

A Relic a Lost World

A review on...

Sunlight on a Broken Column;

Author: Attia Hosain,

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'Old order changeth, yielding place to new' is a popular saying of eternal relevance. The paradox that change is the only constant factor is true, however, the pace of change accelerates at times and decelerates at other times. The early twentieth century was one such periods of swift and rapid transformations, especially in the socio-political structures of the world. What was of a deeper and a more far-reaching consequence was the change in human relationships which had a significant impact on the construction of identities and the consolidation of communities and nations in the post colonial world. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* recaptures the life and experiences of a transformational phase in the history of our nation, depicting the trauma that the then generation of men and women had undergone as helpless witnesses of an onslaught on human relationships. Her subject is the India during the fag end of colonial supremacy, the India that woke up to the reality that the impact of the damages caused by centuries of foreign domination was too severe to be set right by a mere withdrawal of the imperial masters.

The ruins of the ancient monuments and structures that speckle a modern city of massive and sprawling concrete constructions make a discerning observer curious to know the past they represent. The book under review is one such monuments, in which the nostalgic remembrances of the author instill in the reader an irresistible desire

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to retrace the steps and retrieve the past. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* truthfully portrays a segment - 1930s to 1940s - of the history of north India, more precisely that of Lucknow, a city known for its rich Islamic culture. It recreates the pre-Partition Indian subcontinent bringing back to life the glory of that ancient world and the enchanting life of the men and women who lived through the period. The novel thus gains importance not only for its literary beauty but also historical significance.

History and fiction, both being constructs, are so similar that at times the line of demarcation between the two fades, making them seem to be the same. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, "The composition of the world 'history' itself contains the word 'story'" (285-286). Reflecting on the closeness of the two disciplines, she further observes, "...literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree for interpreting experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man" (105). The two disciplines are complementary to each other with history throwing light on fiction, and fiction contributing to a better and fuller understanding of history. One has to pay heed to the tales told by the fictional characters to read what is left untold in the seemingly objective and factual accounts of history.

Attia Hosain's father Shahid Hosain Kidwari belonged to the Taluqdar family - feudal landholders - of Oudh, a state in north India known during the time of the British as United Provinces. He was educated at Christ College, Cambridge and the Middle Temple and her mother, Nisar Fatima who hailed from a distinguished intellectual, traditional Muslim family was the founder of an institute for women's education and welfare. Hosain attended the Isabella Thoburn College at the University of Lucknow. Her traditional upbringing also helped her to gain mastery over Urdu and Persian. In 1947, to avoid relocating to Pakistan, Hosain left for Britain with her

family, where she was well known as a writer, feminist and broadcaster. A seamless blending of the traditional and the modern in Attia Hosain is at the core of all her literary compositions.

“Sunlight on a Broken Column is one of the few deeply sensitive novels in the Indian English writing of the last generation, a poignant, tragic narrative full of poetry of remembrance with an undercurrent of stoic calm” says, Mulk Raj Anand in his introduction to the Arnold Heinemann edition of the novel. The twentieth century, especially its first half, was a period of political, social and cultural transformation which had accelerated and turned into a radical force in the 1930s and 1940s. The change that came over the concept of nationhood was a world-wide phenomenon and in our country the force that accelerated the transfiguration of nationhood was the Colonial experience, especially the divisive policy of the British. Cultural heterogeneity was so pronounced in the pre-British India that the similarity of the cultural practices of every region gave its people a sense of oneness. This feeling of oneness that prevailed among the people of every region of the vast Indian subcontinent, irrespective of their religious faith and communal affinities was what was questioned by the British.

In the contemporary world there is no nation which has such a varied cultural heterogeneity as India. It was this astonishing diversity of India that made the British exclaim: “...there is not, and never was an India, or even a country of India, possessing according to European ideas any sort of unity... no Indian nation, no 'people of India' of which we hear so much” (Chadda, 26). The pre-British India was characterized by tolerance and peace and the first notes of discord came to be heard with the consolidation of the administrative strategies of the British. In consequence of this, the religious identities became more and more pronounced. The India that was projected by the British historiographers of the period was as the

'Other' of Europe and the British novelists like Rudyard Kipling and E M Foster complemented this image in the literary works.

