

SOCIETY IN TRANSITION: CULTURAL HISTORY IN
ATTIA HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN*

S. N. KIRAN
TUMKUR UNIVERSITY,
TUMKUR, INDIA

Abstract

South Asian Literature lends itself for variegated presentation of life and represents the multiplicity of cultures across the region. Literary sources authenticate that historical political developments give shape to the cultural patterns in a society. Hence, literary wealth of the subcontinent is rich and abundant in genres with varied themes. AttiaHosain (1913-1998) a well-known Progressive Muslim women novelist and a short story writer, attempts to document the events that troubled the status and psyche of Taluqdars in North India. The novel 'Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961)' describes the disintegration of feudal-aristocracy due to political changes in the country. An adolescent girl called Laila narrates the stories of the division of the families as witnessed by her. In addition, readers are reminded of Lenny in BapsiSidhwa's 'Ice-Candy Man (1989)' who recounts the events of brutal violence during and after the Partition of India. Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) is full of the memories of companionship, love, marriage and despair spread across three generations. The paper attempts to explore the cultural history of a society, which is in transition. These and other related issues will be the focus of attention.

Keywords: Cultural History, Society in Transition, Taluqdars, AttiaHosain...

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Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is a gallery full of portraits. Set in the first half of the Twentieth Century, the novel brings out the events leading to the breaking up of a Feudal Society. The early years of 1930s in India were full of political turmoil but communal harmony prevailed in the region. Although, Nationalists paved the way for freedom struggle, Fundamentalists began to gain strength. On the other hand, the young graduates who returned to India after obtaining their education from the reputed European universities had been influenced by the ideals of Socialism in Europe. They were of the view that Socialism would solve all the problems of inequality. Resultantly, writers, artists along with other young graduates galvanised their strength and formed Progressive Writers Association in 1937.

Progressive Writers Association focused on the issues of social justice in Literature and Art. It was an important influencing factor in shaping the writings of Attia Hosain. The left wing authors like Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand and others introduced the issues of the subalterns into South Asian Literature that were either ignored earlier, or not considered worthy of recognition and representation. The writers thought that it is necessary to bring to the attention of the nation the exploitation of the lower castes, working classes and gender oppressions in the country.

Attia Hosain (1913-1998) was born in the house of *Taluqdars* where values of Patriarchy and Feudalism were highly respected. The men folk had the benefit of the European education, the women read scriptures and their roles were limited to *Zenana*. The women lived in seclusion, obeying their elders, male members of the family, aristocracy and priests. No one could think against the clutches of social hierarchies based on religion, fame and honour of the family. Cooks, washer men, maidservants and other attendants served the

family.

Attia Hosain's inexhaustive interest in literature helped her to understand the realities of life. She was brought up under the care of an English Governess and her religious education was liberal. Ever since her childhood, she rebelled against the tradition of inequalities. She acknowledges that she was drawn into the Leftist ideologies by her half brother Mahmud Zafar who was an artist and a writer. He is one of the pioneers of the Progressive Movement in India. Inspired by the success of Socialism in Soviet Russia, her rebellious nature began to reject the hierarchies of Class and Caste in the society.

The Pre-partition period was known for Feudalism and communal harmony. People respected each other's religious values and joined hands together to fight against the British. The Muslims in the same fervour and enthusiasm with which Id and Bakrid were celebrated the Hindu Festivals like Diwali, Holi. However, political changes in the sub continent led to the decline of Feudalism. Feudal aristocracy began to decline as Nationalism began to gain force across the country. Subsequently, the Nationalist culture declined as Fundamentalists began to sow the seeds of Communalism to divide the country. Communal forces began to invent the marks of identity to unite the communities and divide the people. The gaps among the communities became wider and deeper in the society. Thus, Partition became inevitable. The events that followed the Partition led to the further division of communities and families. Acts of violence were justified and communities were engaged in the endless acts of violence and revenge. Resultantly, the psyche of the two communities became antagonistic to each other. It is only after the Partition of the country that individuals began to realise the futility of violence. Hence, the philosophies of co-existence, reconciliation and religious tolerance became inevitable for the inheritors of the sorrows of Partition.

