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The Evaluation of the Indian Neo Women: A study of Attia Hosain's "Sunlight on a Broken Column"

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Abstract:

Indian women over the centuries have been presented as embodiments of pain, hardship, and struggle for identity, dignity and individuality. They have always been shown as dependents. Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column traces the journey of Laila, the protagonist, from adolescence to adulthood, against the backdrop of the feudalism and the tempestuous partition of the Indian Sub-Continental. Laila's struggle to extricate herself from "Patriarchal Codes" and her attempts to reach out to define her "Self" epitomize her indigenous kind of feminism.

As a "narrative about the emerging Indian nation and about emerging national identities" and narrative of partition Sunlight on a Broken Column, presents a feminine view of nation formation and national identities in contrast to 'official' nationalism that is dominated by the male and male narratives of nationalism, where an 'author claims the authority to speak on behalf of the entire nation and its diverse inhabitants'. The novel exposes a Muslim woman's point of view in nation formation. Nationalism subjugates women and they have an "indirect relationship" with nationalism and the nation through men. The dichotomy of male/female sphere is attributed to nationalism. Social sphere was specified as a male realm in order to counter colonial onslaught. Women were confined to the inner sphere or the family space, as the family space was consider more vulnerable to the cultural onslaught of colonialism. Nationalism puts the onus of cultural preservation on women, relegating them to the inner sphere of society. The image of the mother figure was projected in order to depict the colonized nation. In the freedom struggle, the image of the oppressed female desecrated by the colonizers was depicted in order to awaken the nationalist men to avenge the violation of the mother figure. In this nationalist discourse, the role of the mother was assigned to women to nurture and bring up nationalist sons. The women were assigned the responsibility to instill cultural and nationalistic values in their progeny.

Attia was a girl with a strong "will"; her struggle for her own independence matches that of India herself. Attia portrays the claustrophobia of this world and frustration felt by forward thinking young women to perfection. Brought up in a world where the traditional rules of obedience, honour and dishonour are more important than personal happiness and the feudal society is still controlling the lives of women. Attia begins to pull against this. Because of the autobiographical aspect of the novel, there are many convergences between Attia Hosain and her fictional protagonist, Laila. Laila's observation of socio-political events of mid-twentieth century and their ramifications on her own life, her family and her community are extensions of Attia Hosain's own experiences. The world of Laila is a reflection of Attia Hosain's contemporary society. Laila's strong will to counter the patriarchal oppressions and feudalism makes her remarkable. Her radical approach against the pseudo morality and strict gender segregations in the novel shows path to the progressive women.

Keywords: *Feminism, progressive women, gender segregations, feudalism, new women*

1. Introduction

Indian women over the centuries have been presented as embodiments of pain, hardship and helplessness. They struggle for identity, dignity and individuality throughout their lives. They have always been shown as dependents and live at the mercy of men in general. To them liberty, individuality and self-reliance are almost daydream. But with the speed of Western Education in India the enlightened women started coming out of their homes to experience and explore the outside world. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* traces the journey of Laila, the protagonist, from adolescence to adulthood, against the backdrop of the feudalism and the tempestuous partition of the Indian Sub-Continental. Laila's struggle to extricate herself from "Patriarchal Codes" and her attempts to reach out to define her "Self" epitomize her indigenous kind of feminism.

As a "narrative about the emerging Indian nation and about emerging national identities" and narrative of partition Sunlight on a Broken Column, presents a feminine view of nation formation and national identities in contrast to 'official' nationalism that is dominated by the male and male narratives of nationalism, where an 'author claims the authority to speak on behalf of the entire nation and its diverse inhabitants'. The novel exposes a Muslim woman's point of view in nation formation. Nationalism subjugates

women and they have an “indirect relationship” with nationalism and the nation through men. The dichotomy of male/female sphere is attributed to nationalism. Social sphere was specified as a male realm in order to counter colonial onslaught. Women were confined to the inner sphere or the family space, as the family space was considered more vulnerable to the cultural onslaught of colonialism. Nationalism puts the onus of cultural preservation on women, relegating them to the inner sphere of society. The image of the mother figure was projected in order to depict the colonized nation. In the freedom struggle, the image of the oppressed female desecrated by the colonizers was depicted in order to awaken the nationalist men to avenge the violation of the mother figure. In this nationalist discourse, the role of the mother was assigned to women to nurture and bring up nationalist sons. The women were assigned the responsibility to instil cultural and nationalistic values in their progeny.

Attia Hosain's in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* counters the British justification of the colonization of India. The British claimed that they rescued Indian women from a debauched and degenerate social system. Attia shows that British colonialism aggravated the dismal condition of women. In order to emulate their western counterparts, women were subjected to a new more strident patriarchal code of conduct in the public space. In contrast to liberal feminists who view that there need not “... be new political, economic, and social categories to end gender oppression.” Attia seems to uphold ‘radical feminists’ stand that “new political, economic, and social categories to end the patriarchy’s oppression of women.”

Colonialism and feudalism were the two tenacious institutions of Attia's contemporary society. In a scathing analogy Attia compares feudalism with that of the tribal systems that ill-treated women. The ramifications of this tribal ideology are discussed elaborately.

In the second part of the novel, the nationalist struggle is discussed at length. Attia delineates the response of Muslim elite to anti-colonial struggle. The narrative presents an account of the tumultuous period of anti-colonial resistance, marked by the conflict with the British. She also exposes the sectarian and communal divide. Laila's search for identity and her progress of individuation is concomitant to the nationalist struggle. Laila's growing awareness of her capabilities to undermine the patriarchal set up is simultaneous to the awakening of the Indian masses to oust the colonizer. The novel presents conflicting ideologies- Gandhian non-cooperation, Marxist ideology of exploitative economic powers, and views of the Muslim League that demanded a separate nation. Congress declined the demand of separate electorate and upheld the abolition of feudal system. Saleem's proximity to Muslim League, Zahid's hatred for the Shia community as well as Uncle Hamid's vision of peaceful co-existence and his disapproval of the freedom struggle, present a microcosmic view of Attia's contemporary society.

