A Critical Study of Attia Hosain’s
Sunlight on a Broken Column

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Abstract:
Attia Hosain is a feminist writer and broadcaster. Her novel Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) depicts the theme of decay fading away of a traditional family of Lucknow. The disintegration of the family takes place of various reasons. In the novel, politics begin to affect the family affairs. The son and father hold to two different ideologies. As a nationalist Muslim, Hamid calls the Muslim league communal. Saleem thinks that the congress is an anti Muslim organization. The present paper aims at an in depth critical study of the novel.

Attia Hosain:
Attia Hosain (1913-1998) is a writer, feminist and broadcaster. She was born in 1913 in Lucknow in a taluqdar background. Attia Hosain and indeed her writing show a unique blend of tradition and modernity. Writing in English, at a time when few women, especially Muslim women, used this medium for literary expression, Hosain present a picture of her own world, one that was multicultural, pluralistic and syncretic.

Sunlight on a Broken Column:
Sunlight on a Broken Column is Attia Hosain’s autobiographical account by a fictional character called Laila. Laila is a fifteen-year old orphaned daughter of a rich Muslim family of Taluqdars. Sunlight on a Broken Column is a significant novel by a Muslim lady on the theme of partition. It also emphasizes the presence of the secular section of Muslims in India. The novel covers a period of both Hindu and Muslims took active part in the struggle for independence as fellowmen. The scene is laid in Lucknow, it depicts ideal two cultural for
ages. The novelist has woven a story out of her own life and experience. The novel is autobiographical that allows personal experience to provide the narrative both momentum and also make it impersonal. There is a parallel between the events of the novel, the life of Hosain against the backdrop of the freedom struggle and events at Ashiana in the novel. Hosain has to face division in her family due to partition.

The Story in Brief:
The novel is a first person narration by Laila of her from the age of fifteen to mid-thirties. Covering a socio-politically turbulent period in Indian history during 1932 and 1952, the novel is a sensitive and poignant tale of the growing up of the orphan Laila. The novel divided into four parts covering a period of twenty years in the life of the country and of Laila. The first part begins with the illness of the orphan Laila’s paternal grandfather Baba Jan and the resultant changes in the lifestyle of the Zenana, the women’s quarters. Laila’s spinster aunt, Abida, who has brought up Laila after the death of her parents, is forced to move into her father’s apartment in order to nurse her properly. Soon after Baba Jan dies and his only other surviving son uncle Hamid comes back to take over his responsibilities as head of the household. Laila’s aunt Abida is married off, as is her cousin Zahra, her distant cousins which comprise of the poor relations in the aristocratic household Asad and Zahid are packed off to college and Laila moves into the new house. The second part begins with Laila’s new world college, new girl friends of her own age but from very different background and the politics of this new social world. The third part charts the changes in Laila’s life with the arrival of her uncle Hamid’s sons from England, Kemal an ICS officer and Saleem a lawyer. Through them she has the opportunity to meet other men, nearer her age, go to parities and she soon falls in love with a lecturer, Ameer, who does not come from a comparable aristocratic background. Laila joins postgraduate studies her affair is discovered. The last section of the novel, the fourth part, is fifteen years later, when Laila revisits her ancestral home in 1952, and the intervening years are narrated in snatches, in flashback. Covering a period from pre-war years to partition, the novel depicts a vivid picture of a social and political change during that period and its impact on simple innocent life of the villagers. The novelist realizes that before the bestial horrors were enacted on the eve of the communal riots. There was communal harmony in the subcontinent. In spite of differences in both the
religions they respected each other’s religion, loved and valued each other’s culture and life and lived in peace and harmony.

Analysis of Major Characters:
In the novel, Baba Jan, the Muslim patriarch has friends among other communities and religious groups. Thakur Balbir Singh, Raja Hasan Ahmed of Amirpur, Mr. Freemantle are a few to name. This friendship emphasizes the social bonding that existed among persons of different faiths. From the pre-partition harmony the novel moves towards communal drift, riots and final partition of the country that also signals the end of British Raj in India. Partition becomes the terminal event in the life of the characters.

There is a remarkable strength in Attia Hosain’s art of characterization. The novel begins with Baba Jan on his deathbed. There is anxiety in the air for what will happen to the family of three generations living under the same roof after the demise of the patriarch. The family gradually disintegrates after the death of the patriarch and the novel is narrated through the political and social upheavals that affect the family living in Ashiana.

