



## **Patriarchy, Feudalism and Colonialism in Sunlight on a Broken Column**

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### *Abstract*

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*According to Simon de Beauvoir: "The curse that is upon woman as vassal consists...in the fact that she is not permitted to do anything; so she persists in the vain pursuit of her true being through narcissism, love or religion."<sup>1</sup> But Attia Hosain's respects her religion and thus she is not as radical as de Beauvoir. She mentions her views on religion thus: "To me religion was that... well drawing everybody together. It was never out of my mind that I was a Muslim."<sup>2</sup> So in Attia Hosain's critique of the patriarchal construction of Muslim society is not directed to Islam, rather she opposes the patriarchy for its interpretation of religion as a tool to perpetuate its domination over women. She firmly believes that by just pushing women out of domestic boundaries does not provide freedom for women but their cerebral imprisonment should be wiped out to enhance them. Though she stays in England, Attia's roots are indigenous. In order to emancipate women she prefers not to imitate the west blindly but she prefers to expose an association of colonialism, feudalism and patriarchy that suppress women as depicted in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.*

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**Key Words:** *Patriarchy, Colonialism, Feudalism, Partition, Identity*

**Full Text of the Paper:** Attia Hosain is an early Muslim novelist and short story writer. The experiences reflected in her novel and short stories express her nostalgia for the past. They also express the sordid realities of women marginalization, and feudal exploitation. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* can be defined as an insider's view of everyday experiences of elite women. Along with individual experiences of the novelist, national history runs parallel to the narrative that impinges Muslim identity vis-a-vis

Muslim women. Patriarchy and feudalism have a tenacious hold over society. *Ashiana* (the nest), the family house, is presented as a microcosm of society that contains characters from every strata of contemporary society. According to Jasbir Jain,

*Ashiana* in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* serves as a microcosm of the world at large with not only its womenfolk in purdah but its retinue of servants who represent the community at large. It has a living relationship with the past not merely through the culture it cultivates but also through the house at Hasanpur at the outskirts of the city, which symbolizes continuity and permanence.<sup>3</sup>

The world of Laila is a reflection of Attia Hosain's contemporary society. Akin to her narrator, Attia Hosain was born in 1913 in Oudh (United Provinces of colonial India). Her father Shahid Hosain Kidwai was a taluqdar of Gadia (District Barabanki) in United Provinces. Her mother Nisar belonged to an elite Kakori family. Her mother's personality as well as her class made her conscious of high culture of Lucknow. Through the social circle of her father and her English education, she attained true secular values. She was educated at La-Martiniere School and Isabella Thoburne College for Girls. Her father died when she was eleven. After her father's death her mother had a confined life. Describing the impact of purdah culture in her household, Attia says that she was not allowed by her mother to join the university. However she had the privilege to be the first graduate woman among the taluqdars. Attia Hosain describes the purdah culture in her family:

We were not in purdah in the sense that we were wearing burqas when we went out but we had a confined kind of life. People who came to visit us in the house were the sons of friends or relations but that was it because my remarkable mother herself never went anywhere.<sup>4</sup>

Attia Hosain was fascinated by the nationalist movements of her age. In Attia's literary and political activities, two streams of thoughts (i.e. leftist and Congress) had great influence. Attia Hosain was highly influenced by Sarojini Naidu and attended the All India Women's Conference. It is noteworthy that Attia had a close proximity with the prominent Marxists of her age and attended the Progressive Writers' Conference held at Lucknow. Her nationalist thinking is attributed to her location in Lucknow, as it was the hub of literary, cultural and political activities.

