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4. Rifts and Fragmentation in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on A Broken Column*

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Abstract

The novel, largely, is about boundaries (specifically those in pre-Partition India). It probes the boundaries between children and their elders, boundaries between Hindus and Muslims, boundaries between Indians and the British, boundaries between rich and poor, and, entwined into these boundaries, the prevailing boundaries between men and women. The novel describes the middle –class quandary as many of the Muslim characters in the novel ponder whether to stay on in India or move to Pakistan. Much of the novel is set in the years prior to Independence. It concludes with the way Independence affected Laila's family and reflects the intricate events that shaped the nationalist struggle. The novel explores the social composition deranged by a historical and a political event- partition in 1947.

Keywords: Partition, Upheaval, Political turmoil, Boundaries

The separation of India was the defining moment in the country's history and perhaps the most tragic chapter too. The results that accompanied partition were cataclysmically drastic even for a country that had testified many tragic events in the past. The partition of India uprooted whole communities and left unimaginable destruction in its way. The 1947 partition persists as a contemporaneous occurrence rather than a long-gone event. It is the most discernable happening and finds its place in many novels of Indian writers in English which is demonstrated by the fact that several works regarding partition are emerging and becoming a part of the pattern of postcolonial literature.

A series of fictional depictions of partition from both Indian and Pakistani sides describe the virtual treatment of the same historical upheaval. Whereas the perception of partition is questioned even today, the fiction writers have responded to the violence of partition in many ways. However, narrative fiction about the genocide of partition does not deliberately involve itself with the high politics that went into the formation of two separate states-- India and Pakistan. Their general concern is with the fate of those ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs caught in the ambit of larger politics. The relentless havoc and brutal uprooting of the masses formed a colossal psycho existential complex in the sub-conscious of the victims. And this reticent ordeal found an appropriate catharsis in partition fiction which developed as a potential genre in the Indo-English fiction.

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) by Attia Hosain is a significant novel by a Muslim lady on the theme of Partition which enumerates it as a major issue in the novel. For Attia *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is a reminiscence of the memories of crumbling of a family due to political changes. It presents a viewpoint different from other novels on the theme and underlines the existence of secular section of Muslims also in India. The novel covers a period of twenty years starting from the early thirties when both Muslims and Hindus actively participated in the struggle of Independence as fellowmen. The scene is devised in Lucknow which is an epitome of integration of two cultures for ages. The novelist lays bare the connivance of the

British and Muslim fanatics in the partition of the country and presents the growth of the narrator-protagonist Laila amid the social and political turmoil. Novy Kapadia holds the view that besides the search for identity and order (which the novel sets out to explore), the novel functions at two levels-- personal and political (167). However an intense analysis of the plot verifies the functioning of the plot at three inter-connected levels-- personal, social and political— subsequent to Laila's pursuit for identity, the breakdown of feudal society and the agony of partition. The novel no doubt projects a Muslim discernment but this observation is not entirely consistent and homogeneous. The views of different characters are constrained since the novel focuses on the effects of partition on the elite class i.e. Muslim taluqdars. Therefore, it can in no way be approved as the voice echoing all Muslims.

The title of the novel suggesting the rise of the sun on a broken column symbolizes the dawn of independence in the country which is partitioned and denotes that the novel is heavy with memories. Memory studies and fictional travels have become so imperative to discussions of Partitions, as people try to garner and epitomize ordinary experience reminiscently. In many ways fiction has begun to employ the human aspect while history focuses on the political. Attia's own life strongly echoed that of protagonist Laila. Anita Desai's introduction to the novel touches an important aspect of the political nature of the novel.

The opening lines of Desai's introduction to *Sunlight on a Broken Column* endorse the main concerns in the novel i.e. Independence and its repercussion. The decision to stay on in India or migrate to Pakistan becomes a major subject of argument in the family, with opinions and personalities discordantly polarized on the issue.