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) is a more or less, autobiographical novel. As there are many similarities between Hosain’s life and the narrator-protagonist Laila’s story. The novel is a first person narration by Laila of her life from the age of fifteen to mid-thirties. She looses both her parents and as a result lives with her grandfather, along with her father’s sisters Abida and Majida and, Majida’s seventeen year old daughter Zahra. She is brought up by her orthodox but principled Aunt Abida. As per the wish of her father, she enjoys the benefit of western education. She has to keep purdah like her aunts. However death of her grandfather makes uncle Hamid, her father’s elder brother, head of the family and her new guardian. Uncle Hamid, a man of ‘Liberal’ ideas, is never the less an autocratic guardian. No longer in purdah Laila starts attending college. Her University friends as well as her distant cousin Asad become involved in antigovernment protests. Thus, it is an extended family. The fading away of the taluqdar family tradition, its feudal system is suggested in the very beginning of the novel. When Baba Jan is on the death bed, it is implicitly revealed by Laila when she says, “We knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live.” (SOBC, 14).
Second part of the novel represents the disintegration of the family. In the novel there are several characters and they are married couples. The out worldly westernized Saira is a mere echo of her husband. If she has given up purdah or is engaged in social work it is at the insistence of her husband. Her Westernization is so super facial that after her husband’s death she reverts back to the traditional values. For Zahra marriage is an escape from the purdah culture and the rigid discipline it imposes on unmarried girls. Marriage grants her the freedom to socialize. Abida’s marriage is a marriage between two incompatible. For her family honour and respectability come before individual happiness. Sita, like Saira, is only outwardly westernized. Even her intense love for Kemal does not give her the courage to fight family, society and the barriers of religion. Laila is a central character in the novel. Laila’s marriage is neither a surrender nor an escape, a compromise, a social necessity, or a matter of family honour and respectability. It is love and trust in the loved man for what he is. Her love for Ameer the one without any social status or money, gives her courage to flout uncle Hamid’s authority and to face aunt Saira’s angry glares. Love gives her the strength to bear the emotional estrangement that arises between her and her dearest aunt Abida. For Laila, Ameer means safety and completeness in life.

In Laila’s family a woman does not have much of a choice as the marriage is arranged within the immediate family or from amongst the relatives. Laila by marrying Ameer rejects her uncle’s authority. Her marriage with Ameer who is not well placed in life is also a statement against the subordination of women in the name of family honour and respectability. Thus, her decision about her future is a triumph over the social world that she inhabits. Nandi grows up as an individual from an illiterate lower caste background and shows her fitness for survival in the most hostile of situations. According to Jasbir Jain and R.K. Kaul Nandi symbolizes the “Slavery of marriage”. (Jain and Kaul, 166)

**Patriarchal Plight of Women:**

Women are not only sexual slaves of men, they suffer for making their personal choices, even they are treated as commodities for the honour of the family. Women’s lives are full of failed loves, forced marriages and finally. It is a life of struggle and surrender without freedom of choice. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* tries to depict that women’s subjugation is a universal phenomenon. Women are victims of the patriarchal system even within the domestic space.
that is supposed to be their sole domain. The novel re-emphasizes that a woman can exercise her will and choice in a quest for her selfhood, as exemplified in the characters of Nandi and Laila. Zainab is fond of Asad but she could not think of marrying him because he is not his equal in blood. Aunt Saira and uncle Hamid reluctantly accept Kemal’s marriage to Prein Wadia, a Parsee and Laila’s marriage to Ameer. Kemal’s love for Sita could never materialize because Sita is Hindu, Sita’s disillusionment in love, taught her to look at love in a different almost rebellious way:

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. Follow my example. I married with my mind unblurred by sentiment and everybody is happy. (SOBC, 296)

After marriage, according to her parent’s will, can be considered as her return to patriarchy that Nandi could defy. But even after her marriage she continues to meet Kemal whenever and wherever they could. She confesses to Laila:

I had children by my husband though my body revolted against the touch of any man I did not love. But it was bearable if I had a hope of being with Kemal, as if that cleansed me. After he stopped seeing me it did not matter what happened. If my body could accept one man without love it could accept others. One discovers so many reasons for sleeping with a man once love is put out of the way. I think hate is as good as any. Certainly it is the only feeling that remains in memory. (SOBC, 297)

Attia Hosain indeed bares and exposes the limits of patriarchy that except domination it never knows anything else. It is a cruel system that tramples over a woman’s genuine desire and feeling. This is the lot of both Hindu and Muslim women during the 1930s and 1940s in India. Like Nandi, Laila challenges patriarchy and its domination in her own way. There is a parallel between Laila’s assertion of her individuality and the freedom struggle. Thus partition affected the major as well as minor characters in the novel.

