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Recuperation of Marginalized Muslim Womanhood: A Reading of Attia Hossain's *The Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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Abstract

Attia Hossain emerged in British India during the communal carnage of 1940s. She not only depicts the partition of British India into India and Pakistan but also shows the worst impact of the partition that ignited the communal fervor consequently triggering off the violence between Hindus and Muslims. However, she is the first Muslim novelist having a sheer propinquity to elicit the battered Muslim women from the societal surveillance which immures or stagnates the women's condition. And her debut novel *The Sunlight on a Broken Column* reverberates her resistance against the rigid myopic chauvinistic world by portraying her alter-ego Laila who is seeking individuality in choosing her male partner. The present paper aims at exploring marginalization of Muslim womanhood and the consequent emancipation from their colonial subjection.

Keywords

Patriarchy, Feminism, Attia Hossain; *The Sunlight on a Broken Column.*

Attai Hossain is the first Muslim woman writer, who wrote with the zeal to emancipate of women from the male centric world. The cultural and religious integrity which had been prevalent for a long time that somehow fallen apart and she tries to mend it by means of her writing. The Hindu-Muslim, India-Pakistan division agonized in her mind. She is beyond all sorts of religious parochialism and overtly wanted to elicit the women's position from the restrictions imposed by the society which prods her broader aspect of life. Being born and brought up in the aristocratic Muslim family, she was western educated that might yield her generosity and enlightenment that she seeks to impart amidst the women. The glimpse of it is found to be resonated through her debut novel *The Sunlight on a Broken Column.*

The concept of femininity and how to conceptualise the feminism have been the focus of scholars like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Julia Kristeva. Others like Chandra Talapada Mohanty have identified race, location and ethnicity as their central viewpoint. Western feminist discourse has traditionally been very patronizing to the third world woman. The typical third world woman has been defined as family oriented, domestic, religious, semi-literate and indecisive. The third world 'other' is contrasted with the white woman who is depicted as sexually liberated, educated, secular and always in control of her life. This attitude has its root in the western belief that the third world woman has not 'evolved' as much as her white counterpart and would be able to do only when she adopts western definitions and specifications. Even early literary works by third world women, when judged in their own historical, political and ethnic contexts prove that third world woman was not always a powerless victim of patriarchy but was educated, aware, and secular in her own way and Hossain testifies it brilliantly.

In the patriarchal discourse, women are relegated to the private world of home and family. Like Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's One* she tries to dissolve the distinction between private and public, and of male and female associated

with the received notion of the home. The homelssness of the colonised out of the colonial dispossession, and women's homeless condition is entrenched in gender orientation. Whereas the gendered, domestic norms restrict women's independence and impede their individual fulfilment. Colonial structures and education policy render the colonised culturally dislocated and spiritually homeless. In this regard Sahgal asserts that "…migration can take place without even leaving one's soil" (119). A shared sense of homelessness was lurking in the consciousness of the writers of the time and Hossain is no exception. She lived in Lucknow and then migrated to Britain where she wrote most of her works. In Hossain's family, women's education and 'voyage out' were not unprecedented and she was the first woman from the feudalistic Taluqdar family to graduate from the Lucknow University.

Laila, the alter-ego of Hossain is a member of a highly patriarchal setup. 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' which is presented as a microcosm of society that contains characters from every strata of contemporary society. Jasbir Jain maitains that,

> Ashiana in *The Sunlight on a Broken Column* serves as a microcosm of the world at large with not only its womenfolk in purdah but its retinue of servants who represent the community at large. It has a living relationship with the past not merely through the culture it cultivates but also through the house at Hasanpur at the outskirts of the city, which symbolises continuity and permanence. (143)

The novel appeared in 1961, but it covers the span from 1932 to 1952, a crucial period marked by the socio-political upheaval in the Indian subcontinent.