Though the realistic picture she draws of gender oppression and marginalization on the basis of class, is suggestive of Progressive influences. As far as her political thinking is concerned, she says that religion does not play any role in her political thinking. However she never shuns religion altogether, and espouses humanitarian aspects of religion: “I believed in my religion but so what? I believed in a religion that to me never said you kill anybody. Never did I believe that religion taught violence.”<sup>5</sup>

The novel appeared in 1961, but it covers the span from 1932 to 1952, a crucial period marked by socio-political upheaval in the Indian sub-continent. Jasbir Jain is of the view, “To treat Laila of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* as the writer’s alter ego would not be fair.”<sup>6</sup>

Laila’s minute observation of the patriarchal functioning of the house makes her distinct from other female members of the family. Unlike them Laila has been given a western education. The novel can also be read as Laila’s quest for identity. Her awareness of the power politics played by the patriarchy is apparent in her vivid narration. At the outset of the novel the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house is described: “...the sick air, seeping and spreading, through the straggling house, weighed each day more oppressively on those who lived in it.” (p.14)

Laila’s observation of the impending death of Baba Jan, her grandfather, as well as her experiences of the strict patriarchal system in the house unfolds her clairvoyance. Gender segregation, a strict code of behaviour, is evident in the first sentence of the novel: “The day my aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest room off the corridor that led to the men’s wing of the house, within call of her father’s room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live.” (p.14)

The description of Baba Jan’s drawing room is metaphoric of patriarchal control. The coloured panes of arched doors symbolize the patriarchal power of Baba Jan whereas light is symbolic of freedom for the women of the house. The light of freedom is stymied by the patriarchal control. Instead of light, only shadows flicker in the vast room.

In this vast room the coloured panes of the arched doors let in not light but shadows that moved in mirrors on the walls and the mantelpiece, that slithered under chairs, tables and divans, hid behind marble statues, lurked in giant porcelain vases and nestled in the carpets. (p.18)

The subservient and claustrophobic condition of the womenfolk is evident in Laila's assertion: "Zahra and I felt our girlhood a heavy burden." (p.14) Though Laila and Zahra grow up together, they are entirely different characters. Whereas Laila is progressive in her outlook, Zahra prefers to cocoon herself in the roles approved by the patriarchy. Laila's father had desired a different upbringing for her by emphasizing that she be educated not only in the Arabic and Persian traditions but also in the western tradition. Baba Jan, despite his staunch espousal of traditions, capitulated to his late son's wishes. Aunt Majida too, sternly opposes Uncle Mohsin's criticism of Laila's "mem-sahib education".

Attia Hosain beautifully presents a panorama of young Muslim women's lives. Marriage is a central concern. It is the most important objective of a young girl's life. Laila, whose vision is moulded by an upper crust Western education combined with the concentrated attention of her aunt, observes other young girls attempting to make sense of their lives. Zahra claims: "I was brought up to do my duty." (p.147) A third aspect is presented in the form of the promiscuous Zainab. In spite of living in Hasanpur, Zainab is more liberal in certain ways than both Laila and Zahra.

Matrimonial alliances were according to the wishes of the elders. Laila's marriage to Ameer, posits the option of marrying the man of her choice, but she has to pay a heavy price and faces the disapproval and disgrace of her family. Nadira marries Saleem because of political and religious conviction. Her volition of marrying Saleem is of a lesser degree than that of Laila. Laila's choice is purged of any material reason; she is unbiased regarding the pedigree of Ameer and is aware of his lack of wealth. Her marriage to Ameer is analogous to her achievement of selfhood, as she asserts her individual identity by marrying Ameer and flouting the norms of the patriarchal set up. Sita's approach to marriage is peculiar as she loves Kemal but considers her love as a personal issue whereas her marriage as a public one, because of her different religious background. Her views are in conformity to the patriarchal system of arranged marriage. She admits her incapability to rebel against the patriarchy.

My parents are the best judges of the man with the best qualifications for being the husband. They have a wider choice; it is only love that narrows it down to a pin point. (p.216)... What has love to do with marriage? It is like mixing oil and

water? Love is anti-social, while matrimony preserves the world and its respectability. (p.296)