Politics and Communal Riots:
The partition of India, an important event affected many aspects of life. Partition has drawn the attention of politicians, historians and creative writers. Sunlight on a Broken Column narrates the story of the individual crisis of Laila and the political crisis facing the people.
The novel is political in as much as the characters not only react but also participate in the political goings on in the country and take definite stands for and against them. The political milieu does not overtake the human story. But the decay of the feudal system, Hamid’s entrance into politics division of the family due to partition and the characters inheriting political climate and discussions on the political ideas enrich the political flavour of the novel. Laila’s friends in the college hold divergent views about the contemporary politics. Nita Chatterji, who is a nationalist, upholds the congress; Nadira, an ardent follower of Islamic ideals, upholds the Muslim League and Joan, an Anglo-Indian, upholds the British rule. The novelist very interestingly holds up mirror to three main streams the congress, the Muslim League and the British Raj through these characters. In addition to that, as Novy Kapadiya writes,

Asad’s head injury, Nita’s dismissal from college and death caused by lathi blows on her head, students’ protest at the viceroy’s arrival and plain-cloth policeman at the University campus were all sings of political ferment.

(Kapadiya, 173)

The novel implicitly depicts the struggle for power politics. After the abolition of the feudal system, Hamid wants to find a new political identity by contesting election. Saleem says to Hamid:

In the final analysis what you are facing is the struggle for power by the bourgeoisie. It is not really a peasant’s movement, but when it comes to division of spoils even class interests are forgotten. (SOBC, 231)

On the other hand, the focus of the novel is on crisis within the Muslim community. Historically speaking, partition was an enigma. They were torn between two worlds the newly created Pakistan, a separate homeland for the Muslims, and India, the country where they were born and lived for many years. This kind of climate this yielded two types of Muslim stands; one pro-Pakistan, demanding the division of the country and two pro-India, supporting the united India. At the level of high political scenario also one can trace the representation of the former in personalities like Jinnah and Liakat Ali and the latter in Maulana Azad.

**British Rulers and Communal Riots:**
It is essential to study the role of the British rulers in the novel. In the novel the narrator focuses more on the reason of communal drifts and partition than just depicting the events. The ideological and mutual differences between the British and the Indian are shown through the characters of Mrs. Martin and Sylvia Tucker Mrs. Martin though friendly with the native people never considers India as her home. Sylvia talks of British arrogance toward the Indians. John criticizes the natives. The ideological difference about nationalism and religion causes argument among Laila’s own friends. Differences on religion and nationalism bring conflict even among the people within the same community and the same family. Asad and Zahid although both are Muslims have different outlook about religion. Asad’s secular outlook keeps him back in India while Zahid maintains a dogmatic fundamentalist view. He says, “I hate those who are enemies of Islam no matter whom they may be and I am prepared to give my life for it” (SOBC, 69). Asad condemns this communal hatred and says, “I am sure of nothing except that hatred breeds hated and violence and sorrow even if we ourselves suffer?” (SOBC, 69). Even Laila is pained to see the growing discord and says, “And now I wonder how far apart we will drive each other ourselves” (SOBC, 256). That is the seed of discord sown by the British was nurtured by the communal hatred and now grown into a well rooted tree the fruits of which were full of bitterness.

In Sunlight on a Broken Column, Attia Hosain shows that the British imperialists get success in weakening the nationalist movement by their well-known policy of dividing the two communities. She exposes the role, the British played in developing the communal struggle. Asad represents the Muslims who know very well about the British rulers policy of hating each other and loving them.

The novelist tries to trace the causes of the growth of communal hatred and partly blames the British and partly the leaders of both communities. Firstly she discerns the “Divide and Rule” policy of the British Similar views are put by the historian Bipan Chandra, “British policy was solely responsible for the rise and growth of communalism; or that the entire communal antagonism or politics can be attributed to British policy. It is obvious that the British policy of divide and rule could succeed only” (Chandra, 238). It is therefore true and needless to suspect that the British rule played important role in the promotion and growth of communal virus between Hindus and Muslims.
References: