

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*: Mirroring the Cultural Transition in Post-Independence India

Anushka Gauriyar¹, Dr Manjari Johri²

¹MA English Semester III, Amity School of Languages, Lucknow, UP, India

²Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Lucknow, UP, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 29 Jun 2024; Received in revised form: 30 Jul 2024; Accepted: 08 Aug 2024; Available online: 12 Aug 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Gender, Independence, Partition, Taluqdari System, Marriage.</p>	<p><i>This paper aims to examine Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) to explore the impact of cultural transition on interpersonal relationships at the time of the partition of India when the feudal system was collapsing. The study undertakes to make a comparative reading of the cultural milieu in pre-independence and post-independence India, with a special focus on the treatment of women in the backdrop of the political and religious context. The paper navigates through Hosain's text to identify the decaying traditional values and belief system of Lucknow, popularly known as the city of Nawabs and highlights the social, cultural and political turmoil that existed in the mid-twentieth century in India. Through this paper, I will investigate how the characters in the novel the challenges of negotiating tradition and modernity in the evolving cultural landscape of post-independence India.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Sunlight on a Broken Column, published in 1961, is the only novel written by British Indian author Attia Hosain. She was born and brought up in Lucknow in a wealthy Taluqdari Muslim family but decided to settle in Britain after the Partition. The protagonist of the novel, Laila, shares a few similar characteristics with the author. The novel is set in the period between the early 1930s and the 1950s and covers a span of more than twenty years. It deals with the themes of partition, marriage, interpersonal relationships, loss of tradition, the position of women and the collapse of the feudal system. In the introduction given by Anita Desai in the novel, she says "Attia Hosain has attempted not merely a portrait of character or a family but of the feudal society as it existed then, ruled by traditional concepts, sometimes struggling to break or to change them and so presenting us with many aspects of this particular kaleidoscope". (Desai 7)

Attia Hosain presents a vivid picture of the cultural practice of a Taluqdari-Muslim family in the novel. The author depicts the social and cultural upheavals that took place because of the political unrest during the time of Independence. The novel is narrated by its protagonist and is divided into four parts. Hosain depicts the conditioning of women in a strict Muslim family as well as the slow and gradual loss of traditions and customs.

The character of Laila is used to critique the patriarchal set-up of the society. The book narrates the tale of a family across three generations, charting the transition from traditional values to a modern outlook. Through its characters, the story delves into conventional perceptions surrounding love and interfaith marriages and the idea of a nuclear family. The narrative offers an in-depth look at how partition impacted cultural identities. Anita Desai remarked on Attia Hosain's works by saying, "Her writings echo

her pride in her lineage and heritage as well as the melancholy over how often they are diminished by reckless, unfair, or selfish deeds" (Desai 5). This statement aptly encapsulates the novel's core while also shedding light on the issues it addresses.

Cultural Studies

The conceptual tools provided by Cultural Studies help to interpret how social institutions shape the structure of a society. "The domain of cultural studies can be understood as an interdisciplinary or post-disciplinary field of inquiry that explores the production and inculcation of culture or maps of meaning." (42 Barker) Cultural Studies looks at the connection between cultural practices such as religion and more general power structures including gender, class and ideology. Instead of seeing culture as a static entity, it is important for us to look at it as a dynamic system of behaviours and processes. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* examines the institutions of marriage, education and family, along with feminism, social changes and traditions and customs of a Muslim Taluqdari family. Attia Hosain has presented a wide range of cultural aspects in her novel by portraying and critiquing some of the Indian cultural practices and customs.

Sunlight on a Broken Column: A Brief Overview:

The novel delves into the life story of Laila, who is introduced as a fifteen-year-old orphan at the beginning of the tale and concludes as a widow with a daughter of her own, also aged fifteen. This narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the disintegration of a close-knit joint family, brought on by the downfall of the feudal order and the partitioning of India. It captures a critical era in Indian history, highlighting the gradual decline of the aristocratic culture in Lucknow. The writer examines the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, addressing issues of social class in marriage, and ongoing gender dilemmas, especially within a traditional Muslim household. The book portrays the political turmoil of the time and its profound impact on Laila and those around her. She reflects on the overpowering sense of history in the city, where "In the city, the past attacked the present, and the future was lost in conflict" (Hosain 88). Drawing on a narrative style that is partly autobiographical, the personal stories of the author lend authenticity to Laila's experiences.