Attia's propinquity with the western discourse on emancipation of women cannot be rejected altogether because of her stay in England. Laila's minute

observation of the patriarchal functioning of the house makes her distinct from other female members of the family. Unlike them, Laila has been given western education. At the outset of the novel the claustrophobic atmosphere 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" (14). Laila's observation of the impending death of Baba Jan, her grandfather, as well as her experiences of the strict patriarchal system in the house unfolds her clairvoyance. Gender segregation, a strict code of behavior, is evident in the first 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" (14). Laila's remark 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" (31) describes Baba Jan's patriarchal authority; his presence will prevail even after his death in the form of Uncle Hamid. The description of Baba Jan's drawing room is metaphoric of patriarchal control. The coloured panes of arched doors symbolize the patriarchal power of Baba Jan whereas light is symbolic of freedom for the women of the house. The light of freedom is stymied by the patriarchal control. Instead of light, only shadows flicker in the vast room. In this vast room "the coloured panes of the arched doors let in not light but shadows that moved in mirrors on the walls and the mantelpiece, that slithered under chairs, tables and divans, hid behind marble statues, lurked in giant porcelain vases and nestled in the carpets" (18). The subservient and claustrophobic condition of the womenfolk is evident in Laila's assertion: "Zahra and I felt our girlhood a heavy burden" (14). Though Laila and Zahra grow up together, they are entirely different characters. Whereas Laila is progressive in her outlook, Zahra prefers to cocoon herself in the roles approved by the patriarchy. Laila's father had desired a different upbringing for her by emphasizing that she be educated not only in the Arabic and Persian traditions but also in the western tradition. Baba

Jan, despite his staunch espousal of traditions, capitulated to his late son's wishes. Aunt Majida too, sternly opposes Uncle Mohsin's criticism of Laila's "mem-sahib education". Attia Hossain beautifully presents a panorama of young Muslim women's lives. Marriage is a central concern. It is the most important objective of a young girl's life. Laila, whose vision is moulded by an upper crust Western education combined with the concentrated attention of her aunt, observes other young girls attempting to make sense of their lives. Zahra claims: "I was brought up to do my duty" (147). A third aspect is presented in the form of the promiscuous Zainab. In spite of living in Hasanpur, Zainab is more liberal in certain ways than both Laila and Zahra. Zainab is knowledgeable in matters relating to sex. This shocks the refined Laila and induces a coy reaction in Zahra. Laila's views on marriage are radically different from other girls. For Zainab, marriage will bring her opportunity to enjoy luxuries - "jewels and nice clothes" (295). Zainab looks forward to a home bound existence: "Now I serve my mother and father and brothers, then I'll serve my husband, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law" (95). Ironically, she will get jewels and nice clothes as a return for her services. For Zahra, marriage appears to be a freedom from the restrictions imposed by her mother. Romana's marriage to a profligate ruler is, according to Laila, a "luxurious incarceration". She is chosen by the "hawk-like" Begum Sahiba and her parents do not have the courage to flout the wishes of their ruler. Matrimonial alliances were according to the wishes of the elders. Laila's marriage to Ameer, posits the option of marrying the man of her choice, but she has to pay a heavy price and faces the disapproval and disgrace of her family. Nadira marries Saleem because of political and religious conviction. Her volition of marrying Saleem is of a lesser degree than that of Laila. Laila's choice is purged of any material reason; she is unbiased regarding the pedigree of Ameer and is aware of his lack of wealth. Her marriage to Ameer is analogous to her achievement of selfhood, as she asserts her individual identity by marrying Ameer and flouting the norms of the patriarchal set up. Sita's approach to

marriage is peculiar as she loves Kemal but considers her love as a personal issue whereas her marriage as a public one. Her views are in conformity to the patriarchal system of arranged marriage. She admits her incapability to rebel against the patriarchy. "My parents are the best judges of the man with the best qualifications for being the husband. They have a wider choice; it is only love that narrows it down to a pin point" (216). What has love to do with marriage? It is like mixing oil and water? Love is anti-social, while matrimony preserves the world and its respectability" (296). Abida's marriage to a widower, Shaikh Ejaz Ali is also a marriage of convenience, arranged by her brother Hamid. Notwithstanding the hostile attitude of the women at her in-laws house, she compromises the situation because of her adherence to duty and takes it as her 'kismet' (fate). Laila's observation of Abida's plight and her fatalistic attitude highlights Laila's maturity. She questions silently about the sense of duty entailed upon women: "I suffered more because of Aunt Abida's acceptance of her life- and her silence…'Dutiful to whom?'… 'To what?'… 'To what I believe is true? Or those I am asked to obey? I wanted to say" (252).

Laila's repeated questions about her difference from others also highlight the 'progress towards individuation': "Why did you not bring me up like Zahra? Why did you send me among those other girls who are not torn apart? (38)…Why was I different from Zahra? What was wrong with me?" (161). These questions reflect Laila's internal conflicts. In an argument Laila's friend Nita accuses her of being a stereotypical Muslim woman. Laila's response evinces her distinctive and mature approach to education: "I believe my education will make me a better human being" (125).

