit to himself that it was obscurely, morally wrong to idealize a dead person just so that one could love him more, could love the thought of him more than one ever had the real person while he'd been alive. (*Way to Go* 5276)

The change in mood reorients everything that we perceive to have concluded about Jamun's relationship to Shyamanand and his own mortal self. Many of the previously speculative passages are endowed with greater meaning when viewed retrospectively through the lens of this announcement:

For a time, he was again nonplussed by the notion that an absent person could well in fact be – have been for long – a heap of ashes but as long as one didn't know, he or she was alive in one's head and one, equably, thought of him or her... with tenderness or malice or desire. (*Way to Go* 706)

This redemptive ending raised many a reviewer eyebrow (notably Sipahimalani's), especially when Jamun's carefully created persona of a macabre, masochistic loser armed with speedy witticisms and ever ready to indulge in self-pity, is squared against a belated emotionality that reveals the entire action up till now to be a charade. The scale of death attitude earlier discussed suddenly swings from one end of the spectrum to another for Jamun: from beyond acceptance to before acknowledgement. It destabilizes in parts the "Rabelaisian humour" (Bhattacharya) of Jamun's earlier engagements with the discursive framework of death and ageing. However, despite the volte-face, the novel does not seem to privilege either one of the two brothers' coping mechanisms as the definitive 'way to go' but rather, it underscores the differential that exists within the human response to ageing and inevitable death. The holy city, a meeting point of youth and age (exemplified by the ritual that Madhumati conducts in the river between an old and young person) functions as the in-between space from which Burfi departs post his

evolved understanding of life's processural nature, while Jamun stays back till he stops seeking Shyamanand in every old man's face. Hope is offered as Jamun demonstrates awareness of the temporary nature of his denial, and suggests that with time it shall be replaced by an acceptance of life beyond the shore.

Ruminating week upon week on his father's absence, with the breeze across the water teasing his brow in the wide expanse of evening...he'd sensed anew the inevitable, that the fear of death, too, was a function of the cognition of time... (*Way to Go* 5418)

What the denouement does, though, is highlight how Jamun's memories of Shyamanand are not only re-constructions (as memories are) but also deliberately distorted remembrances that depict the father in a certain light in accordance with Jamun's grieving process. Shyamanand, Burfi and Jamun's eighty-five year old irascible father, whose disappearance (like Urmila long-drawn out illness in *The Last Burden*) is the depressing centerpiece that spawns Jamun's myriad ruminations on ageing, death, and the family. Sadly, it is only **after** he goes 'missing' that Shyamanand attains primacy in the narrative. While living, his visible body is invisibilised as he is relegated to a room in Burfi's house that is rarely visited by the rest of the family. Upon vanishing, the literal invisibilisation of the ageing body, Shyamanand transforms into an absent presence, forcing Jamun to re-member not only his relationship with him, but also the changing demands of his own ageing body.

The crippled father goes missing. What is the difference between death and disappearance, you ask. The father may be alive, in the same house, yet so distanced as to be virtually dead. (Chatterjee interview with *The Hindu*)

The narration is filtered either through Jamun, or Burfi's consciousness, and consequently, what are presented are their perspectives of their father and his paralyzed, ageing body and self. At no point does the story dive into Shyamanand's subjectivity or even give us his speaking voice outside of either of his sons' interpretations, which begs the critique that at some level the novel

is selfishly absorbed in excavating only a specific kind of ageing anxiety, Jamun's (and to a lesser extent, Burfi's), at the cost of scapegoating Shyamanand's articulatory space. This is not to devalue the validity of a middle-aged subjectivity, but to highlight how the novel executes another kind of marginalization of Shyamanand by reducing him to a catalyst for Jamun and Burfi's self-revelations regarding the cavalier treatment they meted out to their father when he was alive.

For the preceding several years – ever since Urmila's passing – the sons had become accustomed to being sporadically tender with their father; most of the time he had been for them an everyday thing, unremarked, unremarkable, on the wane..." (*Way to Go* 5184-5190)

While Shyamanand too has a penchant for long intellectual discussions with Jamun regarding death, his view on that final act of humanity's tryst with life, nevertheless, has its own developmental oeuvre that the novel only alludes to through oblique references: his constant depression, the temporary alleviation of bleakness through the example of Mr. Padalkar, the tender moments of shared laughter with Jamun, all erupt sporadically, but we are never allowed to engage fully with the ageing patriarch whose advancing age and troubled relationship with his progeny forces him to use melodramatic declamations of his own death as a way to retain their attention. "He was happy to prattle to strangers on death and abandonment – two subjects high on his list of favourites." (882) The social attitudes to ageing, evinced through brief encounters like the erasure of Shyamanand's identity in the missing persons report, Jamun and Dr. Mukherjee's fear that Shyamanand may be murdered while he stays home alone, the threat of violence that the aged can face within the family, are all hinted at but never allowed to unfurl their concomitant thematic, as Shyamanand is ultimately reduced to inhabiting that liminal space between an adjectival imperative and its verb counterpart: missing.

The title attains crucial relevance in these discussions of life, death, and the human condition, especially because there are repeated instances where the multifarious characters use a version of the phrase to describe their mental states regarding mortality. What is unearthed is

the realization that there is no one 'way to go' but numerous potentialities that would be accessed differently by different individuals in their respective quests for answers to the questions of ageing and death.

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