The opening lines of the novel, "The day my aunt Abida moved from the *zenana* (secluded part of the house for women) 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" (Hosain 14), proclaims two significant facts about the narrative. The first one is the position of women and the traditions imposed on them, and the second is the deteriorating health of the head of *Ashiana* (the family home), symbolizing the gradual decay of the entire cultural system.

The novel spans around thirty years, and focuses on the representation of the protagonist, paving her way through the challenges that she faced being an orphan and a Muslim woman. The author illustrates the story of pre- and post-Independence. Hosain points out the havoc that was created and the effect it had on both Hindu and Muslim populations. She shows how at first the different ideologies divided the country which later resulted in the Partition of India. The political turbulence runs parallel to the personal disorganization and is depicted through the characters of varied backgrounds in the novel. "Hosain's novel becomes a microcosm for the nation where the changes in the country regarding its freedom struggle followed by partition are mirrored in the changing familial structure and relationships at home." (Dey).

The novel describes the events that lead to the consequent fall of *Ashiana's* residents. After the death of Baba Jan, his son, Hamid, takes control of the house, but with the Partition and the abolishment of the Feudal System, everything gets disintegrated. Laila, Zehra and Abida get married and leave the house. One of Hamid's sons moved to Pakistan after the partition. The family no longer holds the kind of power which they once had and that results in utter disbelief of Hamid's wife, especially after the death of her husband. At the end of the novel, the family home is sold, and nothing is left of the past life, except for all the memories.

Culture in Lucknow

The events of the novel chiefly take place in Lucknow, the city of Nawabs and follow the story of a typical Taluqdar Muslim family. "Taluqdars were aristocrats who formed the ruling class during the Delhi Sultanate, Bengal Sultanate, Mughal Empire and

British Raj. They were owners of a vast amount of lands, consistently hereditary, and had revenue and judicial powers" (Wikipedia). The Muslim Taluqdars significantly influenced the culture of Lucknow in 1932, which is the temporal context of the novel. Historically, the capital of the Awadh region was Lucknow, ruled by the Delhi Sultanate. Later, the power was transferred to the Mughal Empire and the Nawabs of Lucknow. After the coming in of the Britishers, in the year 1856, the British East India Company took complete control and handed the power to the British Raj in 1857. A rich Muslim culture and noble elites sustained. The Taluqdars enjoyed a luxurious life and were considered the elite members of the society; their chief work was to collect land revenues for the Britishers. They had their equal share in exploiting the common people. The feudal system was abolished with the departure of the Britishers from India in 1947. The novel shows the aftermath of the abolishment of the Taluqdari system in the Taluqdari-Muslim family. The home, which was once so culturally rich, suffers at the hands of this tremendous change. Anita Desai wrote, "One realises that she could have found no better way to describe feudalism than to bring to life its many representatives." (Desai 7).

There was a strong emphasis on the concepts of *Purdah* (Veil), *Nazaquat* (delicacy), *Izzat* (honour), *Sharam* (dishonour) and distinguished etiquette in the culture of Lucknow, and Attia Hosain has presented a true account of such cultural concepts in her novel. The women of the household were expected to follow a strict *Purdah* system; they were not allowed to pursue higher education or to take a stand for themselves. They were given a secluded area to live in, called a *Zenana*, and spent their lives. Women were not allowed to marry the person of their own choice; moreover, in Muslim households, like the one in the novel, marriages between cousins were acceptable, in fact, preferable as well. In addition to that, the idea of joint families flourished during that age, but with the warmth that came with living in a joint family also came the challenges. "My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question" (Hosain 38), says Abida to Laila when she questioned the authority. Honour and Shame were the two most important components of the society, and it was not restricted to elite families.

"In spite of occasional laughter, the struggle is serious, and it is not only the wealthy and titled who live for *Izzat* and die for *Sharam*. The same primal passion possesses those who live in the lowly servants' quarters of the compound." (Desai 8). Furthermore, The Taluqdars held a high position in the society, and because of the influence of the English culture, they hosted and attended many social gatherings.

Lucknow of the 1930s portrayed in the novel was so culturally rich. It was known for its etiquette and intricacies. A place most famous for its food and celebration of festivals.