The rebellious streak in Laila's personality is exposed on her fifteenth birthday as she sees her reflection in the mirror. The experience symbolizes self knowledge. She perceives the conflicting views of Uncle Mohsin and Aunt Abida regarding Zahra's marriage. Mohsin sternly opposes Zahra's presence while discussing her marriage prospects: "Is the girl to pass judgments on her

elders? Doubt their capabilities to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband" (20)? Aunt Abida's retort vividly portrays the marginalized status 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" (21). Laila's outburst at Uncle Mohsin's maltreatment of Nandi predicts her future rebellion. As a child Laila's demand that the head carpenter make her a bow and arrow foreshadows her revolutionary spirit. The "little carved doll's cradle" made by the carpenter represents the patriarchal mindset prevalent in the society. Right from childhood, girls are induced to remain subservient to men and even the toys given to them are stereotypical. Laila shuns Zahra's proposition of marriage as a cure for Nandi's alleged breach of propriety. She shows her determination to resist the patriarchal system: "I won't be paired off like an animal" (29). The altercation between Zahra and Laila exposes the prevalent disapproval of choosing one's own partner in a strict patriarchal society. Laila's assertion presents the marginalized status of women in an arranged marriage. Zahra's retort, "I suppose you're going to find a husband for yourself? May be you'll marry someone for love like English women do, who change husbands like slippers" (30) implies that love marriage is associated with the assertion of female sexuality that is a taboo in a patriarchal society. Laila is the sole inmate of Ashiana who commensurates Nandi, in contrast to other women who treat her as a nonentity.

Laila's maturity is also marked by her consciousness of marginalization on the basis of class. Laila reproaches Zahra for her maltreatment of the sweeper woman. Attia presents two contrasting images. The dopattas "dyed in colour crushed from special flowers" (45) symbolize the colourful and luxurious life of the feudal class. This is in sharp contrast to the penury of the sweeper woman's children who are "naked, thin-limbed, big-bellied, with dirty noses and large black eyes" (45). "Colour crushed from the special flowers" also

presents imagery of oppression. The luxuries of the bourgeois are at the cost of hunger and squalor of proletariat. Zahra's assertion, "You just raise them an inch off the ground and they'll be making a foot stool of your head" (45) exemplifies her chauvinistic feudal attitude and class consciousness. Similarly in the third part of the novel, the juxtaposition of pomp and glory of Raja of Bhimnagar and his "coolies in dirty, patched clothes moving like ragged scare crows" (181) portrays the insensitivity of feudal lords towards their subjects. Laila's first encounter with the ruthless face of feudalism transpires on the occasion of Aunt Abida's dealing with the affairs of state. The feudal oppression of the tenants is justified in the name of justice and "matter of principle" (62). Zahra's and Aunt Abida's feudal attitude evinces the nexus of patriarchy and feudalism. The women are used as pawns to perpetuate the feudal interests.

Attia's proximity with the Marxist ideology finds expression in the portrayal of bourgeois exploitation. Aunt Abida and Zahra are used as agents of class oppression. On one more occasion, Laila visits Hasanpur with Kemal and Saleem, where she witnesses "poverty and squalor, disease and the waste of human beings" in sharp contrast to the grandeur and the luxuries of the feudal lords. Zahra's insistence that Laila should attend the taluqdars' reception or 'viceregal circus' suggests that Zahra wants to introduce Laila to the bourgeois society. The reception exposes "the opportunism, patronage and exploitation that inform their relationship to the British and their tenants.

The speech of the president of the Association highlights the hypocritical altruism of the taluqdars towards their tenants. Attia exposes the hypocrisy of the president with mild humour as he stumbles over his words and confounds the term 'prosperity' with 'property' in his address to the viceroy: "We are aware that the propert-er-prosperity of our tenants is our proper-prosperity" (152). Laila is perplexed with the pompous display of taluqdars' privileged relationship with the British king.

