

**PANGS OF PARTITION IN THE STUDY OF ATTIA HUSSAIN'S:
SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN**

Nilofar Rashid

Research Scholar & Teacher (IISJ)

BIO NOTES

Nilofar Rashid is an English teacher in I.I.S.J Al-Jubail, Saudi Arabia and is a research scholar. Her area of interest is Indian Writing in English. She has published several papers in journals, presented workshops as a resource person and participated in seminars. She is an active member of NISA TOASTMASTER CLUB. She is also in the editorial board of E-Magazine in Al-Jubail.

You may reach her at nilofar.rashid@yahoo.com.

ABSTRACT

Attia Hussain's famous novel '*Sunlight on a broken column*' (1960) deals with a young woman's personal crisis set against the larger historical background of the independence movement in India. It is the sheer story of Laila and her struggle against the orthodox traditional patriarchal system. The novelist has woven a story out of her own experiences. There is a parallel between the events of the novel and the life of the Hussain in Ashaina against the backdrop of India's freedom movement.

Attia Hussain's novel, *Sunlight on a broken column* (1961) and her earlier collection of short stories, *Phoenix fled* (1953), gave evidence of a talent for reminiscence and sensitive observation that doesn't seem to have been exploited since to the full. In the story, the old woman suddenly evokes the terror of the partition.

"When the dread moment was upon them naked of their disguising hopes, they remembered only the urgency of their frenzied need to escape. Terror silenced the women's wails, tore their thoughts from possessions left behind; it smothered the children's whimpering and drove all words from men's tongues but hurra."

Attia Hussain's *Sunlight on a broken column*, the cast is in autobiographical form. It's in four parts and covers 20 years in the life of Laila the narrator heroine. When the novel begins she is fifteen; at the beginning of part II, she is almost nineteen; and towards the end of the narrative we find her a mother and a widow, 'and the 2nd half of the century was now two years old.' An orphan Laila is brought up by her rich relatives, and she spends the impressionable years of her girlhood in Lucknow, keeping terms in the university, making friends dreaming dreams. Belonging as she does to an influential Muslim taluqdar family, she is half distracted by the politics of the thirties, the nationalists being ranged against the congress. Even homes are divided, and the acerbity of politics enters the dining table, and father and son are in opposite camps.

'No one seemed to talk to anymore; everyone argued, and not in the graceful tradition of our city where the conversation was treated as fine art, words were loved as mediums of artistic expression, and verbal battles were enjoyed as much as any delicate, scintillating, sparkling display of pyrotechnic skill. It was as if someone had sneaked in live ammunition among the fireworks. (SOBC P 461-463)

Talking about the purdah system in her own family she said that she was not allowed by her mother to join university however she had the privilege to be the first woman graduate among the Taluqdar family. In her own words, she described the purdah culture

"We were not in purdah in the sense that we were wearing burqas when we went out but we had a confined kind of life. People who came to visit us in the house were the sons of friends or relations but that was it because my remarkable mother herself never went anywhere (p4 SOBC)

Laila was not at all hypocrite whatever she feels she tries to convey especially her nationalistic feelings. It is her ultimate desire to join the movement against the British. She showed this through her ways and manners. At her school she stopped singing the national anthem of Britain:

'We had felt we were part of a great movement and the taunts of 94 Anglo-Indian girls at school had lost their power.' (p-6 SOBC)

Sunlight on a broken column highlighted the hideous scenes of religious violence. It showed how a fight once has done together for the independence of India turned into a fight among them. The divide & rule policy of Britishers once they planned and implemented it in our society, till now we are not overcome from the religious frenzy. Attia Hussian through her characters vividly presented in front of the readers the British's game of the 'divide & rule'. Asad's wordings that the British had given us the message *–Hate each other and love us' gave us the clear idea of their villainous act.* (chap6 -SOBC) they are not the only ones who spoiled everything but the moment religion entered politics of India, things started worsening from that place.

The partition also brought heart-rending experiences the Muslims who left India and went to Pakistan were declared as 'Evacuees' and their property was declared as 'evacuee property, in short, they're coming back from Pakistan was come to an end.

'This dejected cry expressed the feeling that the Muslims who stayed behind in India had committed a blunder. They were insecure in free India. For them, the only place of comfort and refuge was Pakistan their "neo-Paradise across the border'. (Ch.2 SOBC)

Taking up some social change in 'Sunlight on a broken column' the narrator Laila, from a submissive, introvert young girl from an aristocratic orthodox family behind the purdah to a young girl who can think and make her decision of her own. By the end of the novel, we could find a great social change in the thinking of the characters and also the scenes.

