



HETEROGLOSSIA IN ATTIA HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN*

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Abstract

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) by Attia Hosain (1913-1998) is the first novel by a Muslim female writer on the theme of partition of India. It ascribes to 'heteroglossia' by presenting the reader with multiple voices and several points of view through a plethora of characters as Bakhtin proposes: "The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions." (Bakhtin, 263).

It blends the individual destiny of the female protagonist with the destiny of the nation. On one hand, Hosain proffers an unmistakably critical attitude toward the British colonial rule of India, while on the other, as a woman of minority culture, she finds the discourse of anti-colonial Indian nationalism essentially hegemonic and fraught with contradictions. In a liberal humanist fashion, Hosain critiques the discourse of the Raj as well as the anti-colonial Indian nationalism. Because of her departure from mainstream discourse on British India, Hosain had been relatively unnoticed until recently.

Sunlight is a novel about the perspective of colonial hybrid of late colonial India, an outlook rooted in the author's social associations and feudal family heritage. The structure of the novel is such that the first two sections elaborate on the lifestyle of Muslim aristocratic women, while from the third section, the consequences of the growing Hindu-Muslim divide as the struggle for independence gains impetus in colonial India are shown to infiltrate the house and affect its inhabitants in an irrevocable manner. The novel, therefore, can be seen as "a historical argument" that reveals "the impossibility of dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence" of partition. The change in political life from feudalism to a version of democracy and in social life from unquestioning orthodoxy to a rational conformity is brought out through diverse characters and incidents in the novel.

Keywords: Colonial, disintegration, heteroglossia, history, nation, novel.

Introduction

The Indian partition was a dramatic and a despicable event in the history of South Asia. Remembering and returning to such events of

history through our novels does not change the immediate situation, but it gives a clear view of the threats and challenges faced by humanity in the past times. The partition narratives warn the contemporary readers against the machinations of

the colonizers and the unjustified dirty politics of the leaders. Therefore it becomes absolutely necessary to deconstruct these narratives and form a broader view of what happened in the past and what could happen in the future. Indian fiction writers have taken up the partition narrative in different ways. The reactions of this cataclysmic event vary in Indian fiction, but nostalgia, poignancy and lament are the common features of this literature. Streaks of nationalism and embedded humanism naturally come to the forefront through the narratives.

My paper analyses Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) as a study of national history that runs parallel to the narrative that impinges Muslim identity vis-à-vis Muslim women. *Sunlight* by Attia Hosain (1913-1998) is the first novel by a Muslim female writer on the partition of India. It covers the span from 1932 to 1952, a crucial period marked by socio-political upheaval in the Indian subcontinent, describing its aftermath on the elites of Lucknow. Being autobiographical in nature, there are several convergences between Attia Hosain and her fictional character, Laila. The entire world of Laila is a true reflection of Attia's contemporary society.

The novel ascribes to 'heteroglossia' by presenting the reader with multiple voices and several points of view through a plethora of characters as Bakhtin proposes: "The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions." (Bakhtin 263) The novel presents a fusion of disparate experiences into an organic unity. A heteroglot novel is one in which "the social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with all its concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid heteroglossia of his epoch." (Bakhtin 300) In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, there is a discernible framework in which different perspectives, multiple complex interrelationships and voices emerge rather than a self sufficient and closed authorial monologue. The

author's own voice can be clearly heard with the heteroglot voices intersecting each other in a variety of ways and leading to dialogism as opposed to the monologue in the traditional stylistics of the novel.

A specific focus on partition narrative by women writers allows for unraveling of varied experiences of women during this tumultuous time in South Asian history. This is done through exploration of the ideological standpoints attached to the private sphere, that is traditionally the space allocated to women. Here "home" becomes significant not just in its physical embodiment, but also in its ideological underpinnings that stem from various cultural connotations of the word. Home is the central location where gendered identities are moulded in terms of one's culture and religion, and at a later stage where challenging of such identities takes place. Furthermore, as the chief occupants of this domestic sphere, the responsibility of preserving one's cultural values rests on the shoulders of women. In other words, "women are twice colonised – by *colonialist* realities and representations, and by *patriarchal* ones too" (McLeod 175). The first two sections of the novel elaborate on the lifestyle of Muslim aristocratic women, while in the third section, the consequences of the growing Hindu-Muslim divide as the struggle for independence gains impetus in colonial India, are shown to affect the inhabitants of the house in several ways. The novel, therefore, emerges as "a historical argument" that reveals "the impossibility of dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence" of partition (Burton 106). To prove this, the final section is set fourteen years later in the aftermath of partition that narrates Laila's visit to her childhood home. In this section, Hosain brings forth Laila's perspective and highlights the effects of partition on the house and its family members. As Sarla Palkar in her essay "Beyond Purdah" (1995) notes:

One cannot neatly compartmentalize the personal history of Laila from the social or national history – what makes *Sunlight on a Broken Column* a three dimensional novel is the manner in which the personal, social and national issues keep interacting and reflecting on one another. (115)

This interaction of various issues is presented by locating Laila's home at the centre where through the means of its inhabitants, the personal, social and national dynamics play within its walls. For women, home becomes primal with respect to self-definition because through "the memories of home," women can "claim a place in history at the intersection of the public and private, the personal and political, the national and the postcolonial" (Burton 4). This informs Laila's return to *Ashiana* at the end of the novel.

