

From Tradition to Modernity: An Analysis of Female Characters in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

Arya Balachandran, M.Phil. Scholar

Abstract

British colonisation has brought many social changes in India. Their influence, together with the western education gave a modern outlook to the Indians. Along with a nationalistic fervour, a rebellion against the flaws in their own tradition were fired up. *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, written by Attia Hosain is a postcolonial novel. The novel showcases a period of time in India when Indians stood separated in their attitude towards the western culture. The novel has two phases. First, the time before partition of India in which we can see India as ruled by British, struggling for freedom and the free independent India with people troubled to make a choice between their inherent traditions and the alien western culture. And second phase is the time after partition. This novel provides a unique insight into the courtly life of India's Muslim aristocracy. Hosain gives the picture of a joint family in a feudal society, ruled by traditional concepts, sometimes under pressure to break or to change them. The main focus of this paper is to analyse how the author has portrayed through the female characters of the novel, the westernization of Indians whose life and values are intertwined with culture and tradition. Prior to the arrival of British in India, in the name of tradition, they were restricted, oppressed, subjugated and exploited. The upholders of tradition continued the evil social practices like purdah, polygamy, child marriage, sati etc., while the modernists and reformers being influenced by the western education acknowledged it as evil and oppressed it. The contrasting nature of traditional and modern values in the minds of women are explored in detail in this paper.

Keywords: Westernization, postcolonialism, tradition vs modernity, feminism

India is a pluralistic and culturally diverse nation with different sets of people following their own traditions and customs. In such a society, "family and community play a very significant role" as quoted by Richard Allen and Harish Trivedi in *Literature and Nations: Britain and India 1800-1990* (121). In spite of the challenging life patterns in urban India, lifestyles get moulded by traditional notions of social roles. Indian society has not much familiarized with the concept of individualism, because here individual choices and thoughts are conditioned by the demands of family loyalty and honour (izzat) along with the caste, religion, region and class of the individual. In India, these constraints come into action particularly in matters of marriage, as arranged marriage still continues to be the accepted norm. India has not moved away from the traditional notions we see in the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

Individual freedom has been consistently and variously opposed by tradition. Family can deny the freedom and happiness of an individual by inflicting issues of loyalty, honour, respect for one's elders, tradition etc. on him/her. Indian social life is loyal to traditional values though it is superficially westernized.

In Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the characters are in a state of conflict between the tradition they upheld and the modernity by the western tradition of British who ruled them. The novel illustrates the decay of aristocracy. She portrays in this novel, how Taluqdars enjoyed superior position among other social classes and how British influence and exploitation changed them. New laws made by British made old feudal structures impotent. British curbed the rights and princely privileges of feudal lords. The younger generation in the novel tries hard to gain freedom for themselves and their country, while the elders exercised their tyranny in the old joint family that traditionally dominated Indian life. It was a male dominated society where class system also prevailed.

The change from traditional ways to modern ways of living has brought many changes in characters of the novel also (Brians 77). The contrasting and conflicting nature of tradition and modernity are reflected in aunt Abida's words to Laila, "My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed" (38).

This paper deals with the effect of these changes on female characters. Laila, the protagonist in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is an orphan girl brought up in her grandfather's household by orthodox aunts who keep purdah. They remind her of her feminine duties and code of conduct from time to time. She escapes reality through her books. In this novel, we see Laila's growth from girlhood to womanhood and her experience moving from her grandfather's more traditional orthodox household to her uncle's more modern reform household. In this regard Rajashri G.Bavrekar in her work "Dynamics of Social Change and Gender Perception in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*" says,

The novelist presents the growth of the protagonist in two different worlds, one is the world of the Purdah culture of the house which represents conservatism, repression of sexuality and complete patriarchy and other is the world of new, practical, social and economic ideas which encourages an individual to assert and grow. These two worlds are presented with their conflicting values (199).

