

REDISCOVERING WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN ATTIA HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN*

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Abstract:

*From the early nineteenth century onwards, middle-class and elite women in India were socialized to assume the roles as wives and mothers which Attia Hosain demonstrates in her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) in order to come to terms with the effects of nationalism, partition and patriarchy. Attia Hosain (1913), who was brought up in an aristocratic family in Oudh, became the first woman from a taluqdar's family to graduate in 1933 from the University of Lucknow, and chose to spend her life in England after the partition in India. The novel rests between a life within the household, enclosed and secure but restricted by modesty and a life outside is full of freedom but it is insecure and confusing. The paper will explore Laila's exposure to both traditional and modern contradictions in her community's attitude towards gender issues and how women's identities are mobilised to follow patriarchy. It will also examine how the patriarchal power relations are naturalised in female to act as a male authority.*

Keywords: *Patriarchy, identity, hypocrisy, oppression, freedom.*

A woman of letters, Attia Hosain was born in India and moved to England with her husband and family at the time of India's independence. She was not just a writer, but also an editor of *The Pioneer* and *The Statesman*, Calcutta; a broadcaster and an actor. As a diasporic writer, she had published two writings, first a collection of short stories titled as *Phoenix Fled* (1953) and second a semi-autobiographical narrative titled as *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Both of these works have been appreciated as finest writings in the Indian English Canon. She had an unfinished novel titled as *No New Lands, No New Seas*, which was published in an anthology *Distant Traveller; A Collection of New and Selected Fiction* (2012), to mark it as a tribute to her.

Her literary career began in England and to the writers of new generation she wrote, "You must keep trying because it is as essential as drawing breath like exhaling! All the thoughts breathed out and shaping themselves visibly after being inside the cells of the brain, and then released. If you hold your breath and do not breathe out, you will suffocate."ⁱ

Attia had no regret for writing in English, though she greatly missed her first language Urdu in England. Attia Hosain says, "In the struggle for freedom, English was both a weapon, as well as the key to what I might call the ideological arsenal. The result of this clashing and merging of different cultures was that I, like many others, lived in many worlds of thoughts and many centuries at the same time, shifting from one to the other with bewildering rapidity in a matter of moments."ⁱⁱ She had always fought against patriarchy, hypocrisy, extremist beliefs not only in her writing as well as in her life. Harmony, socialism, enlightenment, rationalism, socio-political consciousness were her a few beliefs that she wanted to give to the world.

Her semi-autobiographical novel *Sunlight on the Broken Column* deals with a young girl, Laila, who lives with her grandparents' family as she lost her parents early in her life. Orthodox and determinate Abida, who is Laila's father's sister, raised her. It has been her father's wish that Laila should be educated in western education, but her aunts made sure that she does not abandon her purdah due to her education. After the death of her grandfather, Uncle Hamid, her father's elder brother, has taken the responsibility of

the family and became her guardian. For outsiders he has 'liberal' perspective to share but for his own family he has been dictatorial, by making everyone to submit to his rules. As soon as Laila begins to attend her college, there emerged various anti-British movements and protests which influenced her and her cousin Asad. Though she has been struggling to take side of any political movement or ideology, nevertheless, she joined anti-government protests to fight for her own freedom. She never expressed her liberal views with her family especially in front of her uncle. But her rebellious deed of marrying with a man of poor family, Ameer, reflected her as breaking hypocrisy of her family and achieving a sort of authority in her life. The partition of India and Pakistan have taken many lives including her husband, after which she struggled with loneliness. "Her slow turn towards nationalist politics of India, the confused state of the 'secular' Muslim in post-independence India is symbolized by her subtle acceptance of Asad, her cousin. The novel is open ended and we never know what she finally decides, though."ⁱⁱⁱ

In creating the past history of Muslim India, Attia Hosain traces the heritage of Muslim race from the early days of invasion to the days of the partition through the consciousness of her protagonist Laila as she grows older and passes through the experience of love, marriage and widowhood. In order to place the marginal group within the context of the struggle against the British invaders, Attia depicts a comprehensive picture of the love-hate relationship that moulded the Indian society in Lucknow during freedom movement.