The time span of twenty years is covered in the novel starting from the early 1930s to the early 1950s. It begins at '*Ashiana*'-Laila's home with the elderly patriarch grandfather Baba Jan on his deathbed. Through the character of Baba Jan, the author "gives a symbolic representation of the unquestioned authority of patriarchal domestic norms" (Hasan 71). The household under the authority of Baba Jan is characterized by a "tightly controlled balance between a life within the household, ordained, enclosed, warm and secure but restricted by demands of modesty, and a life outside, free but insecure and confusing" (Amin 119). He holds an absolute command over the household and the home is represented as a stern feudal household where women of the house observe strict *pardah* to protect aristocratic demands of honour and etiquette and are surrounded by "a thousand taboos fiercer than the most fiery dragons" (Hosain 191). The atmosphere in the house is claustrophobic. As Laila claims, "Zahra and I felt our girlhood a heavy burden" (Hosain 14). The house is divided into *zenana* and *mardana* (men's area). Architecturally, *zenana* means "'the interior of the house'- the rooms are in the inner courtyard, away from the public and the male domain of the house," The *zenana or pardah* culture is intentionally scattered in the novel to emphasize the segregation caused by this tradition that imposes a limited mobility in terms of physical space given to women and also restricts their intellectual growth, since they are essentially barred from the world outside.

As a result of Baba Jan's illness, Aunt Abida's moving out of the women's quarters leads to a massive change within the familial structure of the

house, and this foretells the transformation about to take place in the family and also in the nation on the macro level. Furthermore, Baba Jan's dictatorial regime over *Ashiana*, though creates a highly oppressive space for its female inhabitants, can be read as a nostalgic reminiscence of the *talukdari* world in colonial India (to which Hosain belonged) where Hindus and Muslims were still united against a common colonial oppressor.

After the death of Baba Jan, the control of the entire household shifts to his England-returned son Uncle Hamid, who is said to be "more a Sahib than the English," and is "culturally identified with the Raj" (Hosain 22). With his return, one witnesses the "march of Anglicization" of the household (Shamsie 144). Uncle Hamid's return affects the lives of the inhabitants of *Ashiana*, especially the women of the household. For example, Aunt Abida is quickly married off to an old man, widowed Aunt Majida and distant poor cousins are sent away from the city of Lucknow to the ancestral home in the village of Hasanpur. Eventually, the close-knit family breaks down as family members begin to support conflicting political ideologies, that destabilises the family and results in its disintegration. After the partition, Laila returns to *Ashiana* as a widow. *Ashiana* is entirely destroyed, that becomes symbolic of the now divided country, ravaged by ethnic genocide. The house now represents a lost world that can never be recovered. Hosain deploys not just the physical disarray of home to show the broken country, but also highlights how people were reduced to basic facts and numbers.

The hybridity and the heteroglossia in the novel owe its roots to Hosain's life itself, which is a classic example of the struggle between the forces of tradition and modernity in late colonial India. Born in 1913 to an influential *talukdar* family of Lucknow in northern India, Hosain was one of the first women from her family to receive college education, and her father and brothers were London-trained scholars. While progressive on several issues, Hosain's family still adhered to other forms of traditional customs. The women observed *pardah* and were strictly confined to the domestic arena. After Hosain's father passed away when she was just eleven years old, her mother took charge of

the family's estate while still remaining in *purdah* for her entire life. Thus, Hosain's family was divided between a stubborn adherence to the fundamentals of Indian tradition and the progressive precepts of Western modernity. Hosain herself was clearly divided between the progressive edicts of Western humanism, liberal democracy, and women's empowerment discourse and an equally defined set of traditional values like feudal aristocracy and the rusticity of pre-modern India. After the partition, Hosain refused citizenship of India or Pakistan and remained in London for the rest of her life. She found it easier to reunite there with the members of her divided home than in either of the newly carved nations.

Conclusion

The novel creates its meaning against the multi-layered system of language, the heteroglossia, where the voice of the disempowered of history comes out through the aporia created by the dialogic interaction among the various ideological positions of the narrative. Arguing that "the development of the novel is a function of the deepening of the dialogic essence," Bakhtin describes this process of meaning creation in the novel in the following terms:

When heteroglossia enters the novel, it becomes subject to an artistic

reworking. The social and historical voices populating language, all its words and all its forms, which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualizations, are organized in the novel into a structured stylistic system that expresses the differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of his epoch. (300)

Similarly, Hosain's novel places together multiple forms of national belonging in a dialogic relation with one another, thereby challenging the finality of hegemonic discourses. Prof. Jasbir Jain reads *Sunlight's* artistic make up as reflective of Hosain's hybrid imagination. Assessing the disruptive potential of the amorphous form of the novel, a hybrid of various genres, Jain writes, "working through family history, national politics, social

documentation, and a personal exorcism," the novel "lends itself to several interpretative strategies" (135).

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