Laila has the benefit of English education. Education in itself is viewed as an agency of social change. Laila's cousin Saleem's views about the people's right are the result of the education he got. Her father and her uncle Hamid were educated and were greatly influenced by western ideas and modern ways of living. Baba Jan, their father had never been able to forgive them for that. Laila was given English education owing to her father's wish to see her educated. After Baba Jan's death, uncertainty prevailed in matters regarding her education as the right to decide was on her uncle Hamid. He declares his support for Laila's education saying "I have

always believed in the education of girls, it is the duty of parents and guardians to give them the kind of education that will best fit for their responsibilities in this changing world” (109- 110).

Though Laila is educated to fit in to the new world, she is expected to uphold old traditions and culture in her mind. Laila considered British rule as repressive, but she obtained certain modern values from her western education which exposed her to a world of new social, economic and political ideas. She read too many books and unlike her cousin Zahra, had her own thoughts and beliefs. Education makes Laila able to see the disparities in male and female voices. But she was not allowed to express her feelings.

Laila’s cousin Zahra is also a victim of this change. She was a dutiful Purdah girl brought up fittingly and properly according to her mother Majida. Before marriage she said her prayers five times a day, read the Quran an hour every morning, sewed and knitted and wrote the accounts. Unlike Laila, she received religious education. She was a girl who worried about the change of traditional ways with the English ideas of uncle Hamid. Her marriage with Naseer, an officer in the Indian civil service transformed her into a modern wife with “overly individualized”, “private resolutions for maintaining her patriarchal and class privilege” (Didur 121). Marriage for her was an escape from rigid patriarchal restrictions and purdah culture which gave her freedom to socialize. She attended social functions morning, afternoon and evening. She even takes differently rebellious Laila under her wing, bringing her out of purdah and dressing her up, dragging her to public events in defiance of their Aunt Saira’s reservations. But Zahra’s change is only an outward change.

Hamid’s wife Saira was not a western woman but a ‘new woman’ subjected to a new patriarchy according to Jill Didur (110). That is, not only she was modern, but also displayed signs of national tradition different from western woman. She believed the education of girls as necessary, because for marriage young men desired educated girls. She agrees to Begum Waheed when she says, “We bring our girls up to be good wives and mothers” (131). Saira’s husband’s modern outlook towards life also made great impact upon her personality. She did not practice Purdah and supported her husband’s decision - not to give religious education to their sons. She was also interested in socializing. Unlike her sister in laws, she was not confined to zenana.

Laila’s aunt Abida took care of her after the demise of Laila’s parents. She was conservative in her values, but modern in some thoughts which were unacceptable for the upholders of orthodox beliefs. But she is consistent throughout the novel in her insistence on the rightness of the elders. She argued that Zahra and Laila needed to be present when Zahra’s future is discussed; as Laila’s uncle Mohsin opposed it (21). Mohsin is the conservative uncle in Laila’s life. He takes upon himself the task of safeguarding the tradition of his family and Laila hates him for that. The fiery and sensitive aunt Abida, who had been rebel enough to reject uncle Mohsin’s interest in her, was unmarried when Baba Jan dies, as her father could not find a suitable groom for her. She is relegated and married off to an elderly widower as soon as her brother Hamid comes home. Once married, she lost the spark she had always possessed. She became a typical Indian housewife upholding traditional values and devoting her life to her husband’s service and denied of freedom of self-expression and thought.

Laila is torn between concepts of arranged marriage and love marriage. She considers arranged marriage as an uncivilized belief because of which she asserts “I won’t be paired off like an animal” (29) during family discussion of Zahra’s marriage. Love marriage was not acceptable in orthodox as well as in reformed Muslim communities. Marriages had to be arranged, because individual choice was recognized as love which was considered as a sin committed by one to his family “love between man and woman was associated with sex, and sex was sin” (312). According to Bavrekar, Traditional marriages are characterized by religious sanctions, patriarchal control of women and property. Traditional marriages guard the household property and keep the feudal system intact, bind the members of the family and preserves the practice of patriarchy while, modern marriages are based on the concepts of love, freedom, equality and secularism (199, 201).