The novel shows gradual changes as a new generation arises in the 1930s to challenge the life patterns and beliefs of their elders. As Jameela Begum says in her essay "Reconstructing Personal History: The Purdah in Twilight in Delhi and Sunlight on a Broken Column", that, "feudalism had been in India not only in a political system but a personal conviction bound by culture and tradition"^{iv}. Baba Jan, though old and ill, is still a forbidding master whose every movement is cursorily watched over by the entire household. Confined to his bed, he is nevertheless the feudal lord who commands and expects subservience not only from the family members but also from the servants. Laila, the orphaned child of Baba Jan's son, both observes and participates in the process of change. Her aunts Majida and Abida, who observe the purdah, her cousin Zahra, aunt Majida's daughter, her uncle Hamid, his wife Saira, their sons Kemal and Saleem, her distant relatives Asad and Zahid all form a network of relationships and beliefs. The fear and anxiety that is experienced under Baba Jan's commands by women were soon taken over by other patriarchal men after his death.

Attia Hosain has created a protagonist in her own image who reflects not only the sensitive and emotional but also the intellect and spiritual. The segregation of women from men through the division of the home into "zenana"^v and "mardana"^{vi} and the imposition of the will of the senior males on the females, especially the daughters and the nieces are the reflection of the enclosed lives which women lived. As Attia describes in her novel, women did not wander into men's quarters unless they were asked to. Hakiman Bua, the head maid, who had fed and nursed Laila since she lost her parents, kept a close eye on the movements of Laila and Zahra and didn't allow Asad and Zahid, their cousins, to remain in their room in the evening. But Abida's move from the zenana to the guest house as depicted in the beginning of the novel, itself becomes symbolic beginning of the change in the lifestyle the family has so far been used to.

Baba Jan has not only sheltered his own daughters, Majida whose husband, has died and Abida who is Laila's guardian and is yet to be married, but also sons of poor relations like Asad and Zahid. However, Laila is mature even at the age of fifteen to know that although Asad and Zahid are to be treated with the love and affection due to family members, they are not allowed to dream of marrying either Laila or Zahra. It is ironic that on the one hand, upper class social patriarchal Muslims want to remain in contact with English people and want their women to dress and behave like English ladies, but on the other hand, they should remain in purdah after satisfying their husbands' dignity and status in social gatherings and parties. Thus, Attia criticises the kind education that is given to women in her novel.

The narrator lingers over the details of all the activities of the huge household, be it the preparing of delicacies or storing the monthly store of fuel, grain and ghee or the serving and eating of lunch and dinner

or extending hospitality to one's own kin or Baba Jan's friends, both Indian and English. Trivial activities like the dyeing of white dupattas in rainbow colours by Laila and Zahra on the lawns of the house or buying of bangles are described with much care and attention.

After the death of Baba Jan, uncle Hamid steps in his place. Unlike his father, Hamid preferred western forms of behaviour. He was too self-sufficient and could not conform to traditional patterns. No longer women of the household have to watch the world outside from the roof of porticos or from behind its latticed wall. For Aunt Sairais no longer confined to the zenana as her sisters-in-law had been. Thus, Baba Jan's pattern of life and rules soon diminishes. Attia Hosain is preoccupied with the forces that lead to the disintegration of a typical Taluqdar family. As Meenakshi Mukerjee states:

Attia is not merely giving us a picture of men and manners in a particular period of Indian history but also observing how these men and manners have affected the edifice of Baba Jan's family and brought its solid structure crumbling down. Moreover, it is not as if it is merely the outside forces that have led to this disintegration. Forces within the family have also been instrumental in breaking it up finally.^{vii}

Baba Jan has kept his womenfolk under strict purdah, while he himself has mixed freely with English women. As stated in Quran, purdah is meant for both men and women, but men have moulded it to satisfy their desires and needs, without thinking about the live behind purdah. Anita Desai says in her introduction to Attia's novel that, young Laila seems to feel a little confused about the norms of observing purdah. For her aunts observed purdah from certain men, while from others they did not. For example, Chuttan, the young man who performed the duty of keeping a watchful eye on flies all day, always left the room when her aunt came in, but Karam Ali was allowed to stay because he was as old as Baba Jan and had seen them from childhood. Thus, rules for observing purdah have been established according to the standard and age of other males. Aunt Abida exerted the same authority as a male member would have done, although she did it from behind the purdah.