Hosain explains in her personal essay 'Deep Roots' (published just after her death in 1998) "unsurprisingly, the early South Asian women's voices in Britain arrived in London in 1947, just prior to the Partition, to escape the pain of divided national loyalties" (22). It is uncertain whether *Sunlight on a Broken Column* 'escaped' the pain of Partition, as her national loyalties became plainly divided not between just two nations, but three: India, Pakistan and Britain. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* basically deals with the historical moment of Partition and Independence, which have caused deep anguish and the quandary of choosing a national loyalty.

Sunlight on a Broken Column follows the elliptical style of narration with its remarkable dedication to nineteenth-century realism rooted in the political and historical creation of the two nations, India and Pakistan. The novel was published in 1961, though the setting of narrative is from 1932 to 1952 which is considered to be a crucial period as the whole background of the Indian sub-continent was undergoing a change: socio-political events such as World-War II, the end of the empire, mass migration to the Mother country, Independence and Partition. *SBC* through the narration of Partition aspires to portray and shell-out wide-ranging historical scenes.

The novel, largely, is about boundaries (specifically those in pre-Partition India). It probes the boundaries between children and their elders, boundaries between Hindus and Muslims, boundaries between Indians and the British, boundaries between rich and poor, and, entwined into these boundaries, the prevailing boundaries between men and women. The novel describes the middle -class quandary as many of the Muslim characters in the novel ponder whether to stay on in India or move to Pakistan. Much of the novel is set in the years prior to Independence. It concludes with the way Independence affected Laila's family and reflects the intricate events that shaped the nationalist struggle. The novel explores the social composition deranged by a historical and a political event- partition in 1947. Veena Singh asserts, "Partition no doubt was a political decision but not an event in isolation for-it had repercussions on the

lives of people as it resulted in geographical, economic and, most important of all, emotional and psychological dislocation” (171).

The novel is divided into four sections and each section renders to the building up of Laila’s identity, and each section recounts the countries struggle for Independence and the consequent partition—be it at the ideological level or at the physical. The move from one section to another also reports the shifts in Laila’s personality and her defiance. From a shy young girl, she changes into a bold, defiant young woman. The last section is devoted to Laila’s remembrance about the place she grew up in. Laila is barely interested in politics. Her awareness of political scene of India is fractional. Laila represents the realistic generation of the 1940s and 1950s. She is intelligent, frank and a passive observer of the happenings around her. Laila functions as the mouthpiece of the novelist.

Laila’s family which represents the Taluqdars (the landed gentry) is embedded in the pretentious courtesies of a class that was going to be socially redundant very soon. The old feudal concept of mai-baap (the paternalistic face of feudalism, in which the feudal lord was seen as father and mother) was cleverly used by the British in India to manipulate the loyalties of the ‘natives’. Asad describes the British policy as ‘Hate each other- love us’ (SBC 56).

The novel is all the more significant because it attempts to write partition from a woman’s point of view. She not only portrays her own experience of the partition but also renders her voice to the unheard women both in her family and outside of it. Laila, as the narrator and the protagonist is both- an observer and a participant, an insider and also an outsider at the same time. She tries to make sense of her identity. Laila’s world is affected by Independence and partition.

As a Muslim family is depicted in the novel therefore, in course of her narrative Attia exposes almost all aspects of the family life of the Muslims. With the arrival of the British in India and with the spread of education, a remarkable change took place in the way of thinking among the youths. Now the girls from the Muslim community were also taking advantage of this facility of education. This change in the way of thinking and attitude can very well be noticed in the narrator heroine, Laila. The old and the new traditions clashed. Greatly inspired by the idea of freedom, even women were actively participating in it and were ready to go to the prison for the sake of national freedom. Laila’s friend Nita Chatterji was one of them. The youth of India was not ready to swallow mutely the repression policy adopted by the British. But this united struggle for freedom suffered a setback as soon as the religion entered politics. This disastrous development made some power-hungry politicians put their demand for a separate home-land for the Indian Muslims.

With an intention of bringing out the effect of disruptive forces in the form of the partition of the nation and the splitting up of Laila’s family, the pairs of contrasting characters belonging to the same family and from the close relations are delineated by Attia Hosain. The ideologies in which her characters believe become the national ideologies, which ultimately bring about the partition of the country. This twin structure planned by Attia in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* works effectively and helps her to explain the picture of the partition of the nation and the breakup of the family at once.

