



Research Paper

Thematic Study of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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ABSTRACT: Attia Hosain's feminist concern also includes women of every stratum of society. Attia's writings emerged before the sign of second wave feminism in US and UK and feminism was also limited to certain segments of women. Attia's feminist approach is not restricted to some specific sections of women; rather it epitomizes the oppressed and marginalized women of every stratum of society. She introduces minute subtleties of a world class Muslim household in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* so as to demonstrate women's persecution at various dimensions. There is plethora of specific events that accentuates the narrator's intellectual development from childhood to maturity. Laila, the protagonist, is a member of a highly patriarchal set up. Having lost her parents at an early age, she lives with her paternal grandfather and is cared for by her father's unmarried sister Abida. As a bildungsroman, the novel consists of a number of youthful characters, but it is through the consciousness of Laila that readers enter into the closed inner quarters of 'Ashiana'. The novel is autobiographical in nature and Laila's social and political ideas bear the imprints of her creator Attia Hosain.

KEY WORDS: woman, gender, religion, patriarchy, feminine identity.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The writings of Indian Muslim women are more or less an insight into their life and thoughts. Their novels are a critique and analysis of social and gender inequalities, be it from the viewpoint of religion or culture. Attia Hosain's feminist concern also includes women of every stratum of society. Attia's writings emerged before the sign of second wave feminism in US and UK and feminism was also limited to certain segments of women. Attia's feminist approach is not restricted to some specific sections of women; rather it epitomizes the oppressed and marginalized women of every stratum of society. She introduces minute subtleties of a world class Muslim household in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* so as to demonstrate women's persecution at various dimensions. *Ashiana* is a microcosm of Attia's society. Despite the fact that Attia migrated to England, her works do not portray migratory experiences; she holds the view that mere physical liberation does not end women's marginalization; rather intellectual liberation is also needed to eradicate women's peripheralisation. Attia Hosain demonstrates the nexus of patriarchy with colonialism and feudalism. In a strict patriarchal-feudal family, Laila's self-realization gives her impetus to protest against andocentric practices. Attia condemns patriarchal education that makes women intellectually enslaved. Attia illustrates that in patriarchal structure, marriage is used as a domineering tool.

The process of maturity and quest of identity is incalculable and slow and comprises of numerous conflicts between the person's yearnings, needs, desires and the value system entailed by the social order in which the individual lives. The novel can be reviewed in multiple ways. Since it is narrated through the consciousness of Laila and unfolds her intellectual development, it fulfills the criterion of *bildungsroman*. A *bildungsroman* is a story of an individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The process of development is defined in terms of the individual's quest for identity and meaningful existence in the social set up. Finally the protagonist is accommodated in society, displaying the spirit and values of the social order. The novel ends with an evaluation by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society.²

The novel emerged in 1961, but it comprises the duration from 1932 to 1952, a crucial period marked by socio-political turmoil in the Indian sub-continent. There is plethora of identifiable events that accentuates the narrator's intellectual development from childhood to maturity. Laila, the protagonist, is a member of a highly patriarchal system. Having lost her parents at an early age, she lives with her paternal grandfather and is nurtured by her father's unmarried sister Abida. As a *bildungsroman*, the novel consists of numerous youthful characters, but it is through the perception of Laila that readers pierce into the closed inner quarters of

'Ashiana'. The novel is autobiographical in nature and Laila's social and political ideas uphold the imprints of her creator Attia Hosain.

Quest for identity

The novel can also be interpreted as Laila's quest for identity. Her consciousness of the power politics played by the patriarchy is evident in her vivid narration. At the outset of the novel the claustrophobic ambiance 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 meticulous observation of the patriarchal functioning of the house constructs her different from other female members of the family. Unlike them Laila has been given a western education.

Gender segregation, a strict code of conduct, is apparent in the opening 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) Laila's observation of the looming death of Baba Jan, her grandfather, as well as her experiences of the strict patriarchal structure in the house give details of her clairvoyance.

The depiction of Baba Jan's drawing room is symbolic of patriarchal control. The coloured panes of arched doors stand for the patriarchal power of Baba Jan whereas light is representative of freedom for the women of the house. The light of freedom is thwarted by the patriarchal domination. Instead of light, only shadows flicker in the vast room. Laila's comment about her grandfather "Surely he couldn't die, this powerful man who lived the lives of so many people for them, reducing them to fearing automatons" (p.31) describes Baba Jan's patriarchal power; his presence will reign even after his death in the form of Uncle Hamid.