In an argument Laila's friend Nita accuses her of being a stereotypical Muslim woman. Laila's response evinces her distinctive and mature approach to education: "I believe my education will make me a better human being." (p.125) Nita's approach towards education is materialistic. She views it only as a means to earn her living. For Aunt Abida, education means imbibing a sense of duty whereas Aunt Saira perceives women's education as an embellishment to fit in the new roles assigned to wives. Uncle Hamid views education as an impetus that liberalizes the individual. However, when it comes to personal matters like Asad's preferences in education and Laila's in marriage, he is very conservative. It is imperative to contextualize these views as in Attia's contemporary society, emphasis was laid on reforms in Muslim community and there existed a widespread proclivity to safeguard Muslim identity from the cultural onslaught of British colonialism. The "responsibilities in this changing world" (pp.109-110) meant women had to keep the family space uncontaminated. There was a dichotomy between female and male arena. 'Home' was destined as an arena for women, keeping them out of public realm and social sphere was the deemed space for their male counterparts. The consciousness for female education was only to prepare them as a blend of Eastern values and Western modernity so that women may enhance the social status of their husbands. Baba Jan's views on education echo various reform movements in the Muslim community of pre-partition era.

At the end of the last century Baba Jan had been influenced by ideas of reform among Muslims and had sent his sons to English universities. He had thought the weapons of foreigners should be used against them to preserve inherited values and culture. To copy their way was abhorrent to him. (p.86)

Though his views regarding female education are not commented upon by the narrator, his attitude is conspicuous in his decision to educate Laila at a girls' college. He approved only of gender-segregated western education for girls. Western education for women was not the part of Muslim reform agenda, as some reformists like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan "remained adamantly opposed to women's education outside religious mode."<sup>7</sup>

The rebellious streak in Laila's personality is exposed on her fifteenth birthday as she sees her reflection in the mirror. The experience symbolizes self knowledge. She perceives the conflicting views of Uncle Mohsin and Aunt Abida regarding Zahra's marriage. Mohsin sternly opposes Zahra's presence while discussing her marriage prospects: "Is the girl to pass judgments on her elders? Doubt their capabilities to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?" (p.20)

Aunt Abida's retort vividly portrays the marginalized status of the women in Ashiana: "The walls of this house are high enough, but they do not enclose a cemetery. The girl cannot choose her own husband, she has neither the upbringing nor the opportunity."(p.21)

Laila's outburst at Uncle Mohsin's maltreatment of Nandi predicts her future rebellion. As a child Laila's demand that the head carpenter make her a bow and arrow foreshadows her revolutionary spirit. The "little carved doll's cradle" made by the carpenter represents the patriarchal mindset prevalent in the society. Right from childhood, girls are induced to remain subservient to men and even the toys given to them are stereotypical.

Laila's maturity is also marked by her consciousness of marginalization on the basis of class. Laila reproaches Zahra for her maltreatment of the sweepers. Attia presents two contrasting images. The dopattas "dyed in colour crushed from special flowers" (p.45) symbolize the colourful and luxurious life of the feudal class. This is in sharp contrast to the penury of the sweeperess's children who are "naked, thin-limbed, big-bellied, with dirty noses and large black eyes". (p.45) "Colour crushed from the special flowers" also presents imagery of oppression. The luxuries of the bourgeois are at the cost of hunger and squalor of proletariat. Zahra's assertion, "You just raise them an inch off the ground and they'll be making a foot stool of your head" (p.45) exemplifies her chauvinistic feudal attitude and class consciousness. Similarly in the third part of the novel, the juxtaposition of the pomp and glory of Raja of Bhimnagar and his "coolies in dirty, patched clothes moving like ragged scare crows" (p.181) portrays the insensitivity of feudal lords towards their subjects. Laila's first encounter with the ruthless face of feudalism transpires on the occasion of Aunt Abida's dealing with the affairs of state. The feudal oppression of the tenants is justified in the name of justice and "matter of

principle”. (p.62)

Laila’s maturity regarding the patriarchal hegemony is conspicuous in her observation of the discussion among the ‘progressive women’. Aunt Saira, Mrs. Wadia, an Anglophile Parsee, and Mrs. Waheed, a Muslim League supporter, discuss the preparations for the visit of the governor’s wife to a local park. Saira pacifies them by changing the topic and presents her views regarding female education: “I believe our daughters will find it easier, having the benefit of education. That is why I believe in education for women—to prepare them for service.” (p.131) Saira’s views echo the reform movements for Muslim women. She espouses the patriarchal education system to prepare the women to fit in the new patriarchal roles. According to the strict patriarchal code of behaviour, a woman must be an emblem of western education and eastern cultural values.