For Attia Hosain, the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is a recollection of the memories of disintegration of a family due to political changes. It is the story of the journey of a girl from protected childhood to the unguarded present. The plot relates the life of Laila who has lost her parents in

her early childhood but she is protected by her Uncle Hamid and guided by her Aunt Abida until her marriage. It is a story of the growing consciousness and the development of the selfhood. The novel shows the Muslim's self in turmoil. The novel is structured into four parts. The death of Baba Jan at the end of the First Chapter begins a new era of Liberalism in the subsequent chapters. The Third Chapter brings out the disintegration of the Feudal Order and the Final Chapter is about the reconciliation of the present with the Past.

The novel is set in *Ashiyana* the ancestral house of Baba Jan in old Lucknow in harmonious undivided India. The high dividing walls separate the rich and the conservatives, from the poor vegetable vendors, hawkers on the streets. A unique observation by the novelist is the presence of communal harmony among the Muslims and the Hindus in the early days of the freedom struggle. Laila recollects that the best friends of Baba Jan included, Thakur Balbir Singh, a Rajput; Raja Hasan Ahmed of Amirpur, the builder of Palaces, and Mr. Freemantle- a lawyer, a scholar in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Baba Jan's friends visited him frequently. They respected each other's religious sentiments; the differences were never a hindrance to their friendship. Further, she adds, 'The four men loved the city to which they belonged, and they lived and behaved as if the city belonged to them (35).' However, changes in communal harmony between the Hindus and Muslims are noticeable in the later years of the Indian Freedom Struggle.

The ancestral house is symbolic of patriarchal hegemony and Feudal Aristocracy. Baba Jan, the maternal grandfather of the narrator is bed ridden; he is a Taluqdar and a commanding and formidable figure in the region. The House was the nerve centre of political activities. Baba Jan's friends marked the era of feudalism. The women practiced orthodoxy. Though the amorous behaviour of the men was ignored, the flirtatious women were severely punished. Aunt Abida who was the guardian to Laila took pride in the sense of belonging to the family of *Taluqdars* and firmly believed that any disobedience to tradition is unpardonable. Unfortunately, she becomes a victim of conservative prejudices in the later part of the novel. The rich squandered their wealth on the celebrations of marriages, festivities, and by hosting dinner

parties and indulged in the ugly show of wealth. However, with the death of Abha Jan, conservatism began to decline. His son Hamid returns home to look after the affairs of his father. The arrival of Uncle Hamid marks the era of Liberal views in the household. Hamid was educated in Europe and he was proud of his class. Baba Jan never forgave Hamid who had adopted the Western way of living and had brought the wife out of Purdah system. She had lived strictly in Purdah in an orthodox, middle class household until her marriage. Though Uncle Hamid appears rigid in his views, he was liberal. He says that

I have always believed in the education of girls, it is the duty of the parents and guardians to give them the kind of education that will best fit them for their responsibilities in this changing world (Hosain 110).

On the contrary, Uncle Hamid unsuccessfully attempts to consolidate all his powers to save Feudalism from decline. However, his two sons Kemal and Saleem are swayed by the changing political winds of the time. His eldest son Kemal who becomes a civil servant struggles to retain the wealth of the family. On the other hand, the younger son Saleem becomes a barrister. He is optimistic about the fruits of Partition and goes to live in Pakistan after the Partition. Laila the only daughter of Hamid's brother Ahmed is influenced by the Marxian ideologies. She begins to question her family's rules, traditions, customs, and the unquestionable privileges of the feudal lords. Class-consciousness and sexual exploitation in a feudal society are revealed through Laila's interactions with her maids in the house. The women of the elite classes were greatly dependent on their maids, who were doubly subjugated by class and gender. Marriage and bringing up of the children in the traditional manner with a certain amount of religious education were the duties of great importance. However, after the decline of Conservatism, these duties were gradually ignored. With an increased desire to protect the privileges of aristocracy, the institution of marriage and marital relationships were diluted as we witness in the character of Sita Agarwal.

Hosain criticises social hypocrisy and class inequalities. While elders entirely respected the honour of the family and adhered to conservative practices, the younger generation firmly believed in breaking the feudal structure to reconstruct an egalitarian society. However, breaking the conventions was discouraged. People credulously cling on to traditions and customs in faith. Laila's marriage with Amir was disapproved because of his lower economic status. Nandi's desire to be independent was always met with resistance. Laila withdraws to the mountain ranges to live far away from the influences of the feudal and conservative society.