Mrs. Wadia criticizes the Muslim community for purdah culture and discusses the scandal of a Muslim girl, "from a strict purdah family" who eloped with a Hindu boy. All the women deplore the 'wicked' and 'immoral' girl. The condemnation unfolds the reality of the 'reformist' and 'modernist' project of these women. When the boy's money was spent, he acceded to his parents' wishes and abandoned the girl, and the girl's parents refused to take her back. Mrs. Wadia says that because of communal feelings her organization could not help the destitute girl, who eventually committed suicide. The hypocrisy and hollowness of their progressive ideas offends Laila so much that she brazenly defends the girl's action and compares her love with that of heroines in novels, plays and poems. Laila's blatant assertion outrages Aunt Saira and her peers. They appear to Laila, "like paper figures, as hollow as their words, blown up with air"(133). Laila's daring assertion to defend the girl enunciates her revolutionary spirit. Her assertion that "there was nothing in them to frighten me" (133) shows that now she has realized her own power and also the hollowness of patriarchy. She exposes her revulsion to the hypocrisy of Aunt Saira and her peer group: "Inside me, however, a core of intolerence hardened against the hollowness of the ideas of progress and benevolence preached by my aunt and her companions. Rebellion began to feed upon my thoughts but found no outlet" (138).

In the views 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" (155). However Attia's approach to religion is not sacrilegious and she is not obviously as radical as de Beauvoir. She respects her religion: "To me religion was that... well drawing everybody together. It was never out of my mind that I was a Muslim". Hence it can be argued that Attia's critique of the patriarchal construction of Muslim society is not directed to Islam,

rather she opposes the patriarchy for its interpretation of religion as a tool to perpetuate its domination over women.

Attia's pungent criticism of the patriarchy is visible in the portrayal of Uncle Mohsin's character. Mohsin poses to be morally upright but beats up Nandi for her alleged misconduct. Laila subtly describes Mohsin's character: "Even we, the young ones, knew stories about him and the dancing girls of the city…He lived in the city with friends or relations, had a wide and influential circle of friends, dressed well, composed poetry, was an authority on classical music and dancing, and never did any work. I disliked him" (21). Zahra's sense of duty and religiosity is criticized when after her marriage, she sloughs off her religiosity and acts in accordance to her husband's wishes. Her abandonment of purdah does not bring any change in her circumscribed mentality. She acts as a 'modern' wife in compliance to her husband's wishes but inwardly she adheres to conservative values. Her marriage proves to be a shift from one patriarchal order to another.

> Zahra had changed very much in her appearance, speech and mannerisms. I knew she had not changed within herself. She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful purdah girl… She was all her husband wished her to be as the wife of an ambitious Indian Civil Service officer. (140)

The national patriarchs of the freedom movement decreed that women, upholders of values, would not westernize themselves. The wives of civil servants maintained a discreet modernity by giving up purdah and attending mixed parties along with their husbands. Sometimes the British ladies hosted 'purdah' parties for the more conservative wives of the Rajahs and other noblemen. Aunt Saira has the same conformist attitude to the patriarchal norms that Zahra displays. She is an echo of her husband Hamid. Prior to her marriage she hailed from an orthodox middle class family and lived in strict purdah, while Uncle

Hamid was educated in England. Laila subtly comments upon her shift from a strictly gender segregated family to another strident patriarchal niche. Aunt Saira was Uncle Hamid's echo, tall and handsome, dominated by him, aggressive with others. He had groomed her by a succession of English 'lady-companions'. Before she was married, she had lived strictly in purdah, in an orthodox, middle class household. Sometimes her smart saris, discreet make up, waved hair, cigarette-holder and high-heeled shoes seemed to me like fancy dress (87). Laila narrates that Saira's westernization was much to the dismay of Baba Jan, "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" (87). Saira's freedom from strict purdah cannot be interpreted as an expression of Hamid's reformist ideas; instead, Hamid merely modified the patriarchal views of Baba Jan according to the demands of time. Saira's modernity is a mere simulacrum when it comes to the issue of Laila's marriage. First she tries to arrange Laila's marriage to a profligate ruler of an estate and later to one of her own sons in order to keep the property undivided. She is prejudiced about Ameer regarding his pedigree and sternly opposes Laila's marriage to him. If she sulkily approves Laila's marriage it is only to save the family's reputation. In the last part, after her husband's death, she gives up 'modernity' and returns to the traditional way of life. Her reverting to traditions is also ordained by the patriarchy, as in a strict patriarchal system, a widow must refrain from the pursuit of luxury and pleasure.

To sum-up, the entire analysis is embedded in the conflict between tradition and modernity. The prominent motif of Laila is that she as if seeks to identify herself with lacanian mirror stage to construct her ego making a clean sweep of any societal taboos that adumbrates the triumph of modernity over wornout tradition in terms of recuperation of the marginalized Muslim womanhood and reconfiguring their identities.

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