Laila's presence in the house brought tears to the depressed eyes of the loyal servant, Ram Singh. He lamented the great change brought about by the unhappy developments. He said to Laila :

"The house, Bitia, this is not how you should have come to the house. I saw you grow up in it, and I should have seen your children and the children of Kemal Mian and Saleem Mian grow up in it. Bhagwan should have taken me from this earth before I saw this happen'.(SOBC)

The novel is very political in the sense that the characters not only a part of the story but also participated in all movements. The novel explores the power politics and it was revealed through the characters when after the abolition of the feudal system, Saleem says to Hamid:

'In the final analysis, what you are facing is the struggle for power by the bourgeoisie. It is not a peasant's movement, but when it comes to the division of spoils even class interests are forgotten. (p-231 SOBC)

The crisis within the Muslim community was depicted historically within the novel. They were torn between two different worlds-one was newly created Pakistan and the other was India where they lived for centuries. It is essential to talk about British rulers in the novel. The philosophical differences are shown through a few characters of the novel like Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Sylvia.

The character of Saleem was characterized by the writer so that to portray that group of society who is an opportunist. He criticized Congress for being anti-Muslim but he is the person who left India, his birthplace and went to Pakistan. He always has a conflict with his brother Kemal and thought that Kemal didn't bother for the family but he did just the opposite of that. He didn't realize his mistakes and took the petty decisions by keeping his selfish motive on top:

'I believe the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it against which the Muslims must organize. The danger is great because it is hidden, like an iceberg. When it was just a question of fighting the British the progressive forces were Uppermost; but now that power is to be acquired, now the submerged reactionary Elements will surface, Muslims must unite against them.(p39 SOBC)

The communal tension of the city is created by a writer through the character of Hakimian Bua:

Just outside the big Hanuman Ji temple, the top of their Tazia stuck in the branch of a Peepal treeThe branch of their (Hindus) sacred tree could not be cut without getting the Hindus angry... Someone began to blow a conch in the temple, though it was known there was a holy procession outside. Some

hot blooded persons threw stones at the heathen sounds and the fighting began. This kind of mischief spreads like a fire in a field of dry grass.”(p75-76 SOBC)

The pathetic description of the train tragedy was given by Attia in the novel. The brutality which history witness in which men were massacred, women were violated, babies snatched away from their mothers and smashed against walls. The communal riot in which Zahid was killed. Hossain writes:

“Full of bright hope and triumph Zahid had boarded the train on that thirteenth day of August which was to take him to the realization of his dreams, on the eve of the birth of the country for which he had lived and worked when it had reached its destination no man, Woman or child was found alive” (p-310 SOBC)

When the announcement of Pakistan and India was finally declared. It was difficult for the people of Ashiana to decide about their future. They were in an utter dilemma what to do next. The brothers Kemal and Saleem having different outlooks and perspectives opted to different countries. Urvashi Butaliya says:

‘Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly and despite many warning the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion: they had not anticipated that the fear and uncertainty created by the drawing of borders based on headcounts of religious identity, so many Hindus versus so many Muslims, would force people to flee to what they would be surrounded by their kind. (p8 SOBC)

The strong bond of relationship between Laila & Asad is visible in the conversation between the two. Asad wants a normal love relationship with her but Laila considers him to be above commoner. Asad’s disapproval is identified when he protested against her behavior:

‘ I am not a monk. I am very human. Why do you always treat me as if I were not? You used to talk of me and my poetry as if I were not the poet but one of my poems. And now when you write to me or talk to me – about my work, I have the same feeling as if you thought of me, not as a worker but the work itself. It is most disconcerting.’(p16 SOBC)

The romantic relationship between Sita and Kemal evokes a sympathetic attitude by the reader. It's very common and realistic especially in a country like India where the mingling of a different culture is like a family and not only we share our festivals but we share our feelings. Both the characters understood the seriousness of the situation and breaks off the relationship in the middle based on their religious grounds. Even Saleem sarcastically said in spite of Sita’s education in the west her prejudice against Muslims is still unchanged and she is still an orthodox Hindu like the others.

“I am not interested in theological arguments. But Sita's attitude Opened my eyes to the realities of communal problems...”(p14 SOBC)

The writer believes that though the different sects of the society pretend and showcase that they are living in close ties with each other but in fact, this all is a superficial notion. They are quite aloof from their beliefs, rituals, and understanding. In the novel we had encountered the clash between Hindu & Muslim, Shias & Sunni of Indians & Britishers:

“What can you expect from a religion which forbids people to eat and drink together? When even a man's shadow can defile another? How is real friendship or understanding possible?”(p15 SOBC)

The partition had changed everyone’s life including mortal and immortal. Ashiana which was once a magnificent building earlier, after 14 years when Laila returned home she was shocked to find the same Ashiana but in a gloomy state. The things of Ashiana changed completely upside down and lose its old grandeur and charm.