In a patriarchal purdah society, a girl has no right to question or pass judgement on her elders by refusing to accept the groom they selected for her. Marriage is made important motto of young girl's life than her education, and they are treated as an object which is bargain in marriage market. Choosing a husband on her own was out of question and same happened with Zahra, who wilfully accepted wealthy husband over loveable one. But in Laila's case, she decides to marry the one whom she loves and can connect easily. Social status is placed above any humane feelings, and this is depicted through the marriage of Zahra who forsakes the true love of Asad for a social figure who will give her a life of extravagance and pleasure. Sita (Laila's friend) drifts away to a loveless marriage because religion separates her from Kemal and she can't face social ostracism.

The transformation that Zahra has undergone because of her marriage and subsequent European tour is recorded delightfully by Laila who, despite her western education has remained well grounded in her native roots. Not that Laila has not changed, but her change is different order and takes her in a different direction. She has begun to question and argue about the conversations and norms of her family. At the same she develops a care of intolerance against the hollowness of the ideas of progress and benevolence preached by her aunt and her companions.

The novel raises questions of beliefs and customs that have remained unchanged and which have chained women to the role of victims. Laila questions the passivity of womanly existence that gets centred around parties, social gatherings. As Jameela Begum pointed out in her essay that the older order breaks up not only at the political plane but also at the personal. But Laila sees in Sita, Zahra and Zainab only another form of subjection. They remain appendages to their flourishing husbands, catering to their needs, getting education to lure wealthy husbands and finding pleasure in a round of club parties and social gatherings. Though generation that steps into Baba Jan's position is liberal in getting women educated but for their own fulfilment. Women as shown by Attia are not even given agency to speak their mind. The argument that

Begum Wahid, Mrs. Wadia and Saira have, on the need for a purdah-park for women is ironically carried on with the argument on the modern education for girls that is corrupting their traditional values. Women had discarded the purdah; they had not discarded the purdah mentality. (210)

If some patriarchal men have suppressed Laila's freedom, then there are some men in her life like Asad, Saleem, Kemal, Zahid, that have encouraged her to follow and break patriarchal conventions. The day Laila leaves Ashiana (her house), to marry her love Ameer against the wishes of her elders, she frees herself from the shadow of emotional barriers that had been imposed on her. The world outside is perhaps able to shut out the existence of the woman in the purdah but the woman herself sees all from within her purdah. Her experiences are more intense and poignant.

For elite women, there is an opportunity of good education, luxurious lifestyle without any burden of household, then also they don't understand the plight of poor women. And this happens with Nandi, a maidservant and daughter of Jumman the washer man. Her misfortune is that she has a face that was a scourge to her parents "because it was not the face of a girl of the lower class" (Hosain 89). Nandi therefore is an archetype of woman as the temptress by others, who provokes the lecherous male with an excuse for fornication, seduction, adultery or rape.

Nandi and Saleem, the maidservants of Ashiana, are victims of sexuality. They suffer while their accused are exempted from guilt and sin. Victimisation and social ostracism become for these women inescapable forces of existence. Their lives don't have any purpose other than to care for and keep in comfort those whom they obey. Hakiman Bua is a typical example of the selfless sacrificing servant who has become a part of the household. She has no family of her own, her children are the children of the feudal lord. Nandi was Laila's favourite playmate, "carelessly happy, fearless and free, graceful as a gazelle" (Hosain 66). Laila even after she is no longer young enough to play with her still has sympathy with her when Nandi's father and Uncle Mohsin beat her. Jumman accuses her being "found by the driver with the cleaner in the garage" (Hosain 67). Nandi's explanation is that she went to give him a shirt that he had forgotten. But nobody gives credence to her explanation. Her father's complaint is that she has offended against the rule forbidding her to visit the men's quarter alone. But the free spirit Nandi refuses to be crushed by raising her voice against patriarchy and she questions the idiotic rules made by them like segregation of places according to the gender within the household.

The double standards by which the poor and rich are judged is exposed by Attia Hosain through the portrayal of Nandi. The adults see her as a potential "loose woman" (Hosain 23) in miniature, and she even draws light on Uncle Mohsin's actions by accusing him of having tried to seduce her, exposing the hypocrisy of their paternalism.

