

Negotiating Historical Narratives and Conflicted Identities in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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The partition of India, despite being a thing of the past, is a living phenomenon in the contemporary India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In her remarkable book on the ground realities of partition *The Other Side of Silence* Urvashi Butalia observes that while organizing camps in 1984 for those numerous Sikhs who bore the brunt of the massacre that struck them as the aftermath of the murder of the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, she came across helpless groups of “older people, who had come to Delhi as refugees in 1947”. They “would remember that they had been through a similar terror before. ‘We didn’t think it could happen to us in our own country,’ they would say. ‘This is like Partition again’”(5). That partition is a living presence in the narratives of the post-independence India is acknowledged by Gerald James Larson who, in his book *India's Agony Over Religion*, observes;

Partition was the defining event of modern, independent India and Pakistan, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that partition continues to be the defining event of modern India and Pakistan... Partition [moreover] was and is a profoundly religious event for both sides... and most of the agony over religion throughout the South Asian region is to a large extent traceable to it. Partition is at the heart not only of the great regional conflicts... [but] it is also an important component or factor in a whole series of religious-cum-political conflicts reaching down to the present time... To be sure, partition as a defining

religious event is not by any means the only event or condition for an appropriate analysis and explanation of [these] great religious controversies currently tearing the fabric of India's cultural life, but ...it is, indeed, one of the necessary and central events or conditions for understanding India's current agony over religion. In many ways it is the core plot in the unfolding narrative of modern, independent India. (182-3)

The association of religion with the issue of partition is clearly evoked by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a Muslim leader of the Indian National Congress who later became the education minister of post-partition India, when he argues that [t]he basis of partition was enmity between Hindus and Muslims. The creation of Pakistan gave it a permanent constitutional form and made it much more difficult of solution [*sic*]. The most regrettable feature of this situation is that the sub-continent of India is divided into two States which look at one another with hatred and fear. (247)

The three-pronged nature of the pre-independence political scenario of India saw the maneuverings between the colonial Government, INC and the Muslim League and experienced a massacre that was hitherto unimaginable. The estimate of the number of people slaughtered while crossing the border on either side or died due to malnutrition or contagious disease vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted. As always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different of their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion). (Butalia 3)

It is natural to expect that the reference to such a momentous episode must recur constantly in the fictional realm of India. In her essay "The Anxiety of Indianness" Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed the presence of "the theme of partition" in Indian vernacular literature¹. She observes that "writers in at least four languages of the country (Hindi, Urdu, Bangla and Punjabi) have gone back again and again to this rupture to understand our present" (179-80).

One can take cue from the comment made by Mukherjee and complain against Indian writers, both English and vernacular, for not having addressed the issue to a considerable degree. The title of a short-story collection by Saadat Hasan Manto, who lived his later life in Pakistan, *Siyah Hashiye* (1948) which was one of the very early works that dealt with partition sounds very apt. It can be translated as

“Black Marginalia”, and indeed in the gamut of Indian writings the issue of partition seems to be relegated to a marginalized position. In the early post-partition writings the “anguished failure to understand, to stare unblinking into the glowing inferno, itself becomes a negative way of representing that which is truly horrific” (Rai 368). And it took more than a couple of decades after *Siyah Hashiye* for the longer narratives to take up the issue. Priyamvada Gopal contends that this “may be because novels, epic novels in particular, necessitate an analytical engagement with history, causality, and possibility”. She further contends that “where the Partition is concerned, the novel on the subcontinent is only now beginning to find a way to do this and a place of collectedness from which to do it” (70).

Published in 1961 Attia Hosain’s (1913-98) solitary novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* puts forward her claim as a chronicler of the history of partition and ethos of Hindu-Muslim identity even more strongly than her short-story collection *Phoenix Fled* (1953). *Sunlight* is one of the early instances of a longer fictional work that has dealt with partition. In his favorable “Introduction” to the novel Mulk Raj Anand describes it as “one of the most sensitive novels in Indian English writing” whereby the author combines “a poignant, tragic narrative with an undercurrent of stoic calm” (xi). Though it is natural to find similarities between *Sunlight* and *Phoenix Fled* the language of the former is more subtle and adnuanced to suit the voice of the first-person narrator Laila, a woman of a privileged background. In its counter-balancing of the private life of the protagonist and the public history *Sunlight* can be compared with two other novels of early post-partition phase – Ahmad Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Aziz Ahmad’s *The Shore and the Wave* (1948), classics by their own right.