Strangers were living in the rooms where I had once searched for my lost father and mother, where I had found refuge in the love of my aunt Abida and Hakimian Bua, where I had developed through conflict with Zahra and Aunt Saira, where I had learned comradeship through Asad and Kemal and 110 tested my beliefs in arguments with Saleem and Zahid, where my will had been disciplined by my grandfather and Uncle Hamid, and been freed by my dreams and love for Ameer,’(SOBC)

At the beginning of the novel, Laila was an innocent girl but attains her individuality in her experienced womanhood. Laila through her character which is sometimes soft and sometimes stern. She took the decision of her life and marries Ameer and lived a blissful life. She made herself an identity in society. After Ameer's demise, she tried to be bold in front of her daughter and taught her how to live life facing difficulties and living life according to her terms & conditions. Partition of India & Pakistan not only tormented her from within but also in some other respect made her strong in her outlook of life. She became a role model for her daughter. After coming back to Ashiana, the home of her childhood and girlhood she was disheartened to see the condition of the house and also the people.

"Strangers were living in the rooms once so private and guarded, strangers who were names in government files balancing Saleem's name against theirs- he labeled Evacuee they 'refugees'. Their presence here and Saleem's in their erstwhile homeland was part of a statistical calculation in the bargaining of bureaucrats and politicians in which millions of uprooted human beings became just numerical figures. The official words describing them had no meaning in terms of human heartache." (SOBC)

CONCLUSION:

To conclude I must say that literature is the medium through which we can show the world the atrocities and brutalities of the past. The partition of India and Pakistan was imposed on us, it was not the wish of commoners. The event of partition disheartened many including Attia Hosain too. Mulk Raj Anand has given the true psychological scenario of that India in his words;

'She had an instinctive dread, or nervous anticipation, of the penalties which freedom might bring. Her family had been tomming up by choosing the side that wanted the partition of the sub-continent. She still believed, from the bent of her Catholic temperament, that confrontation might be avoided. But on the night of the transfer of power, the past bitterness emerged in the present and bloody history was enacted in the north and east when over half a million brothers murdered each other and 195 their neighboring sisters, and some other millions became refugees away from the land of their birth. Most of us were benumbed'.

The loss of Laila's husband and Asad's brother Zahid in the partition of India did not change their mind and they like the true Indian remain in India in spite of all the odds. She shared the same feeling with those of Kemal as he says:

"I see my future in the past. I was born here, and generations of my ancestors before me. I am content to die here and be buried with them." (SOBC P49)

Attia Hosain's novel Sunlight on a Broken Column is an interesting study of partition and She depicted beautifully the position of Muslim women in Indian society. Anita Desai says,

'Attia Hosain's novel and collections of short stories are the monuments of the past. To read them is as if one has parted a curtain or opened a door and strayed into the past. To read them is like wrapping oneself up in one's mother's wedding sari, lifting the family jewels out of a faded box and admiring their glitter, in hailing the musky perfume of old silks in a camphor chest.'

Laila was a strong girl and her independence for her self as matching that of India. She was brought up in a world that is full of honor, obedience is more than personal happiness. Laila begins to raise her voice many times when trying to save Nandi from the atrocities from male hegemony, or making verbal arguments with her cousin Zahra and telling her not to subdue in front of familial ties.

It is the great irony of history that after the division of the country into India & Pakistan still, the tension lingers in the mind of the people. And after the independence of so many years, the communal bitterness created unrest.

We had seen the liberal attitude of Attia in the novel. She lucidly described the picturesque beauty of the unpartitioned India in which all religion celebrate their festivals together:

'the lights and the banging of crackers at Shubrat and the mouth-watering halwa {sweet}, the glowing oil-dipped cotton wicks in earthen saucers put on the curves of arches and walls in a straight line and roofs on Diwali (a Hindu festival), the blessings on Eid (a Muslim festival) showered in the form of money and sweet Siwayyan (sweet) and the sacrificial feasts of sheep, lamb and goats on Baqreed (Muslim festival).

Towards the end, the writer pointed out that in spite of all the odds of life there still exists a small ray of hope somewhere which gives us hope to live life again. In the home when Saleem comes hope after a gap of two years:

'Saleem was touched to find old friends (Hindus!) Unchanged in spite of the back-wash of revengeful hate and suspicion that had spattered the humane, poetic soul of the city. He was glad of the feeling of recognized identity in Hasanpur after having lived among strangers who knew him as an individual without a background'' (SBC 299)

The only thing which is needed now in the present scenario after the partition is tolerance towards other religions. The liberal attitude and vision are only going to save our next generation from hatred, bitterness, the animosity which day by day increasing and making the world a dangerous place to live. With her novel Attia Hosain has given the message to the world to live life carrying the liberal attitude towards other religions, leaving the hatred behind. In her novel, she portrayed the Elite family and its problems and with that, she presented in front of the reader's various dimensions of partitions.

REFERENCES:

1) Attia Hosain, Sunlight on a Broken Column, (New Delhi :Arnold 1987)162 references are incorporated in the text itself with the abbreviation SOBC.

2) Urvashi Butalia, The other side of silence voices forms the partition of India (New Delhi: Viking, 1998)3

3) Iyenger, Srinivasa. K.R. Indian Writing in English. Bombay : Asia Publishers,1961.(pg 461-463)