Laila, the narrator protagonist has fond memories of Lucknow. She links the city with merriment and elation. But the city ceases to be a secular place with the increase of radical activities by both Hindus and Muslims; the city is torn asunder. The pattern of communal conflict becomes evident with the increasing of communal hostility in the *city* and the outbreak

of fights on very insignificant and frivolous issues. The novelist relates the origin of communal riots very lucidly. Hakimian Bua explains, “Just outside the big Hanumanji temple the top of their Tazia stuck in the branch of a peepul tree...The branch of their (Hindus’) sacred tree could not be cut without getting the Hindus angry...Someone began to blow a conch in the temple... Some hot-blooded persons threw stones at the heathen sounds and then the fighting began” (*SBC* 75-76).

The freedom struggle and its objectives affect individual lives in much the same way as family loyalties do. Laila’s cousins Asad and Zahid had lost their father who actively participated in Khilafat movement. They had been brought up wearing hand-spun cloth and hated all things that were foreign. A revolutionary optimist, Asad is constantly in trouble and is first to confront Uncle Hamid, who after Baba Jan’s death succeeds him as the family patriarch, and leaves home.

Soon the communal abhorrence fans itself out from politics to religion and religion to politics. The Muslim political leadership separated themselves into nationalists and reactionaries. The Congress is identified as having ‘a strong anti-Muslim element in it’ and Muslims are urged upon to unite to resist Hindu absolutism. Speculative fears begin to infiltrate. Saleem adds, “The majority of Hindus have not forgotten or forgiven the Muslims for having ruled over them for hundreds of years. Now they can democratically take revenge” (*SBC* 234).

The Indian freedom movement suffered a setback as the religious intolerance penetrated politics. Envy, hatred and violence became domineering force and the conventional Lucknow courtesy is completely vanished. These divergent beliefs elucidated the change, politics had brought about in a considerable section of the Muslim community to baffle religion for nation and sabotage the political foundations of the country. The novelist portrays different communal backdrop and bigotry against each other by presenting the different views of a group of friends that hold different religious connection. The exchange of views among them shows how the two communities have drifted away from each other. The tendency to take the religious differences for granted had faded away. Instead, these differences like a poisonous gas are now spreading in the communal atmosphere, infecting all that come within its reach. Thus the pattern of communal hostility is speedily eclipsing that of harmony.

Sunlight on a Broken Column highlights the degeneration in social and financial status of the feudal family after partition of India. The trauma of a feudal family of Laila’s maternal uncle is portrayed who lived lavishly under the British rule. In the wake independence and partition family faced financial crisis. The first blow to the family was the constitutional abolishment of feudalism. The ancestral privileges and rights which nurtured the life and blood of their whole way of life were withdrawn. It instigated horror among many families at the cost of their psychological health, complete retirement from public life, leading the life of being neglected. The visible changes and growth of the cities, mushrooming of new buildings and housing societies of the refugees and behavior of new populace added new wound when the royal era was completely shattered. Asad represented the spirit of optimism and acceptance of the changing and harsh realities. Partition also dethroned the Rajahs and lords. Their property was confiscated by the government for official uses.

The illustrious family of ‘Ashiana’ gets divided. Laila’s autobiographical storyline which outlines her identity formation corresponds with the nation’s account of Independence and partition. The family often discussed the ideologies behind independence and partition. For example, with the departure of the British after India’s independence, the new Government put

