
Transformation of the Female Protagonist in Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column: an Analysis

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ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses on the secluded life of women, their helpless condition and their transformation on the basis of feminist perspectives. Attia Hosain's, Sunlight on a Broken column, blends the individual destiny of its female protagonist with the destiny of her nation. This article also projects Attia Hosain as a spontaneous woman writer with her excellent artistic skill in her critical and creative endeavours.

The study of woman in literature has become important only in recent times. Earlier, women accepted their presentation in literature without any reservations. But in the nineteenth century, women realized how male writers through the centuries had stereotyped women. Gradually they began to see that male prejudices have denied woman her right and rightful position in life. After all literature reflects life, and writers belonging to a society in which primacy is always given to man can present woman only from the culturally accepted norms of their society.

Of course we cannot say that a woman writes always remembering the fact that she is a woman. But if she is a woman in an uninhibited way, she will be a spontaneous woman in her critical and creative endeavours. In modern writing by women we find a lot of writing which is quite self-conscious about gender identity. Yet there have been writers who could bring together a spontaneous womanhood and an awareness of the wholeness in life. Such writers are indeed rare. It is interesting to study them.

Women prefer to lead the life of suspension. They are not willing to break away from the traditional pattern of life open for women. They are not willing to the next step of assimilation and move one step farther and gain female empowerment through education and by securing a gainful employment. Many have groomed to be submissive always. They do not appreciate the truth that female empowerment alone can enable a woman to shed their dependent and inferiority complexes. The exclusive air of freedom was reserved only for the men, while the women languished at home, their fate dependent on the whims and vagaries of a father, uncle, husband, brother or son. Belonging to this society, Attia Hosain grew up between the two worlds of tradition and modernity.

Attia Hosain examines the secluded life into which women particularly the Muslim women and the kind of life open to women, and how it is dangerous for women to gain education, the helpless condition of women how the women are forced to be either victims or rebels. Attia Hosain has a clear understanding of feminism and through her well-considered feminist perspectives, she offers ways and means through her female characters such as Laila, Nandi, Sita, and Mrs. Martinto reshape the thinking about gender, and the generation gap. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* presents two girls growing up in an aristocratic Muslim family in Lucknow.

In the Muslim society there is a sharper accent on what is expected to be what she is expected to do, and why and when she should wear the purdha, and what and with whom she could talk, and the level of education she should gain, and the kind of training to be given to her to groom her into a submissive, unassertive and dutiful wife. She is to give birth to any number of children as her husband wills and she should adjust and accommodate to live along with the several wives of her husband, for the Muslim male has the license to practice polygamy in life. Thus, the life of the Muslim women is conditioned by her religion and by the male and female elders of the family circle.

Laila, a young girl who has lost both her parents, lives in the household of 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. Though Laila, according to the wishes of her father, had the benefit of western education, she too keeps 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 nevertheless an autocratic guardian, allowing very little freedom to those who live under his rule.

From the angle of the requirements and conditions laid down by Muslim society for the Muslim women, Zahra met with all the requirements and conditions whereas Laila branched away from them. This is evident from the tender scolding of Hakimian Bua and Laila's refusal to heed to Hakimian Bua's advice. The following textual passage quoted from *Sunlight on a Broken Column* argues the points noted above:

Hakimian Bua came in slowly, heavily, grumbling, "The miles one has to walk in this house! My legs are weighted with lead, and every joint has needles stuck into it." And without pausing she changed to her tender scolding, "Child, put away that book. Those insect letters will eat away your eyes. Now then hurry! Abida Bitia is calling both of you." "Bua, Bua," I said, higgling her. "These books will be garlands of gold round my neck." ... [p. 17]

Laila, the forward-looking educated and sophisticated Muslim girl, hated her uncle, Moshin, for he never in the least bothered about the feelings, sentiments, thoughts and desires of women and that women are not inferior to men. He always placed the women in the second rate status. This male chauvinistic attitude of Moshin infuriated Laila, who embraced ways and means of female empowerment. Moshin and Laila's aunts discussed the issue of the marriage of Zahara, without in the least, taking into any serious consideration the feelings, sentiments and the likely preferences and predilections of Zahra. Incidentally, they try to silence Laila maintaining that Zahra will do as her elders decided and will not object to the choice of Zahra's husband made by them. Abida mentions the necessity of asking the girl's opinion on that issue, uncle Moshin is shocked and angrily shouts, "Is the girl to pass judgement on her elders? Doubt their capacity to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?"(20)

Aware of the state of mind of her niece, Aunt Abida cautions Laila, "My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. I do not wish anyone to point a finger at you, because it will be a sign of my failure. Never forget the family into which you were born."(38) But, unlike Laila, Zahra cares more for a successful marriage in the traditional sense of material gains and comfort than marrying for love.