Though Laila and Zahra grow up together, they are completely diverse characters. The submissive and claustrophobic situation of the womenfolk is apparent in Laila's assertion: "Zahra and I felt our girlhood a heavy burden." (p.14) Whereas Laila is progressive in her attitude; Zahra opts to insulate herself in the roles endorsed by the patriarchy.

Marriage is the most significant point and it is a central concern of a young girl's life. Attia Hosain beautifully portrays a panorama of young Muslim women's lives. Laila, whose vision is modeled by an upper crust Western education merged with the focused attention of her aunt, examines other young girls trying to make sense of their lives. Zahra states: "I was brought up to do my duty." (p.147) another aspect is displayed in the form of Zainab. Despite living in Hasanpur, Zainab is more liberal in certain aspects than Laila and Zahra. Laila's ideas on marriage are drastically different from other girls. For Zahra, marriage seems to be a freedom from the limitations enforced by her mother. For Zainab, marriage will fetch her opportunity to enjoy luxuries "jewels and nice clothes." (p.295). "Now I serve my mother and father and brothers, then I'll serve my husband, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law." (p.95) ironically, she will acquire jewels and good clothes as a return for her works.

Laila's surveillance of Abida's troubles and her accepting attitude accentuates Laila's maturity. She questions mutely about the sense of duty necessitated upon women: "I suffered more because of Aunt Abida's acceptance of her life- and her silence. (p.252)... 'Dutiful to whom?'... 'To what?'... 'To what I believe is true? Or those I am asked to obey? I wanted to say.'" (p.252) Abida's marriage to a widower is also a marriage of adjustment, arranged by her brother Hamid. in spite of the antagonistic attitude of the women at her in-laws house, she compromises the circumstances because of her obedience to duty and endures it as her 'kismet' (fate).

Laila's 'progress towards individuation' is highlighted through repeated questions about her difference from others which mirrors Laila's internal conflicts: "Why did you not bring me up like Zahra? Why did you send me among those other girls who are not torn apart? (p.38)... Why was I different from Zahra? What was wrong with me?" (p.161)

Nita's attitude towards education is acquisitive. She considers it only as a way to earn her living. Laila's response shows her unique and mature approach to education: "I believe my education will make me a better human being." (p.125) For Aunt Abida, education means absorbing a sense of responsibility whereas Aunt Saira sees women's education as an adornment to match to the new roles allocated to wives. The "responsibilities in this changing world" (pp.109-110) meant women had to maintain the family space virtuous. There was a dichotomy involving female and male dome. The awareness for female education was only to coach them as a merger of Eastern values and Western modernity so that women may improve the social status of their husbands. 'Home' was destined for women, keeping them out of public dominion and social realm was the considered space for their male counterparts.

Aunt Abida's angry reply intensely depicts the marginalized position 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)

As a kid Laila's command that the head carpenter create her a bow and arrow indicates her revolutionary spirit. The "little carved doll's cradle" prepared by the carpenter symbolizes the patriarchal mindset widespread in the society. Right from childhood, girls are stimulated to remain submissive to men and even the dolls given to them are conventional.

Laila's intellectual growth is highlighted through the surveillance of the patriarchal implementation at *Ashiana*. The novel is also classified as a "resistance narrative"³ against patriarchy and feudalism. Attia represents feudalism and patriarchy as two pillars of contemporary society. Laila's personality can be better known in relation to Zahra. She comes across an entirely different world at school. Her situation can be realized through Nadira's remark: "we are paying for being the product of two cultures." (p.211) although in contrast to Zahra, she never wears a veil; her life is hampered by the proclamations of patriarchy. Her isolating state is featured to her education and the ambiance 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 esteem of traditions incorporates her into the culture of the society. Laila's maturity is also assessed by her realization of marginalization on the base of class. Zahra's and Aunt Abida's typical feudal approach shows the nexus of patriarchy and feudalism.

Critique of the patriarchal:

Attia's critique of the patriarchal structure of Muslim society is not pointed to Islam, rather she resists the patriarchy for its analysis and interpretation of religion as a tool to propagate its domination over women. In the viewpoint of 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."⁴ However Attia's attitude to religion is not blasphemous and she is clearly not as radical as de Beauvoir. She values her religion: "To me religion was that... well drawing everybody together. It was never out of my mind that I was a Muslim."⁵

Zahra's responsibility and religiosity is criticized when after her marriage, she forgets her religiosity and acts in compliance to her husband's desires. Her desertion of purdah does not carry any transformation in her restricted state of mind. She performs as a 'modern' wife in obedience to her husband's desires but behind closed doors she sticks on to conventional values. Her marriage proves to be a move from one patriarchal array to another. Aunt Saira has the similar traditionalist approach to the patriarchal standards that Zahra presents. She is a resonance of her husband Hamid. Before marriage she hailed from a conventional middle class family and existed in strict purdah, as Uncle Hamid was educated in England. He had groomed her by a string of English 'lady-companions'. Sometimes her smart saris, discreet make up, waved hair, cigarette-holder and high-heeled shoes seemed to me like fancy dress. (p.87)