Attia Hosain is not a confessional writer and though some aspects of Laila’s life match up with that of Hosain, Laila is only superficially modeled on the novelist. Attia Hosain grew up in Lucknow in a feudal family and happened to know many influential political and literary personalities of her time. She chose to stay back in India during partition but later departed for London to pursue a career in writing and journalism. Laila, on the other hand, goes for a university education, marries against her family’s will and goes into a somewhat recluse widowhood. As an aristocratic woman she tussles with the strictures of the society which is conflicted between permissiveness and prohibition. *Sunlight*, however, is not confined to the private journey of Laila and is not primarily a bildungsroman.

Hosain slowly builds up her novel to the cataclysmic events of 1947. Her writing prowess varies between the poetic sensibility of the modernist and the measured realism of the nineteenth-century novelist. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is indeed a moving chronicle not only of a crucial period in history but also of a city – Lucknow which is portrayed in its entirety of decaying yet rich splendour. Along with the inner workings of Laila's mind Hosain employs a gallery of minor portrayals to embellish this richly detailed picture of time and place. Each group of characters is presented with its own point of view and each individual character is given his/her distinct voice. These clashing voices and view-points are presented to us through the understanding of a highly intelligent, self-questioning and skeptical narrator.

Through Laila's maturing sensibility and her sympathetic eye *Sunlight* charts the transformation of a wealthy feudal (Taluqdar) family in pre-independence India. Laila enjoys a superior and advantageous position within the society and yet understands its confining nature. She is at war with these confining agencies and performs some daring acts to avow her sense of independence. Her daring acts are not limited to choose a husband for her alone, but also in discarding the purdah, professing her political views which at times countered those of the men of the family and expressing sympathies with the poor. Her special bond with her spirited Hindu ayah Nandi is both engaging and endearing. Hosain's protagonist is at war with a class environment that puts duty over feelings and class solidarity over national interest. Unlike her cousin Zahra, Laila's selection of friends defies the barriers of class and community. From the revolutionary Nita Chatterjee, the aristocratic Sita Agarwal to her less well-off cousins Asad and Zahid, Laila moves at ease in these variegated spheres of life. Again unlike Zahra, Laila does not opt for Pakistan (Land of the Pure) but for the secular India. Yet Laila, much like Hosain, is proud of her Islamic heritage. In her introduction to *Phoenix Fled*, Anita Desai aptly observes;

“Westernization” is seen as destructive of the old, traditional culture. The latter may be full of cruelties and injustices, but it is a pattern of life known and understood, therefore more acceptable and more fitting than an alien culture that has been neither fully understood nor assimilated. Attia Hosain's work is by no means an unreserved paean of praise for the old culture but is certainly full of an inherited, instinctive love for it. (xx–xxi)

The anti-colonial struggle of India and the formation of a national sensibility are prominent features in the *Sunlight*. In his acclaimed book *In Theory* Aijaz Ahmad claims that modern literature in indigenous languages such as Urdu is far less concerned with the “nation” as a category or “primary ideological problematic” and much more with “our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of our bodies and sexualities, our idealisms, our silences”. This accounts for the writer’s choice to write in English (118). Hosain received an English education at La Martinie`re girls’ school and the famous Isabella Thoburn College for women. Like many other women writers of her time, she spoke Urdu at home and was educated in English, Arabic, and Persian. She, however, is one of the very few who chose to write in English. One may observe that her language does not quite achieve the height reached by her contemporary novelist Ismat Chughtai whose Urdu novel *The Crooked Line* (1942) expertly captured all the nuances of the language of the upper class Muslim families.