Political Turmoil

The novel is set during the most challenging period of the Indian history. The narrative unfolds at a time when the fight for freedom had reached its zenith, placing the Taluqdar family squarely in the midst of the turmoil. The tale first touches upon the contemporary movements through Mrs. Martin, Laila's governess, who educates her about the Non-Cooperation Movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi. Despite societal expectations for women to remain apolitical, Laila and her college friends frequently shared their political beliefs. Laila particularly relished the opportunity to engage in such discussions with Asad.

The heightened sense of Nationalism in people also led to the formation of conflicting ideologies. For example, Asad and Zahid, brothers, had opposite ideas of the concept of Independence. Asad wanted to participate in the freedom movements and he believed in the notion of secularism. He understood the British propaganda of pitting Hindus and Muslims against each other. On the other hand, Zahid was a realist. He believed in the concept of humanism and voiced his opinion regarding the processions of Muharram, saying, "I tell you the Shias blaspheme and all such processions are sinful; those who take them out are worse than idolaters and are damned." (Hosain 56). During the processions of *Muharram* that year, there were talks of a communal riot taking place. The women of the household were not allowed to watch the procession, and the men were told not to participate in it. But Asad went anyway, and the riot did take place. He was badly injured when he was brought home by Zahid. Asad expresses his desire to study at Jamia

Millia Islamia to Hamid when they were still in Hasanpur (their ancestral village) for Baba Jan's funeral, rather than Allahabad University. He explains that the former catered the idea of Nationalistic Muslims whereas the latter was more on the revolutionary end. This explains the kind of effect the freedom struggle had on the universities and education system. Everyone was trying to impose their own ideas.

There was a clash of beliefs between the people of two different generations, specifically Hamid and his son. Laila narrates, "No one seemed to talk any more; everyone argued, and not in the graceful tradition of our city... In the thrust and parry, there was a desire to inflict wounds." (Hosain 230). The fall of the Taluqdari system after the Independence led to the loss of identity for the lords of Feudalism; they struggled to adjust to the new world, thus making this massive victory a little bittersweet for them. "At the end of a long, legal struggle, landowners had to accept the fact that their feudal existence had been abolished constitutionally..." (Hosain 277). The novel also presents the gradual hatred that started to build against the two major communities of India. The author suggests that the hatred between Hindus and Muslima that eventually led to the partition of the country was slowly embedded in the minds of people.

The partition was one of the most tragic events that ever occurred worldwide. Kemal, Hamid's elder son, leaves India and settles in Pakistan. We meet Laila for the last time five years after the havoc of the partition. She visits her childhood home, which is now all disoriented one last time. The novel's last chapters serve as a reminder for the readers of the personal and the National loss.

Gender Representation in the Novel

Attia Hosain has put out a very typical patriarchal set-up in the novel. The gender representation in the novel is somewhat conventional. The head of the household, Baba Jan, is an archetypal patriarch. The distant male relatives were allowed to give their suggestions and impose their power of being a man, especially on the women of the household. Unlike the male members of the family, Laila was not allowed to pursue her higher education abroad. Laila's distant poor relatives, Asad and Zahid, were sent off for their

studies, as did Kemal and Saleem, Uncle Hamid's sons. She was told to be grateful that her family was letting her continue her studies because education for women was not easily accessible. Moreover, women were not expected to have political opinions. Despite all this, Attia Hosain broke certain conventional norms and gave voice to the women, realistically, adhering to the actual condition of the society of that time.

Abida, Baba Jan's youngest daughter, lives in Ashiana till she's married to an incompatible man. She has been portrayed as a strong woman trapped inside the web of patriarchy. She gives in to the dominant power without any protest unwillingly; Zahra (Aunt Majida's daughter), on the other hand, does that with all her willingness. Zahra, who is of the same age as Laila, resents any kind of protest against the set institutions of society. This treatment of women was not restricted to the upper strata of society; the lower strata suffered even worse. When Jumman dhobi's wife's condition deteriorates after having a stillborn baby, and Laila suggests that she should be taken to the doctor, he says, "Be shameless and be seen by all those doctors and half-doctors? Better to die at home." (Hosain 136). This shows how adhering to the social construct was more important than the life of a woman. "Women are victims of the patriarchal system even within the domestic space that is supposed to be their sole domain." (Kandhare).