She removes the purdah not as her own cognizant choice; rather she comes out of purdah, only to correspond to 'new' patriarchal structures. Similar to Zahra, she is physically out of veil, but her intellectual confinement is apparent in her conventional mind-set. She is the orthodox 'new' woman, representing Eastern and Western civilization. Laila describes that Baba Jan was greatly disappointed of Saira's westernization; "Baba Jan had never been able to forgive his son for opting a Western way of living, bringing his wife out of purdah, neglecting the religious education of his sons and doing all this openly and proudly." (p.87) Saira's liberty from strict purdah cannot be understood as a representation of Hamid's reformist initiatives; but Hamid simply personalized the patriarchal ideas of Baba Jan in accordance with the demands of time. Saira's modernity is just simulacrum. Towards the end, after her husband's death, she quits 'modernity' and goes back to the traditional way of living.

Aunt Abida is depicted as supporter of old values and standards. After Baba Jan's death, Hamid speedily organizes her marriage to an old widower. Laila views more insensitive marginalization of Aunt Abida at in-laws' house. In spite of the antagonistic atmosphere, Abida sacrifices her individuality for 'sense of duty'. She insists Laila, "You must learn that your 'self' is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfill your duty." (p.252) in spite of her care for Laila, she stubbornly disproves Laila's desire to marry Ameer. She feels it as Laila's rebelliousness and defiance: "You have been defiant and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to your family."[...] "You have let your family's name be bandied about scandal-mongers and gossips. You have soiled its honour on their vulgar tongues." (p.312) Jasbir Jain regards Abida a remarkable woman, with a sense of justice and balance.⁶

Nandi is childhood friend of Laila. Her father, Jumman, beats her for going against the patriarchal regulation of modesty by going to men's quarters. Jumman blames her shouting that she was "...found by the driver with the cleaner in the garage." (p.27) Nandi clarifies that she went to give the shirt he had forgotten. But Nandi's visit is a violation. She trespasses the borders of female space, dictated by the patriarchy. Men's quarters are the area that is restricted for women. A woman's admittance to the male realm is equivalent to sin and defiance of decorum in a strict patriarchal structure. Nandi's character pictures the subjugation of women on the base of class.

Through Saliman's excessive misery, Attia discloses the double standards of morality. Nandi's assertion, "You don't know what life can be for us. We are the prey of every man's desire" (p.168) reveals the severe form of deprivation and oppression of the poor and underprivileged. Although Nandi is uneducated, her strong determination to counteract the patriarchal domination makes her significant. But she also turns into the victim of Ghulam Ali's diabolic assault, as he wounds her arm and mutilates her beauty by blemishing her face from cheek to chin.

Laila's consciousness of her innate capabilities has resemblance with the course of social change: "For the first time I became aware that barriers built by the mind had no more substance than the fears that raised them; once they were overcome by action, it was hard to believe they had ever existed." (p.190)

Mulk Raj Anand says that the novel is "a jigsaw puzzle of her memories"⁷ Amina Amin emphasizes the image of restriction and liberty in the novel as well as portrays "three stages of freedom" passed by the speaker.⁸ In *Margins of Erasure*, several critics reviewed the novel as a purdah novel for "purdah motif is all pervasive in the novel."⁹ Jameela Begum consider s it as a cognizant attack on " 'the closed women's quarters' to demonstrate the joys, grieves, and experiences of the Muslim woman."¹⁰

II. CONCLUSION:

Laila's quest for feminine identity is denoted by her explicit denial to conform to the patriarchal standards. Characters of Nadira, Sita, and Romana demonstrate oppression of women regardless of their higher education. Attia speculates that imitation of western civilization does not bring any transformation in the marginalized position of women. Saira and Zahra come out of *purdah* only to correspond to the roles of 'new women' sustained by the patriarchy. Attia's portrayal of the under-privileged women stands for the impression of her imminence with the Progressive Writers. The predicament of Nandi, Saliman epitomizes the most horrible document of exploitation of women.

The scope of Attia's feminist concerns is very wide-ranging. In spite of her acknowledgement of western influence on her writings, she is greatly upfront of her western counterparts in dealing with issues of women. It can be argued that she is one of the precursors of Third-World Feminism.

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Bio note:

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