an end to the legal rights of the feudal lords. They lost their source of income. Due to the elimination of the feudal system, no previous powers or privileges of the *Taluqdars* exist. Uncle Hamid and Aunt Saira who grew up with the confidence that they have ancient rights passed on to them by their ancestors, which the actuality of the country's Independence and partition strips them off. Uncle Hamid becomes a politician trying to preserve the country's integrity, although initially he is opposed to the anti-colonial struggle which threatened the position of Taluqdari Muslims. So the novel projects that the partition not only shattered the splendid world of the *Taluqdars* but also devastated the peace and harmony of thousands of families. After the partition, these discrete people had to adjust themselves with the changing habits of mind and the living conditions they had treasured for centuries. In her narrative Laila's takes note of Uncle Hamid's evolution. And then there is Asad, who becomes more and more politically active and remains devoted to India and decides not to migrate to the new nation Pakistan. When Saleem's brother Zahid gets killed in a train bound for Pakistan, he convinces himself that he has better prospects and security in Pakistan, and thus he migrates to Pakistan. Saleem opts for Pakistan and Kemal decides to stay in India. As the partition had an impact on the lives of many families, Laila's family too got divided into two parts: one of which chooses to stay while the other decides to migrate to Pakistan. All the inhabitants left Ashiana one by one and Laila too in the end, like the rest of her family, had to leave Ashiana. She is not only displaced from Lucknow and Hasanpur but also from Ashiana, the home where she grew up and had no hope of return. In the end like Laila, Ashiana also transcends the socio political and cultural aspect and the differences that become apparent in Laila's family have a massive effect on Ashiana. Partition is the root of dislocation.

The situation is used both to underline the problems that came up for the Muslims staying in India and to refute the myth of 'Paradise across the border'. A strange type called refugees now swarm the houses abandoned by the Muslims who opted to go to Pakistan. Such houses are declared evacuee property and the officials started harassing the relations of the emigrants. But Kemal believes all such situations as the natural consequences of the partition. He finds his identity safe in the land of his birth alone. In spite of his brother's warnings and qualms expressed about the future of Muslims in India Kemal remains unshaken in his choice and adds, "I see my future in the past. I was born here, and generations of my ancestors before me. I am content to die here and be buried with them" (SBC 288).

Kemal views the political association in terms of human sentiments based on their related standards than the theoretical, based on religion. This is the only novel which appraises partition not only from the Muslim point of view but also absolves the Muslims of the charge of being entirely communal. It articulates for the several thousands of Muslims who remained, unaffected both by the religious and political obsession and decided on to stay in India for good cause.

The views of different characters are delineated since the focus of the novel is on the effects of partition on the elite class i.e. Muslim taluqdars. Therefore, it can in no way be approved as the voice echoing all Muslims. Since the novel is autobiographical in tone, the perspective of the novelist finds voice in Laila who for the most part is estranged and perplexed because for her freedom from the patriarchal society and quest for identity are more demanding interests.

Laila reveals that the courteous City of Lucknow being infested with ruthless voices rose in disagreement. The second and the third parts of the novel are full of deliberations about different party ideals. The gap among the Muslims widened when the "secular" Muslim

nationalists continued in the Congress fold while the “communal” Muslims level serious charges against the Congress, labeling it as a “purely Hindu organization”. It is proclaimed that the policies and programmes of the Congress are untrustworthy. Politics enters sophisticated houses like Ashiana and there is a heated argument between Hamid and his son, Saleem being now in opposite camps. The brutal realities of the political sphere present the way friends betray one another. Uncle Hamid realizes that he has been let down by his old friend Waliuddin, who joins the Muslim League and actually consents to contest the election against him. He is even supported in this step by Agarwal, Sita’s father, once a staunch Congress supporter because the Congress and the Muslim League temporarily agree to sink their differences to wage war against the bigger opponent, the British. Uncle Hamid is forced to withdraw his nomination and represent the Taluqdars. Laila blames the Pakistani leaders like Jinnah for migrating to Pakistan without thinking of their Muslim brothers in India. The novel is a scathing attack on the political who worked out the partition of the Indian subcontinent making India a cauldron, soaked in every ingredient measured to produce poison and leaving the nation least bothering about those elements for which the cause was initiated. Laila also exposes the stubbornness of those Muslim leaders who first provoked hatred and violence in India and then safely ran away to Pakistan abandoning their followers.

It is for the first time that in a novel the Muslim leadership is questioned about its role and liability in misguiding the Muslim masses which led to partition and its bloody outcome in the country. It is again the first novel which articulates the political integrity of the millions of Muslims who continued to live in India of their own free will. The problem which accompanied the formation of Pakistan created for the Muslims of India was distrust against their political reliability which could be dissipated only with great tolerance.