Yet another female character is Sita. Sita’s education did not give her enough courage like Laila. Sita is like every other girl who yields to parent’s decisions in every matters regarding their life. Sita loves Kemal, Laila’s cousin. But for her, marrying him was unthinkable and she decides to marry following her parent’s wish. She says to Laila “Do you think I am submitting to an arranged marriage; this is my own choice, I cannot ever marry for love and I do not want a masquerade. My parents are the best judges of the man with the best qualifications for being a husband. They have a wider choice” (Hosain 216). In her opinion love has nothing to do with marriage. She says “It is like mixing oil and water. Love is antisocial while matrimony preserves the world and its respectability. I married with my kind unblurred by sentiment, and everybody is happy” (296).

Laila’s love with Ameer is an expression of her individuality. It is against the principles of her family which gives little importance to one’s self. “It is only through service to others that you can fulfill your duty” (252). Her love threatened the patriarchal community’s identity and material security because of the active and unregulated expression of female sexuality. The traditional branch of her family including aunt Abida refused to forgive her for her actions. Aunt Abida says: “You have been defiant and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to your family ... you have let your family’s name be bandied about by scandal-mongers and gossips. You have soiled its honour on their vulgar tongues “(312).

Laila’s family resisted her acceptance of Ameer as her husband as he lacked good breeding. Laila suffered rejection from her extended family for marrying for ‘love’ and ‘below her class’. Also they objected the independence she demonstrated by pursuing the relationship without their consent. They considered Laila’s love with Ameer as a loss of family honour. They rejected her affair with Ameer, but the educated youngsters of her generation supported their relationship. Kemal’s marriage to a non-Muslim, Perin Wadia proves this. Unlike Sita, Laila’s love for Ameer gives her the courage to reject her family’s bourgeois values. Thus she was able to break from traditional customs by realizing her dream of living her own life.

Nandi, the servant in Laila’s household also thinks differently from the traditional way of thinking. She criticizes the patriarchal practices of marriage system in which women are reduced to slaves. In her words “Some old man will want a young slave to cook his food and press his feet. But she must suffer first. I know we cannot escape from our destiny or the devils inside us”

(169). For Nandi, “a man’s love is like an animal’s love” (170). She was determined enough to take revenge on Ghulam Ali for Saliman’s death. Through extramarital sex she becomes pregnant, but she has no regrets for that. She wants his son to be educated and employed unlike her people who washed the dirty clothes of others. Nandi, the servant girl belongs to different economic class, but influence of modernity in her ideas is the same as Laila’s.

The notion of family honour, or ‘izzat’ and its hold on social behaviour remains strong even today. Izzat in many instances is particularly circumscribing of women’s lives. It also makes individual action difficult for both men and women, particularly in relation to marriage between Laila’s cousin Kemal and her childhood friend Sita unthinkable. Though Laila rejects the old pressures of class and background when she marries Ameer, the past remains important to her.

Impact of these social changes on women is also huge. There are three important incidents in this novel where people die or nearly die because tradition prevents scientific medical treatment. In the first case, Nandi’s mother dies of tetanus because Nandi’s father calls an exorcist rather than a physician (135-136). Aunt Abida falls seriously ill after a miscarriage because of the unavailability of a female doctor when her mother in law refused to allow a man to attend her. Finally Saliman dies due to the same “hypocrisy and bigotry that ... nearly killed Aunt Abida” (204-205). Thus this novel is an account of complexities which pull society in the two opposite directions, one towards the traditional culture and nationalism and the other towards modernization and in some cases westernization.

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Arya Balachandran

M.Phil Scholar

Department of English

St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam, Kerala arya.thidunnayil@gmail.com

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Arya Balachandran, M.Phil. Scholar

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