No longer in purdah Laila starts attending college. Her university friends as well as her distant cousin Asad become involved in anti-government protests. Surrounded by people who are either pro-British or against, she, however, is unable to take sides. She is enmeshed in the struggle for her own personal freedom. Once when asked by her uncle to opine about the agitation going on in the university, she refuses to do so. On being asked whether she had no freedom of thought she answers that she has no freedom of action. Her rebellion against the hypocrisy visible in the so-called liberal views of her Uncle and his wife remains limited to her mind until she falls in love with Ameer. Ameer, a poor relative of their family friends, would never be approved by her family. She goes against their wishes to marry him, and wins her freedom from their authority.

In one of the party, Laila gets an opportunity to get closer to Ameer, as he is the friend of Ameer. It was a society where social dating never exist. Only in the social gatherings, or in the party, the young male and female or unmarried get a chance or opportunity to express speak themselves. Unfortunately, Laila love's who belongs to inferior branch of the family, lacking 'breeding'. Laila, once again meet Ameer and Ameer is in a position to accept her as his own. Though older generation wishes to stop them, Laila and Ameer are determined to be together as they are old enough, courageous enough and free enough to take their destiny into their own hands.

In India, family and the community have always played a central role. In spite of the changing life-patterns in urban India, lifestyles remain moulded by traditional notions of social roles. Individualism as a way of life has not yet penetrated Indian mores. Individual choices are often conditioned by the demands of family loyalty and 'honour' (*izzat*). Added to these constraints are those of caste, religion, region and class. These are particularly manifest in matters of marriage, arranged marriages still being the accepted norm. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* can only be properly understood against such a background.

On her part Laila is not willing to submit to the strict rules of the Muslim society and outdated practices of the Muslim family by giving vent to her feelings of disgust and wrath in the dialogue between herself and her cousin, Zahra, who is the double of Laila quoted *Sunlight on a Broken Column*:

"Laila, how could you have interfered? Aren't you ashamed?"

"Yes, I'm ashamed to call him [Uncle Moshinj uncle. I'm ashamed that you [Zahra] have no pity because Nandi is a servant girl. Besides, I don't care what anyone thinks. I don't care."

"Do you know what is wrong with you, Laila? All those books you read. You just talk like a book now, with no sense of reality. The only cure for Nandi is to get her married quickly."

"The cure for a good girl is to get her married quickly; the cure for a bad girl is to get her married quickly. Do you think anything but getting married quickly?"

"I suppose you think you will never get married?"

"I won't be paired off like an animal. How could you sit there listening to them talking as if you were a bit of furniture to be sold to the highest bidder? How can you bear the idea of just any man?"... [p. 29]

This is a striking dialogue. It helps the strong and progressive and dynamic mind-set of Laila when compared to the weak, docile, submissive, and unassertive mind orientation of Zahra. It projects the strong willed Laila as the type of the empowered woman as diagonally opposite to Zahra as the type of the suspended woman. In fact, Laila favours rich comparison with Toni Morrison's Sula in *Sula*, with Lorraine Hansberry's Bencthea in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and with Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple*.

Sunlight on a Broken Column blends the individual destiny of its female protagonist with the destiny of her nation. As G.J.V. Prasad comments:

This is a book about growing up, a woman, during the most existing years of our national history. The struggle for national independence was also a challenge to feudalism, to all old orders. Empowerment of the masses also called for the empowerment of women. Laila, the protagonist, learns to take control of life. Her personal struggle for freedom is fought out against the background of national struggle for Independence (10)

Sunlight on a Broken Column describes the traditional, straight forward even old- fashioned maner with some events. It was reminiscences of Laila, who left fourteen years ago after the death of her grandfather. Laila has come back with a hope to make another home with Ameer.

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