

## THE GRIM LEGACY OF PARTITION IN ATTIA HOSAIN'S SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

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Poonam Charan\*

### ABSTRACT

*The change from a wealthy and glorious force in society to becoming deficient and impoverished has been dramatized in Sunlight on a Broken Column. The dissipation of family also contains the scattering of a way of life. Laila's experience of destitution and her notion about the revolutionary zealots are described retrospectively. Attia Hosain portrays the significant years when Laila grows up and becomes mature enough to think about the socio-political issues. She has narrated the last section reflexively through Laila's point of view. Her personal experience of loss helps us understand the experiences of those who may not have been refugees but did suffer nonetheless. There is a perception of frozen time and an element of mystery in this journey through memory lane amidst the ruins of the home that once nurtured Laila. She remains an objective and unprejudiced observer than an active participant in Politics.*

**Keywords:** Partition, Migration, Disintegration, Feudalism, Loyalty.

### Introduction

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* handles the theme of Partition from a different spatial-cultural background and offers a comprehensive study of an elite Muslim *taluqdari* family and its struggle during the division. The novel was published in 1961, and the title has been taken from T. S. Eliot's famous poem *The Hollow Man*. It chronicles the downfall of the feudalistic order of society and the struggles to preserve its heritage. The narrative is divided into four parts and unfolds the disintegration of a family in the backdrop of Partition. Several Indian English writers have tried to depict the trauma, tumult and tribulations of the division of the Indian Subcontinent and its terrible aftermath. Hosain's novel traces the growth, development and transformation of an orphaned girl Laila and her journey towards self-realization. In this sense, the novel could be categorized as a bildungsroman. Laila and her cousins Asad and Kemal search for identity and a settled order in the pretext of turbulent changes. The four parts of the narrative project the growing alienation and fate of Muslims in India trying to figure out the significance of the Promised Land. Niaz Zaman considers:

Hosain touches upon the brokenness of the Muslim nation as she does upon the broken family. Thus, as the family squabbles about who will go to Pakistan and who will not, the point that Pakistan can not be the homeland of all the Indian Muslims is stressed. (107)

Part one of the narrative focuses on the large extended family of Laila and her equation with the several family members living a privileged life in the mansion *Aashiana*. This part of the novel depicts the conservative mode of society where religion, morals, prestige are always held high. Women observe purdah and are heavily guarded by their men folks. The world of Laila collapses after the death of her grandfather Baba Jan and the following dispersion and disintegration of the family. Part second of the text deals with Laila's adjustment and bewilderment in a different environment headed by her uncle Hamid. This part emphasizes the impacts of changing socio-political life in pre-partition India. Uncle Hamid and Aunt Saira prefer the western norm of behaviour. Laila despises this world of affectation, and the urge to rebel grows more in her.

Part third and fourth of the novel represents the trauma of Partition, which destabilizes the family. The protagonist finds love and support in Ameer, a junior lecturer at Aligarh Muslim University. Ameer's status is quite inferior to Laila's, but this never hinders her way to marry a person of her choice. In this way, Laila affirms her individuality which is a step further in her quest for revival and identity formation. Laila's final visit to her ancestral house *Aashiana* rekindles the suppressed memory after a lapse of fourteen years. She vividly remembers her childhood days, her aunts and cousins lost in the wind of destruction. This

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\* Assistant Professor (English), Government Dungar College, Bikaner, Rajasthan, India.

section portrays the throes of Partition on the lives of each individual and how it cracked their world apart. Laila's cousins Kemal and Asad opt for their motherland despite countless troubles. For them, the choice is clear, as stated by Kemal: "This is my country. I belong to it. I love it. That is all. One does not bargain" (287). On the other hand, Zahra, Saleem and Nadirs voice their disregard for staying in India and echo the doubts about the fate of Muslims in free India. Novy Kapadia states:

The disruption of a settled order, of family relationships and human feelings, is what Attia Hosain characterizes in the last section of the novel. A similar vulnerability of human understanding and life, caused by the throes of Partition, is echoed in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*. Both women novelists stress the inexorable logic of Partition, which moves on relentlessly, leading to friends and families being separated and lost from each other. (178-179)

The grim legacy of Partition and its impact could be felt in the last section of the narrative. Zahid boards the train to Pakistan in search of a new homeland, where the interests and identity of Muslims were promised. However, unfortunately, this train meets the similar fate of brutal attacks like many others, and everyone is massacred. The unfortunate turn of events proves fatal as Ameer is killed in World War II, leaving Laila dejected and alone with her only daughter. During riots, Laila and her daughter are rescued by Ranjit and further helped by Sita. As per the norm of the day, thousands fled and were forced to take shelter under camps. At one instance, Laila reprimands Zahra: "Where were you Zahra, when I sat up through the nights, watching village after village set on fire, each day nearer and nearer?" (304)

Attia Hosain has been able to make up counter images through the reconstruction of the memory of the ordinary and the popular through the perspective of her protagonist Laila. The novelist's stress on psychological existence and a reflexive approach to memory differentiates her writing from her contemporaries and her predecessors. As Feuchtwang suggests, "the home is a mappable place of shared memory; such territorial mapping may include, as in this case, a sense of distances, silences and blanks in the memory." (72). Hosain's mapping of several kinds of loss and displacement amidst the destruction at the end of the novel is suggestive of a strange and unusual sense of fractures in shared memory.