Hosain's delineation of the female characters cleverly portrays how women were conditioned to conform to patriarchy. "...One's culture is reflected in the severity with which the importance of tradition is stressed by older female characters on the younger ones" (Dey). For instance, Aunt Saira objected to Laila's actions at multiple places; she told her, "There are certain social rules that she must learn." (Hosain 149). These rules were only thrust upon a woman, and usually by a woman. Moreover, we see how the ever-loving Aunt Abida decides to break off all her ties with Laila after her decision to get married by her choice. These illustrations given by the author only exemplify the idea of 'women putting women down'.

The women were accustomed to be quiet and soft. They were trained to laugh gently and have a delicacy in their manners. In the novel, the women of the household were not allowed to step out of their Zenana; they were not expected to have a life outside

of those four walls. They were conditioned to follow the set traditional code of conduct and give in to the will of men. The men, however, enjoyed all the freedom.

After the death of Baba Jan, Uncle Hamid takes control of the entire household, dictating its workings. The responsibility of the entire family falls on his shoulders. He takes several decisions, marries off Abida and Zahra, allows Laila to pursue higher education and send Asad to study at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. He controls all of Laila's actions, and strongly opposes her willingness to marry Ameer, because it was unconventional for a woman to marry a man of her choice. He exclaims, "I respect an independent mind, but while you are in my charge and until I consider you are fit, you will be guided by me. I will not allow any action of which I disapprove." (Hosain 160). Although, he also opposes the match of his son, Kemal with a Parsee girl. It is symbolic of how, with the loss of his authority as a wealthy Taluqdar, he also loses his power as the head of the house.

The Female Agency

Attia Hosain presents Muslim women in a realistic light but also gives them agency in her narrative. Laila, a character in the story, is encouraged to pursue her education. Although she sometimes questions authority, her challenge is not overt but rather a critical reflection on social institutions, which she does not blindly accept. Laila is portrayed as a voice of reason, introduced as a fifteen-year-old at the beginning of the novel, allowing readers to witness her transformation into the woman she becomes. Raised primarily by her aunt, Abida, she is cautioned to "Never forget the family into which you were born" (Hosain 38), suggesting that regardless of her experiences, she must uphold her family's honor. Laila critiques both the Purdah system and the concept of marriage, questioning, "A thing can't be shameful at one time and not another, for one person and not another. Besides, if it is such a shameful business being married and having children, why talk of nothing but marriage from the moment a girl is born?" (Hosain 105).

Nandi, a maidservant in *Ashiana*, has been portrayed as one of the strongest female characters in the novel. She has been given an agency to speak her mind by the author. She opposes the dominance of

patriarchy and challenges the men in authority without fearing the repercussions. She was being accused of having an inappropriate relationship with the cleaner, which was untrue. Nandi protested against the backlash she received because of this rumour, but since she was a woman and of a poor background. Uncle Mohsin, a distant relative of Laila, said, "This slut of a girl is a liar, a wanton." (Hosain 28). Her reply, "A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?" (Hosain 28), shows the kind of agency she possessed. Nandi expressed her hatred towards Ghulam Ali, who murdered Saliman, another maidservant. She speaks about Saliman to Laila saying her mistake was that "she was full of fears and she showed it." (Hosain 228). Nandi lured Ghulam Ali and then showed him his place, "Ghulam Ali became her slave, she tormented and tantalised him with the consciousness of her beauty, and the absolute rectitude of her conduct." (Hosain 228). She accused him of sexually harassing her later, which ultimately led to him leaving the town after being brutally beaten up. Nandi was not like the other maidservants as described by Laila; she wore corseted clothes and had a strong will.

Women in the novel have been portrayed in the most authentic manner. Attia Hosain, being a woman from a Taluqdari family, raises the internal and societal issues that come along in a woman's life. She has depicted a wide spectrum of the kind of women in the society, all of them a victim of patriarchy in one way or another.

The institution of Marriage

Multiple marriages in the novel help to establish the concept of marriage as an essential theme of the story. The cultural aspect of the institution of marriage is showcased through the different ideologies that the characters hold on the topic. No marriage is the same in the novel; some have been done out of necessity, some out of love and others for the sake of clinging to societal notions. The girls were raised with the idea that they were to be married off.