Female characters had different opinions regarding national politics. Nita is the only character who opted for nationalist movement. She dies of a skull fracture in a lathicharge (baton charge) by the police on a procession of students. Nadira's views reflect her parent's political conviction, and Joan views on politics through the lens of her Anglo-Indian origin.

Zahri's views are in consonance with her husband. The novel presents metamorphosis in the social structure. Uncle Hamid's displeasure at Kemal's jokes exposes the existentialist fear of *taluqdars*. Public outcry against the feudal system was an emergent trend.

“Our existence is threatened and you think it a joke? Our fathers and forefathers handed us down rights and privileges which it is our duty to preserve. I have no use for ingrates who enjoy privileges without accepting responsibilities.” (p.199)

The conversation between Laila and Uncle Hamid juxtaposes two views of the anti-colonial struggle. Laila calls it as a movement, whereas Uncle Hamid condemns it as “a demonstration of irresponsible hooliganism”.(p.160)Hamid's assertion regarding Laila's freedom of thought and action echoes the British justification of colonization of India. “You must know that freedom of action must be controlled until the mind reaches maturity and one's powers of judgement are fully developed.”(p.160)He refuses permission to Asad to study at study at Jamia and to work for the nationalist cause. With the passage of time, Hamid has to yield to the forces of social and political change and he contests the election of 1937 for a reserved constituency for *taluqdars* to the Provincial Legislature. *Taluqdars'* loyalty to the British government is presented through the depiction of the Viceroy's visit. The Viceroy's visit is celebrated with enthusiasm and elation. Asad mocks the celebrations and condemns it as a “viceregal circus”.

Asad calls the year 1937 young and exciting. Saleem finds the Taluqdars who participated in the national politics “the instrument by which the historical process” (195) is going to destroy the feudal class. Laila mocks the election campaign of Uncle Hamid, and decries it as ostentation to prove his credence of social service. Uncle Hamid acts as a pragmatic politician and unhesitatingly invites Shekh Waliuddin, who incites Shia-Sunni riots and later emerges as the hero who stops it. With some political maneuvering, Hamid wins the election. Saleem as a political analyst, views his father's victory merely as a ruse: “That we won by a few votes, after a recount, is no indication of our real strength, It merely shows how politically ignorant the masses are, how unprepared for democracy.”(p.177)

Attia Hosain commensurates the decaying feudal system and the “gradual crumbling” (p.282) of Uncle Hamid's predicament is assessed by Laila at political, social as well as emotional levels. “Politically” Laila comments” he had fought a losing battle against new forces that were slowly and inexorably destroying the rights and privileges in which he had believed” (p.282) At the social level, he encountered inevitable transitions that erred the way of life that “he had cultivated so carefully.”(p.282) “*Emotionally*, his family had grown away from him” (p.282) and he ultimately becomes an isolated, solitary figure.

It is noteworthy that Laila's realization of her inherent capabilities has affinity with the process of social change: “For the first time I became aware that barriers built by the mind had no more substance than the fears that raised them; once they were overcome by action, it was hard to believe they have ever existed.”(p.190)

As a partition narrative, the novel presents the poignancy of partition “with great objectivity and sympathetic understanding.”(p.43) The post-partition and pre-partition events are objectified. Attia's vision of shared identity and secularism dominates other dissenting voices that espouse a separate nation on the basis of different culture and religious identity. Attia was directly impinged by the disastrous partition. Regarding her motive of writing a partition narrative, Attia states, “I wanted to write about that agonizing heart

break when we are all split up and a brother could not see a brother and a mother could not be with her dying son and families that had been proud to always collect together. When there were weddings or deaths or birth or anything, cannot be together.”(p.44)

The novel presents Attia’s nostalgia for the pre-partition days. This is the first novel, written by a Muslim writer that evinces the divisions of Muslims between Congress and Muslim League. The partition is not directly portrayed, but with its implications on social, cultural, and political life. Baba Jan’s death brings about disintegration to the nucleus family:”after Baba Jan’s death it was as if tight hands had been loosened which had tied together those who had lived under the power of his will and authority.

Attia was a girl with a strong “will”; her struggle for her own independence matches that of India herself. Attia portrays the claustrophobia of this world and frustration felt by forward thinking young women to perfection. Brought up in a world where the traditional rules of obedience, honour and dishonour are more important than personal happiness and the feudal society is still controlling the lives of women. Attia begins to pull against this. Because of the autobiographical aspect of the novel, there are many convergences between Attia Hosain and her fictional protagonist, Laila. Laila’s observation of socio-political events of mid-twentieth century and their ramifications on her own life, her family and her community are extensions of Attia Hosain’s own experiences. Attia presents her heroine more experience than the cotemporary women. Her heroine is newer than the “new women”. The world of Laila is a reflection of Attia Hosain’s contemporary society. Laila’s strong will to counter the patriarchal oppressions and feudalism makes her remarkable. Her radical approach against the pseudo morality and strict gender segregations in the novel shows path to the progressive women.

2. Methodology

The work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, autobiography, journal, etc.

3. Notes

All the references of this article are taken from Attia Hosain’s novel “Sunlight on a Broken Column”, London, Penguin, 1961 & 1988. Only the page numbers of these editions have been mentioned here.

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