*Sunlight on a Broken Column* offers a deep insight into the recollection of the nostalgic past. Laila's final visit to her ancestral house after the lapse of fourteen years projects the image of disintegration. The majesty and grandeur of *Aashiana* are lost, and it has become dilapidated and taken over by refugees and evacuees from Pakistan. Bureaucrats and politicians in numerical figures already sealed the fate and condition of refugees. Hosain has tried to explain the misery of those uprooted from the land and hearth forever: "Faced by prospects of poverty, by the actual loss of privilege, there were many who lost their balance of mind when their world cracked apart. Others retired to anonymity in their villages." (277)

The dissipation of family also contains the scattering of a way of life. Laila's experience of destitution and her notion about the revolutionary zealots are described retrospectively. Ameer dies tragically during the Second World War, leaving Laila alone with their child. During the violence Laila was saved by Sita and Ranjit who risk their lives to ensure her safety.

The past glory and majesty of the feudal world were lost in the maze of the deadly blow of Partition. Hosain is critical of the new laws imposed by the new government. According to the new rules and regulations, the Muslims who left for Pakistan were considered evacuees, confiscating their property. Aunt Saira's agonies evoke the plight of the deprived rendered homeless and alienated by the officials. Thousands of families fled to safer places leaving everything behind- the world of contentment, happiness and pride. Aunt Saira expresses her sorrow and laments in the following statement:

What right have they to steal what is ours? Will they never be content with how much they rob? Is there no justice? Why treat those people like enemies who went over? Were they warned they would lose their property and have their families harassed? If they want to drive out Muslims, why not say it like honest men? Sheltering behind the false slogans of a secular state! Hypocrites! Cowards! (279)

The trauma and the madness witnessed by several characters burden the psyche. The collective remembrance of glorious past left behind creates a vacuum which further hinders in the way of adjustment. The fact that past never dies and is rather invoked in everyday experiences and reiterated in memories is evident in the personal histories and social relations. Its shadows not only effect the present but also influence the future course of action. The objective of Partition Studies is to explore the reasons, the tactics and manipulations of political leaders and its deadly impact on the masses.

The vivisection of country on religious line compels us to think of the date 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 to be celebrated as Independence Day or to be remembered as Martyr's Day. The long awaited freedom came with a prize. The characters discussed in the novel don't seem to celebrate the occasion of freedom; rather they are confused at the mass destruction and bloodshed. How the poison of communalism was spread amidst the masses is a major issue discussed in the thesis. The awareness of communal antagonism and its development added fuel to the fire.

*Sunlight on a Broken Column* has a linear structure and it offers a reflexive approach at the culmination. It is a story of Laila's growing awareness and her coming to terms with the tragic incidents of violence and mayhem during Partition. Her refusal to conform to the set patterns was foundational in the process of self-realization and authenticity. The novel depicts the plight of those Muslims who were not refugees, but suffered equally, were part of the violence and were termed as traitors as *kaafirs* for staying. The novelist explores the myriad ways of transformation of the narrator heroine Laila through odd times. The shattering ideals and falling legacy of Muslim aristocracy during 1930s and 40s in Lucknow is depicted poignantly in the narrative.

Laila's awareness and realization of the hypocrisies of the society and her British liberal education added to the growing tension within her mind regarding the specified role and duty towards family, society and nation. Her upbringing according to the norms of traditional Muslim *taluqdari* family prioritized strict adherence to customs and culture. Laila's bewilderment at the insensitivity of people around her in order to preserve self and culture is a turning point in her development. The futile attempt to save the servant girl Nandi from beating, sudden empathy with an old woman waiting for debt remission and her discovery of the reason behind Saliman's death brings to our consideration the sensitivity of the narrator and her quest for emancipation.

Saleem's visit after the division exemplifies a different perspective and attitude in the psyche of those Muslims who chose Pakistan. Informative years Saleem stood for the neo-paradise that would offer peace and security, urging his family to join in this quest for self-identification. However, unfortunately, his ideas and beliefs are turned futile. During his visit to India, he finds relatives and friends unchanged despite the differences. They still love him and expect his arrival. The bitter memories of Partition are aroused by a blue-turbaned man in a club and call Saleem a bloody traitor. The sudden response infuriates Kemal and Ranjit and saddens Saleem. Such instances in the narrative remind us of the prevailing aspects of communalism and mutual distrust. Isabella Bruschi's comments regarding Laila's personal growth and maturity are worth noting:

The experience of Independence and of the worst effects of Partition, which will cause the final collapse of Laila's family and circle, will add to her insight into herself, into her relationships with the others and into reality. Yet, without her personal partition-which teaches Laila to stand on her own feet-she would not have been able to draw from the Partition of the country a lesson about what is really essential. (150)

It can be concluded that the narrative exemplifies the blended emotions of bewilderment and awareness, loyalty and duty, honour and dishonour. It explores the plight of several members of a united idealistic feudal family divided in the aftermath of the Partition. The thesis delves deeper into the psychic state of individuals torn apart from their home and hearth. Through Laila's consciousness, we come across varied emotions of fear, loss and bewilderment of the common man caught in the whirlpool of violence. The narrative sheds light on the ghastly circumstances of millions of refugees rendered homeless overnight and depicts the false realization of the veracity of the neo-paradise.

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