Another aspect of partition laid bare in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is the sense of alienation suffered by the evacuee Muslims to Pakistan. Saleem on his visit to Hasanpur after several years of stay on the other side of the border revives his sense of affinity to his former *City* and people. Not only this, Saleem’s wife Nadira also loses her faith in the so called Islamic Renaissance. Ranjit and Sita save Laila and her baby in the middle of horrendous communal riots. Laila slams the supporters of partition and admires the Hindu munificence in saving the lives of Muslims even at great personal risk. The focus is more on the reason of communal impetus and partition than just portraying the events.

As communal identities are created, differences are whetted, often leaving no room for expressions of individuality. In a similar way, the relationships between Saleem, Ranjeet, Joan and Laila can also be seen as signs of defiance to this crusade of irrational customs and conventions. The terror of the killings, the helplessness of women and the pain to leave, virtually overnight dearly loved people and treasured places are dealt with in this novel through the metaphor of the breakdown of the family home, Ashiana. It does not follow the origin and growth of communal discord between the Hindus and Muslims. Rather, the novelist highlights the disaster within the Muslim community. During the tormenting event, the Muslim community is torn between two worlds, one dead, and the other powerless to be born, because of the burden of their shared memory. The relationship between different religious communities in pre-partition times sharpened the conflict between a society of harmony and the dreadful violence and disharmony that the Partition brought about.

The home 'Ashiana' epitomizes the whole India. The split in the home is symbolic of the division of the country as India and Pakistan. So the novel is a social record as well as a domestic

narrative. Ashiana was under going through its worst times. The well conserved palace turned out to be desolate dwelling of refugees from West Pakistan. It lost its elegance and splendor.

Post-partition the ancestral family house 'Ashiana', disintegrates as a direct result of discord among family members assuming different political stances on the issue of the partition of the country. It symbolizes the now divided country devastated by communal holocaust. The house represents a lost world that can never be restored. For example, the existing inhabitant of Ashiana are now branded as "refugees," while its lawful owner, late Uncle Hamid's son Saleem, who had migrated to Pakistan, is labeled as an "evacuee," and the house itself becomes a mere property.

The problem of property transfer and its procedure is also reflected in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* through Laila. The soul-crushing and poignant pain that people who are uprooted are enrooted in new homes, and the owners became strangers and strangers became owners. Laila's grief when she hears such terms as 'evacuee' and 'refugees' used to refer to people on her visit to Ashiana, portrays not just the brute disorder of home to exhibit the broken country, but also reflects how people were degraded to basic facts and numbers, thus wiping out the ache of displacement and uprootedness endured by many that was caused by partition.

It must be observed that Ashiana as a microcosmic representation of the country remains persistent throughout the novel. For example, it commences with a unified family that bears a resemblance to the undivided colonial India, where the authority of family patriarch (Baba Jan followed by Uncle Hamid) over the family can be compared to the domination of British colonisers over India. The mounting strain between family members echoes the increasing difference between Hindus and Muslims. The increasing political anxiety goes side by side the breakdown of the family. Laila's liberation from the oppressive patriarchal regime of Ashiana replicates the independence of the country from colonial powers. Laila's account is one among many narratives about people who stayed behind, on behalf of those who did not face the cruelty and violence that after the division of the Indian Subcontinent in the form of migration, bloodshed and brutality, but were however left to perceive the slow degeneration of the nation as an outcome of partition.

Sunlight on a Broken Column both criticizes and endorses the Muslims for their wicked and moral role played by them in India's fight for independence. The novelist portrays her conviction in secularism as the only feasible philosophy for the political welfare of the nation, especially for the Muslims now dwelling in India. The novel is political mood as the characters not only respond to but also partake in the political happenings going on in the country and hold clear-cut viewpoint for and against them. *Sunlight on the Broken Column* comes out to be a very arty depiction of the moving and poignant mayhem endured by the Muslims at a crucial time in India's history with secularism surfacing as the only answer to both the personal and political calamity confronting the people.

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