Another episode that depicts the oppression against poor woman, where Nandi informs Laila about Saliman, the maidservant, dismissal from the service. Saliman is punished because Ghulam Ali, uncle Hamid's favourite cook, has made her pregnant. Thus, Nandi highlights about the biasness by which men and women are treated. When Saliman died in childbirth, because her family members don't want to go to male obstetrician, Nandi decided to seek revenge on Ghulam Ali. She is willing to go to any extent to show loyalty to her class and gender. She lures Ghulam Ali to assault her and raises a hue and cry about it. At last Ghulam Ali gets his due, he is beaten up by the servants and dismissed by his master. Nandi is deprived of education, but she has an acute understanding of the male psyche and patriarchy.

In contrast to Zahra, who hates Nandi the most, she is rebellious and wild while Zahra is submissive and conformist. Both of them are in constant pressure to remain "pure" (Hosain 36), but Nandi at least follows her heart and can blame only herself for her bad choices, whereas Zahra is manipulated into throwing away her only chance at a happy marriage. Thus in some way the servant woman is more free than the young lady.

Nandi's confession to Laila that she is carrying a baby and adds "it is not my Husband's of course" (Hosain 79), reflects that the poor woman is much more liberated in terms of choices and actions than the rich ones, who are more or less dependent on patriarchal patronage in order to maintain their class status

and material well-being. Through the portrayal of Nandi, Attia Hosain subverts the canons of respectability established by patriarchal society and Laila also sees Nandi involved in the same struggles as herself to carve out a space in which a woman could make her own choices.

In the last section of the novel, Attia explains why Laila has come to Ashiana again, in order to release herself even from the invisible barriers:

My life changed. It had been restricted by invisible barriers almost as effectively as the physically restricted lives of my aunts in the zenana. A window had opened here, a door there, a curtain, had been drawn aside; but outside lay a world narrowed by one's field of vision. After my grandfather's death more window had opened, a little wider perhaps, but the world still lay outside while I created my own round myself. (98)

Meenakshi Mukerjee explains Attia's depiction of Mushtari Bai, courtesan, in her book *The Twice Born Fiction*. The courtesans are seen as preserver of Muslim etiquette and culture and on the other hand, are marginalised for corrupting the society. The houses of courtesans are visited by various wealthy men but when it comes to give them respect and position in society, they are always rejected. (49)

Anita Desai in the introduction to the Attia's book writes that, "it is Laila's education at the hypocrisy free atmosphere of the school and an enormous revelation to modernist thought which make over her outlook and make her a contest in the midst of the moving stream of distort feudal trends". (Hosain 4)

Hence, Attia Hosain through her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, indicates that it is extremely important to push women out of domestic chores, but what is much more important is that to liberate women mentally by giving them proper education and agency to act and support of the society so that they can ameliorate themselves.

Notes:

- i. Distant Traveler: New and Selected Fiction, selected and edited by Aamer Hussein with ShamaHabibuallah, 2011, p. 13.
- ii. *Writing in a Foreign Tongue* by Attia Hosain in South Asian Diaspora Literature & Arts Archive - broadcasting, scripts and correspondence.
- iii. Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel by Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin, 1996, p. 121.
- iv. P. 212.
- v. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, p. 14.
- vi. Ibid
- vii. *The Twice Born Fiction* by Meenakshi Mukerjee, 1972, p. 82.

References

1. Amin, Amina. "Sunlight on a Broken Column- The Disintegration of a Family." *Women Creative Writers*. Op. cit. pg 56.
2. Amin, Amina. "Tension between Restriction and Freedom: The Purdah Motif in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*." ed. Jain, Jasbir and Amina Amin. *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel*. Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 1996. pg 119-130.
3. Begum, Jameela. "Reconstructing Personal History: The Purdah in *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight On a Broken Column*." ed. Jain, Jasbir and Amina Amin. *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel*. Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 1996. pg 206-214.
4. Hosain, Attia. *Distant Traveller: New and Selected Fiction*. Ed. Aamer Hussein and ShamaHabibuallah. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013.
5. Hosain, Attia. *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. ed. Anita Desai. Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.
6. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice Born Fiction*. Delhi: Arnold Heinemann Publishers Private Ltd., 1972.