One may bring in the famous observation made by Raja Rao in the “Foreword” to his own novel *Kanthapura* where he made a distinction between the vernacular and the English, one being a language of our emotional make-up the other intellectual. But Hosain’s choice of language is significant and this can be elaborated upon by quoting another contemporary novelist Ahmed Ali. In his “Introduction” to the 1994 edition of his novel *Twilight in Delhi* (originally published in 1940) Ali explains his choice of English over Urdu,

The cause [of India’s freedom from colonialism] deserved a world-wide audience. If presented in Urdu, it would die down within a narrow belt rimmed by Northwest India. There were many instances to show that British injustices in Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English India were dismissed as local matters. But if a case were brought to London, the home government became involved, which depended on public good faith and was answerable to King and Parliament. (xvi)

It is not difficult to find parallels and intertextual references between *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Both the novels record the dying glory of the Muslim culture in India – the effacing grandeur of the Mughal regalia and the refined artistic sensitivities of Lucknow. Mir Nihal’s Delhi and Laila’s Lucknow (as well as Hasanpur) are effectively evoked to depict the vagaries of history and foreshadow the future of the Muslims in India. In *Muslim Narratives and the*

Discourse of English Amin Malak notes an interesting intertextual parallel in both these novels as he observes:

Mushtari Bai, the charming courtesan that appeared in *Twilight in Delhi*, reappears in Attia Hosain's novel as a pathetic pauper well beyond her prime. Reflecting the fate of Mir Nihal's Delhi and Laila's Ashiana, Mushtari Bai gives a human face to a dying erotic past that coexisted within a puritanical Muslim milieu. (35)

Sunlight begins with a heated debate over tradition that involved the self-righteous Uncle Mohsin and Laila's aunts Majida and esp. Abida. Mohsin continuously taunts Abida for her choice of Laila's western education – "Soon you will have to apologise for your birth and breeding, and not proud of them" (23). However, this guardian of moral codes receives a jolt when the feisty Nandi exposes his amorous intents towards her when she cried out to Mohsin "'A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?'" (28). The servant girl is silenced quickly but this adds to the novel's personalized appeal and casts a light in the private corners of an affluent Muslim family who along with Shubrat and Eid celebrated Diwali and Holi (40-1). Nandi resurfaces again later in the novel and has an interesting episode with the head of the servants Ghulam Ali that resulted in her receiving a wound in the face. The Hakimian Buas and the Nandis, along with the friends of Baba Jan, Laila's grandfather, captures the different dimensions of life in Lucknow and Hasanpur. The narrator describes the friends "The four men loved the city to which they belonged, and they lived and behaved as if the city belonged to them" (35).

These subtle touches underscore the inter-connection between the private and the public world. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita have noted that the tradition of writing domestic fiction in India which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was preceded by women's life writing which generated "an extraordinary number" of memoirs and autobiographies (160). The tradition of writing domestic novels has the flavour of autobiographical writing and exhibit the familial drama of everyday life in its wide panorama. Gopal observes that the

Early anglophone fiction by women shared many of these features but also had roots in ethnographic fictions where the author often functioned as a kind of 'native informant' for an assumed European or American reader; traces of this function would persist in the fiction to come. As it evolved over the twentieth

century, domestic fiction in English often also became the vehicle for tales of life in particular communities including minorities such as Muslims and Parsis. (140)

Laila's narrative also has the quality of this 'native informant' and speaks out not only to the Joans and the Mrs. Martins but also to us who stand outside her community.

Sunlight makes use of a mythological texture as well. It is not difficult to associate with Partition the myth related to the 'Promised Land' recorded both in the *Bible* and the *Quran*. The migration to Pakistan was considered a journey to the land of the pure. Hosain expertly shows the flip side of such a promise. Moreover, Laila's elders are conflicted over the use of purdah for the women. The purdah or the veil or the burqa have always been mythicized by the patriarchy to render its women powerless. Daphne Grace contends that

The veil is... associated with a 'mythologising' of the past and the stereotyping of the role and attributes of a 'good' woman. These powerful hegemonies, still disseminated throughout India and Pakistan, in fact become increasingly virulent in the face of modernization and social change. While women are given a 'religious' status, they are simultaneously denied any access to religious space or agency. Just as in Islam, where women were barred from the sphere of sacred power, so women in Indian culture are silenced and distanced from power by having their 'sacred' role defined as to wait in silence at home. (161)

This applies to the purdah as well. Laila, according to Sundar Rajan, represents the "new woman" of India, the educated woman who "has been drawn out of the privacy and invisibility of the home" and describes her new visibility as being "a measure of her reality" (137). We have noticed earlier that neither Laila nor Hosain considers the straightforward flouting of the tradition as a preferred course of action and Laila's negotiation with these myths of tradition becomes multi-layered.