In these circumstances, establishing a national identity was an inevitable need for the Indian national leaders. The programmes targeted towards the founding of a Hindu national identity initiated in this context in the last decades of the nineteenth century consolidated the Hindu nationalism as propagated by the Right wing. An attempt to project the political legacy of the Muslims was a natural reaction to this.

In the works of the Indian Muslim writers of the early twentieth century there is an effort to portray the collective consciousness of the Muslim community of the period. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* expresses a nostalgic yearning to do away with all the divisive forces which annihilated the peace and quietude of the life of the nation and records the political events that moulded and transformed the concept of nationhood. It is remarkable for its objectivity and authenticity in the presentation of the national events of the pre-Partition era. The historic transition that came over the common man's idea of nationhood and his religious and regional affinities and the choices that he made, or rather, was compelled to make are presented by the author.

Attia Hosain sketches a realistic picture of the pre-Partition India in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by juxtaposing the views held by different members of the Taluqdar family around whom the story is woven. This novel that subverts the patriarchal construct that politics is not the prerogative of women also presents a realistic picture of the India during the years that preceded and followed Partition. The central issue of the novel is Laila's self realization. The story of her self-realization is also the story of the Nation that struggles to come to terms with the communal hatred unleashed in the closing years of the colonial rule.

The death of Baba Jan, the patriarchal head of the “Ashiana” household with which the novel begins also indicates the disappearance of a way of life. Uncle Hamid belongs to the generation of the period of transition, the agent of fervent nationalism. He takes a pro-British stand that was characteristic of the Taluqdars and other landed gentry who had enjoyed certain privileges from them.

Uncle Hamid's sons Kamal and Saleem are foils to each other; Kamal advocates the secular nationalism of the Congress and Saleem the fanatical stand taken by the Muslim League in the 1940s. The latter is critical of the anti-Muslim stand of the Congress when he says, “I believe that the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it against which the Muslims must organize. The danger is great because it is hidden like an iceberg” (Hosain 233).

Asad and Kamal are two characters through whom Hosain portrays the sober stand taken by the nationalist Muslims. Yet she is careful to draw a line of demarcation between the two. Asad is a Gandhian who accepts non-violence “believing that bitterness and retaliation could only breed violence” (315). Kamal strongly adheres to the secular nationalist views. His faith in nationalism withstands even the horror and the pain of Partition. His words to Saleem are expressive of this faith, “But I believe in my country. I have to fight for what I believe in” (287). Laila's political sympathies are with Asad and Kamal, though her conventional upbringing does not permit her to be so demonstrative of her views.

Hosain's “Ashiana” is a microcosm of the India that was in a state of turmoil during the years that preceded the Partition. The Muslim perspective of the pre-Partition political crisis is the chief thematic concern of the author; however her success is that she has impartially presented the views held by different sections of Indian Muslims accurately.

The scattered ruins of old monuments in the modernized metropolitan cities of India shake us from the illusion that life in India is what we see in the massive malls and multiplexes. So also immortal literary creations which realistically depict the life as lived by the people of a lost world are reminders of a rich past. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* falls under the category of such immortal creations. The glimpses of that old world of peace and harmony, in which communities and cultures were assigned their own spaces, leave the reader with a nostalgic desire to bring back those days of yore. At a time when racial, religious, regional and cultural differences set one against the other, and communities in conflict with one another emphasize their differences with a sense of rivalry, literary works like *Sunlight on a Broken Column* are relics that make one look back upon those days of tolerance, peace and harmony, when differences were celebrated, allowing cultures and traditions to mix and merge leading to new and diverse cultural formations. ■

“To get what we’ve never had, we must do what we’ve never done”

- Anonymous

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“Change is the watch word of Progression”

- Anonymous