The marriages of Abida and Zahra were shown to be different but conventional. Abida sacrifices herself for the duty of being a wife. She completely loses her identity and gives up. In contrast to her, Zahra thrives in her marriage. She was conditioned to be a wife, a role that she thought was

perfect for her. She attended social parties and went on trips abroad.

One of the most rebellious marriages is of Laila with Ameer, who does not belong to an aristocratic background. They fall in love with each other and decide to persuade their families for their marriage. Uncle Hamid, Aunt Abida, and everyone else oppose the match, but Laila is determined to get married to the love of her life. She does, "In the morning the sun would come and waken me in this house as it had done since I became a conscious being. Yet I had already left this home forever" (Hosain 267), Laila narrates. Everyone turns their back against Laila, as she supposedly brought in dishonour to her family. She resented this disapproval more after the death of her husband and no amount of efforts that were put into reconciliation by her family members could make Laila get attached to them.

Sita, Laila's friend, was in love with Kemal. But she married another man because she knew that it would be too difficult for her to convince her parents to let her marry a Muslim man. She says, "Our love is our own, inside us, but our marriage would have been outside ourselves, everyone else's." (Hosain 215). However, Kemal marries a non-Muslim, Miss Wadia, and Laila recounts, "He had committed an even greater crime than I had; he had married a non-Muslim, Mrs. Wadia's daughter." (Hosain 276). Hamid strongly opposed this marriage as well, saying, "You can marry anyone you like. But independently of me. As long as I am master of this house, I decide who lives in it." (Hosain 236). This was also one of the dominant reasons why he moved to Pakistan with his wife after the partition.

CONCLUSION

Anita Desai observed, "...Attia Hosain has painted a gallery full of portraits, varied and rich and interesting, lit by occasional flashes of humour like flakes of mica or mirrorwork." (10). The novel significantly portrays Indian cultural heritage and highlights the paradigm shift that rocked the nation post-independence. Hosain has weaved a story in this backdrop to represent transformations in the institution of marriage, interpersonal relationships, the position of women, and the Taluqdari system. "Sunlight on a Broken Column" skillfully captures the

shifts in social and cultural customs, illustrating how the advent of modernity, while promoting awareness and empowerment, simultaneously led to the erosion of the values and principles that once united Indian families.

REFERENCES

- [1] NPTEL-NOC IITM. "Introduction to Cultural Studies." YouTube, 2018
- [2] Hosain, Attia, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Penguin Books, 2009
- [3] Dey, A. (2016) 'The domestic sphere in Attia Hosain's sunlight on a broken column (1961): The Home Mirrors the world.', *The Grove - Working Papers on English Studies* [Preprint], (23). doi:10.17561/grove.v23.a4.
- [4] Saleem, A.U., Rasheed, S. and Aqeel, A. (2019) 'Intersectionality, matrix of domination and female agency in Hosain's sunlight on a broken column', *Global Social Sciences Review*, IV(I), pp. 403-409. doi:10.31703/gssr.2019(iv-i).52.
- [5] Kandhrare, Ram S. "Thematic Study of Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column." *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2021, pp. 58-61. ISSN(Online): 2321-9467
- [6] Gupta, Priyanka. "Patriarchal Domination and Quest for Identity in Sunlight on a Broken Column." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. II, no. IV, October 2017, pp. 37-42. ISSN: 2455-6580
- [7] Bhardwaj, Ananya. "Idea of Home and Estrangement in Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 46, no. 2, Summer 2023, pp. 101-136. ISSN: 2455-6580
- [8] Choudhury, Arifur Rahman. "Female Bildungsroman in Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column." *Journal of Positive School psychology*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2022, pp. 3206-3211. ISSN: 2455-6580
- [9] Lucknow (2024) Wikipedia. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucknow> (Accessed: 02 July 2024).
- [10] Sunlight on a broken column - Attia Hosain (1961) (2014) heavenali. Available at: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2014/03/19/sunlight-on-a-broken-column-attia-hosain-1961/> (Accessed: 02 July 2024).

[11] (No date) Unit 29 themes and characterization.

Available at:

<https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/27547/1/Unit-29.pdf> (Accessed: 02 July 2024).

[12] Dixit, Dr. Ekta. *The Theme of the Partition*