The novel is also categorized as a “resistance narrative”<sup>33</sup> against patriarchy, feudalism and colonialism. Attia portrays feudalism and patriarchy as two pillars of contemporary society. As discussed earlier, Laila’s intellectual development is accentuated through the observation of the patriarchal functioning at *Ashiana*. Laila’s character can be better understood in relation to Zahra. She encounters a totally different world at school. Her predicament can be perceived through Nadira’s remark: “we are paying for being the product of two cultures.” (p.211) Though in contrast to Zahra, she never wears a veil; her life is encumbered by the diktats of patriarchy. Her in-between state is attributed to her education and the atmosphere of the outside world: “I felt I lived in two worlds, an observer in an outside world and solitary in my own.”(p.124) Unlike Laila, Zahra’s appreciation of traditions assimilates her into the ethos of the society.

Both Zahra and Laila are orphans. Laila, however, is an heiress to her late father’s property. Through the characters of Zahra and Aunt Majida, Attia critiques the rules of inheritance practiced by the Muslim patriarchy. According to Islamic jurisprudence, Aunt Majida and Abida have right of inheritance, but the patriarchy has incurred upon them the responsibilities of preserving family honour and adherence to duty, dispossessing them from their inheritance, a privilege given by Islamic jurisprudence. Hence Aunt Majida’s and Zahra’s status is reduced to the dependants of Baba Jan’s family. In such a condition, Zahra’s highest aspirations are limited to dreaming of a happy and prosperous marriage.

She is brought up internalizing the conforming roles of an unmarried girl and a devoted wife. Her education and upbringing is lauded as correct and sensible by Uncle Mohsin. Her education and upbringing prepares her to fulfill the patriarchal niche of a woman: “She has read the Quran, she knows her religious duties; she can sew and cook, and at the Muslim School she learned a little English, which is what young men want now.”(p.24)

Attia’s pungent criticism of the patriarchy is visible in the portrayal of Uncle Mohsin’s character. Mohsin poses to be morally upright but beats up Nandi for her alleged misconduct. Laila subtly describes Mohsin’s character: “ Even we, the young ones, knew stories about him and the dancing girls of the city...He lived in the city with friends or relations, had a wide and influential circle of friends, dressed well, composed poetry, was an authority on classical music and dancing, and never did any work. I disliked him.” (p.21)

Aunt Abida is portrayed as adherent to old values. She embodies the high culture of Lucknow, as she is well versed in Urdu and Persian poetry. The readers are informed that she remains a spinster because of Baba Jan’s emphasis on pedigree. After Baba Jan’s death, Hamid hurriedly arranges her marriage to an old widower. Laila observes more strident marginalization of Aunt Abida during her visit to Abida’s in-laws’ house.

Abida’s ‘way of thinking’ was altogether different from Laila’s, as Abida’s strong sense of duty and compliance to the patriarchal norms sets her apart from Laila. To her dismay, she considers Laila’s love for Ameer merely as the assertion of her sexual instinct. Laila cannot reconcile with Abida, as she has rejected patriarchal hegemony in which Abida participates. Jasbir Jain considers Abida a remarkable woman, with a sense of justice and balance.<sup>8</sup> Laila is also incarcerated by the tradition in spite of her education in England and her western ways of life. She is deeply in love with Kemal, but is not brave enough to transcend religious boundaries in order to marry him. Out of frustration, she yields to the wishes of her parents and gives in to a marriage void of love, sympathy, and understanding.

Attia’s narrative counters the British justification of the colonization of India. They claimed that they rescued Indian women from a debauched and degenerate system. Attia shows that British colonialism aggravated the dismal condition of women. In order to emulate their western counterparts, women were subjected to a new and more strident

patriarchal code of conduct in the public space. In contrast to liberal feminists who view that there need not “...be new political, economic, and social categories to end gender oppression”<sup>9</sup>, Attia seems to uphold radical feminists’ stand that “new political, economic, and social categories needed to be constructed to end the patriarchy’s oppression of women.”<sup>10</sup> Colonialism and feudalism were the two tenacious institutions of Attia’s contemporary society. In a scathing analogy Attia compares feudalism with that of the tribal systems that ill-treated women. The ramifications of this tribal ideology are discussed elaborately.