The novel assimilates the personal with the political. Though the historical incidents are present throughout the novel, the first two-thirds of the narratives present to us vignettes of Indian Muslim life and exude a timeless charm. The last third of the novel is imbued with political strife and the personal gets political. It is affected by the incidents that happened in India from 1935 onwards which made choice for a Muslim in India split between extreme ends. Belonging to an affluent

feudal family which had its share of disadvantages, Laila feels confused as questions remain unanswered. She asks “What was ‘wrong’ in itself, and what was ‘right’? Who was to tell me?” (31). Laila’s family gets conflicted over the choice. While her cousins Saleem and Zahra opted to settle down in Pakistan, Laila and Kemal, another cousin of Laila, stayed back in India. The feud within the families is effectively captured by Hosain in an exchange between Laila and Zahra after they have chosen different nations. Laila begins by accusing Zahra for having left her brothers and sisters in India;

“...Where were all their leaders? Safely across the border. The only people left to save them were those very Hindus against whom they had ranted. Do you know what ‘responsibility’ and ‘duty’ meant? To stop the murderous mob at any cost, even if it meant shooting people of their own religion.”

Zahra replied with equal anger, “What is so extraordinary about that? Do you think we did not have the same sense of duty on our side? Do you think the same things did not happen there? You are prejudiced.”

Her words defeated me. They showed me that all avenues of understanding between us were closed. I had appeared to her prejudiced, taking sides, when I so passionately believed in friendship and tolerance.

But we made up, Zahra and I, as we had always done; there was so much we had in common, so much to remember. (304–05)

However, unlike the simple and apolitical villagers of Mano Majra in the iconic partition novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956) who are caught in the whirlwind of the effects of partition, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* contains characters who have long been politically engaged or aware. And whereas in Singh’s novel the incidents happen within a few weeks, *Sunlight* is spread across years and slowly builds the tension up. Hosain’s narrative moves towards the incidents that led up to the Partition and then moves ahead a few years to look back at it. The life of Laila becomes a testament to the momentous incidents witnessed by the subcontinent and the narrative very successfully weaves in with the personal accounts the happenings of the turbulent world outside. Visiting her ancestral home in 1952 Laila recounts the incidents that led up to the much awaited independence:

There came the war, the Japanese threat to the country, the news that thousands of captured soldiers – and officers had joined the Indian National

Army as their allies, then the violent eruption of extremist nationalism when Congress leaders were imprisoned in 1942, then the riots that spiraled across the country from the East to the West to the North gaining murderous momentum towards their bloody climax in 1946. And in 1947 came the partition of the century, and the people of India and Pakistan celebrated Independence in the midst of bloody migrations from one to another. (282-3)

Hosain's description of the life of the Taluqdars, their inane parties and their desperate bid to cling on to the departing glories is streaked with touches of a humour that the writer carefully underplays. The address made by one such aristocrat on the occasion of the Viceroy visit – ““We are aware that the property-er-prosperity of our tenants is our proper-prosperity”” (152) – subtly exposes the latent hypocrisy.

The conflict between national ties and familial bonding was experienced by many Indians during Partition and Hosain seems to provide an answer by taking recourse to the private sphere. Laila fondly recollects the love and assurance provided by her deceased husband Ameer and found comfort in her home; “I was happy to have a home of my very own, to live in it as I pleased without dictation...” and in accepting “the ordinary elements of everyday life” (314). The novel ends for her with the possibility of a relationship with Asad, the humane face of an otherwise militant idealism, and with a larger trust in human relationship to tide over the time of conflict and struggle. The sense of love tides over doubts and confusion and Attia Hosain leaves us with a fond wish to look back nostalgically at the bygone days and wonder at “the brave old world” (178).

Note

1. Mukherjee contends in her essay that the Indian English writers seem to be more concerned with matters like diasporic existence and remain silent on other serious matters like partition.

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