The feelings of Nationalism and fundamentalism became intense during the Partition. Violence had already erupted in the city by the time of Baba Jan's death. Asad was injured during the riots. The youth were caught in the web of conflicting ideologies. Asad firmly believed in the philosophy of Liberal Humanism. He says to Zahid who is charged with communal ideas that hatred breeds hatred, violence and sorrow and it is self-destructive. Asad and Zahid symbolically represent the conflicts between the views of religious fanaticism and liberal Humanism. Communal clashes erupt in the city during the month of Moharram. Asad underscores that riot erupts

May be because there have not been any for too long, not even Hindu-Muslim one's. Something must be done to prove that the British are here to enforce law and order; it is killing each other (Hosain 56).

Thus, riots result in the death of Nita Chatterji, a classmate and the strongest friend of the narrator. Laila bemoans the lack of unity in the freedom struggle,

Children in politics that is what terrorists are, heroic but misguided. To fight the British imperialism, we have to be organised, disciplined and raise the kind of weapons that will not misfire (Hosain 124).

Laila recollects that Asad, Zahid, Kemal, Saleem and herself always debated the validity of ideologies. 'The five of us, our world was bounded by our books,

and the voices that spoke to us through them were of great men, profound thinkers, philosophers and poets (Hosain 128).’ Suspicion and hatred prevailed everywhere during the Partition from which we are not able to recover up to this day. In the concluding pages of the novel, *Ashiyana* is a deserted place. Laila visits the house. She recollects her childhood and the events that shaped her life. The dark and the empty house stands as an evidence to the state of affairs in the society where social harmony is hijacked by the enthusiastic communalists who did not foresee the outcome of their own actions. Moreover, the actions of the greedy leaders and irresponsible rulers increased the degree of suspicion. Caste and class based associations became powerful. These forums began to function as pressure groups. The rich continue to enjoy the privileges and act as horse traders to bargain the price of their votes. The social and cultural landscape also underwent a sea change. Communalism began to reign in the private and public institutions. Resultantly public institutions lost the objective of Social Justice. Gradually, traditional social institutions like Joint Family System, Marriage and Family become weak and personal welfare diminished the public interest.

These factors and practices had a strong impact on the moral development of the narrator. Gender and class prejudices always disturbed her. The sufferings of women in the patriarchal families made her unhappy. Thus the novelist opines that a change in the attitudes of the ruling classes is necessary to safeguards the interest of peasants and the working class, otherwise decisions of the affluent classes will have a negative impact on the lives of the poor and the weak. Thus, the novelist questions the traditional attitudes and emphasises the importance of Humanism. Things are not the same for everybody for all the times. Anita Desai notes in her *Introduction* to the novel that though the Time changes, the influences of the past remains everywhere like the colour of the skin. After the Declaration of Independence, the cityscape also changed. Thus, the narrator observes, ‘In the city the past attacked the present and the future was lost in the conflict (Hosain 88).’ Many members of the royal families become bankrupt. The Palaces were abandoned. The rate of urbanisation increased manifold; factories and apartments increased

their presence.

For times had changed sadly since the integration of the Princely States, and Their Highnesses were left with titles, no states, reduced incomes and unchanged habits and tastes. To play polo, entertain, race, drink, flirt or fornicate with the proper air of aristocratic nonchalance needed co-operation between those who had the means and those who had the title (Hosain 307).

Thus, the Twentieth Century has been an important phase in the literary history of the subcontinent. The writings brought out the problems of the Untouchables, the urban poor, and the minorities and victims of other forms of exploitation based on gender and class. Attia Hosain's novel and short stories are the monuments to the glory of the past. The South Asian region is the hotbed of political experiments. Several political and cultural institutions have come in to existence by reshaping the existing institutions. At the same time, the invaders also brought in new forms from their homeland and experimented in the region. The cultural history of the region reveals that the decline of aristocratic feudalism made the way for Nationalism, which did not remain too long because of the emergence of Communalism, and Nationalism paved the way for Socialism. Socialism permitted the emergence of Capitalism in the region. Thus, the novel traces the society in transition and the heritage of the community, which has lost its existence because of pseudo secularism, and institutions that mock the democratic institutions.

The novelist's exquisite use of the language is par excellence. Filled with utmost sentimentalism towards family and society in the troubled times, the novel attempts to discover the cultural history of the society. Hence, the novel is a significant contribution to the literary wealth of South Asia.

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