In the second part of the novel, the nationalist struggle is discussed at length. Attia delineates the response of Muslim elites to anti-colonial struggle. The narrative presents an account of the tumultuous period of anti-colonial resistance, marked by the conflict with the British. She also exposes the sectarian and communal divide. Laila’s search for identity and her progress of individuation is concomitant to the nationalist struggle. Laila’s growing awareness of her capabilities to undermine the patriarchal set up is simultaneous to the awakening of the Indian masses to oust the colonizer.

Hamid’s assertion regarding Laila’s freedom of thought and action echoes the British justification of colonization of India.: “You must know that freedom of action must be controlled until the mind reaches maturity and one’s powers of judgment are fully developed. (p.160) He refuses permission to Asad to study at Jamia and to work for the nationalist cause. With the passage of time, Hamid has to yield to the forces of social and political change and he contests the election of 1937 for a reserved constituency for taluqdars to the Provincial Legislature. Taluqdars’ loyalty to the British government is presented through the depiction of the Viceroy’s visit. The Viceroy’s visit is celebrated with enthusiasm and elation. Asad mocks the celebrations and condemns it as a “viceregal circus”.

The novel presents Attia’s nostalgia for the pre-partition days. This is the first novel, written by a Muslim that evinces the divisions of Muslims between Congress and Muslim League. The partition is not directly portrayed, but with its implications on social, cultural, and political life. Baba Jan’s death brings about disintegration to the nucleus family: “After Baba Jan’s death it was as if tight hands had been loosened which had tied together those who had lived under the power of his will and authority.”(p.112)

Attia shows that personal ambitions were at the root of partition. In order to fulfill the dreams of a better future, the people wielded religion as a tool. Saleem migrated to Pakistan as he viewed it as a land of his dreams that promised him a better future. Nadira emphasized on the loyalty to her faith: “Pakistan needs us to build it up as a refuge where all Muslims can be safe and free.” (p.288) Conversely, Kemal identified with the country of his birth and not his faith: “A choice presupposes both sides mean the same to me... This is my country. I belong to it. I love it.” (p.287) However, ironically Kemal and Saira encountered disappointment as Saleem’s property was declared as evacuee property and was taken away by a custodian. Aunt Saira is disgusted with the government and angrily calls it a “robber government”.

The final section of the novel is full of pessimism and nostalgia. Laila visits Ashiana after fourteen years. She witnesses a drastic change in the social and cultural scenario. The grandeur of Ashiana, that once symbolized the grandeur of taluqdari, is turned into the ugliness “like the skin of a once beautiful woman struck by leprosy.” (p.271) Ranjit and Sita rescue Laila and her baby in the midst of horrific communal riots. Laila condemns the supporters of partition: “Do you know who saved all the others who had no Sitas and Ranjits? Where were all their leaders? Safely across the border. The only people left to save them were those very Hindus against whom they had ranted.”(p.304)

In short, Attia emphasizes the futility of partition. In view of Niaz Zaman:

Hosain, a minority writer, stresses the folly of partition through Laila who suggests that, despite the pain, despite the loss, India is large enough to contain different religious groups. The villain in Hosain are not people from the other religious groups, but those co-religionists who deny that people of different religion can live in India.<sup>11</sup>

## References:

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<sup>2</sup> All text references in this paper are taken from Hosain Attia. *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. New Delhi: penguin. 2009.

- <sup>3</sup> Jain, Jasbir. *Attia Hosain: A Diptych Volume*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001. p.143. Print.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with Omar Khan. <http://www.harappa.com/attia/attiahosain.html> Web. 6 January 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Jain, Jasbir p.95. Print.
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- <sup>8</sup> Jain, Jasbir. p.156. Print.
- <sup>9</sup> McHugh, Nancy Arden. *Feminist Philosophies A-Z*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007 p.72. Print.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.111. Print.
- <sup>11</sup> Zaman Niaz. *A Divided Legacy*. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001. p.125. Print.