

Gendered Nationalism and Emotional Confinement in Attia

Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column

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Abstract

Gendered nationalist discourses and the emotional prisons in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961)¹⁴⁵ Spanning pre-independence India and the years of Partition, the novel depicts what happens when feudal Muslim nobility goes into decline, and individual identities change- amalgamate/ divide under colonial modernity that was vying for a place alongside indigenous nationalist movements. The paper contends that the novel's understanding of nationalism is male, allowing men to participate in politics, while relegating

women to symbolic and domestic positions. Women serve as the custodians of cultural values, moral righteousness, and family honour but are denied the public space of modern nation-making. By the means of Laila, through revealing how emotional entrapment works in family structures, patriarchal powers and within the zenana by means of spatial isolation. Employing a feminist-postcolonial lens, this paper examines the way Hosain critiques nationalist ideologies and patriarchal traditions to embody the idea that political freedom does not always result in gender emancipation. But what women know of nationalist history is the fragmentation of emotion and the shackles of psychology.

Keywords: Gendered nationalism, emotional confinement, Partition literature, feminist theory, postcolonial identity, domestic space.

Introduction

Sunlight on a Broken Column, by Attia Hosain, is one of the most notable examples in Indian English writing about pre- and post-Partition realities. This novel takes place in Lucknow, following the story of Laila, an orphaned girl raised among high-end Muslim families. Hosain chronicles the slow decomposition of feudal customs, the dawning awareness of nationalism and its quick disinterest in a peaceful Partition.

But the book does not merely tell a history: it also recounts both how nationalism is experienced on different sides of the gender divide and how female historical figures fit within this narrative. Men in the novel experience the current political debates, movements and ideological struggles; women are largely restricted to domestic spaces and emotional labour. Thus, national identity is not a neutral labour of equal experience and it operates through patriarchal norms that instruct men and women to behave but in two distinct paths.

This paper holds that Sunlight on a Broken Column serves to transform nationalism into a gendered phenomenon which shapes and confines women to emotional spaces. Laila experiences this by revealing how patriarchal prerogatives are entrenched at the level of

household and culture even as nationalist rhetoric promises freedom (and independence) for women and men.

Gendered Nationalism: The Politics of Exclusion

Sunlight on a Broken Column is dominated by men: Baba Jan and the other males in the family confront political and ideological questions of independence. They are the authority figures, the bastions of tradition, who populate the public face of nationalist debate.

But women are relegated to mythic containers for cultural identity. By making women vessels of “honour” in the logic of nationalist ideology, women are subjected to regulation of their bodies and behaviour. This echoes feminist critiques of nationalism suggesting that women are too often not the builders of nations but rather mere metaphors for them.

Awareness of politics and modern education does not equate to real agency for Laila. Although she is naturally intellectually curious, she is required to adhere to society's rules of humility, submissiveness and homemaking. She is consequently trapped in a paradoxical identity: she carries the weight of a shifting world yet resides in an immovable frame.

This exclusion represents the split between the ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’, which Partha Chatterjee has elaborated upon as a situation in which men occupy the material (political, economic) sphere while women remain confined to ‘the spiritual (domestic, cultural)’ (Chatterjee 1993).

Domestic Space and Emotional Confinement

The home of the novel isn't just a backdrop; it is an apparatus of emotional containment. The zenana system represents the isolation of women from public space, a protrusion of depersonalization and subordination. Through surveillance, silence, and duty as the demons of her emotional world Laila gets lost. Elders watch every move; personal needs are sidelined in the name of family pride. The home turns into a place of regulation of emotions and subordination of individuality to common traditions.

The broken column metaphor refers to the nagging collapse of a former overarching feudal structure. But it also means that they have power over individual lives as the scaffolding starts to rot. Even as social change unfolds, emotional confinement continues, which is an indication that transformation remains partial and uneven. In this setting at home, Hosain (1977) illustrates that patriarchy not only enforces physical confinement but is also a part of emotional conditioning behind all patriarchal communication. We teach women that being obedient, feeling guilty, and making sacrifices are good things.

Domestic Space and Emotional Confinement

In the book the home is described as not only a physical living space but an emotional place of controlling. Zenana system is the isolation of female from public which leads to a greater sense of loneliness and dependency. Laila's emotional world is defined by the forces of being observed, mute, and dutiful. Her every move is ghosted by elders, and her own desires are sacrificed for the family honour. The house becomes an emotionless environment, where emotions go through a process of arrests, and individualities are sacrificed at the altar of tradition.

The metaphor of the "broken column" represents the crumbling of an old feudal system. Even as these systems fall apart, it means they still have an impact on people's lives. Emotional containment survives social transformation, signaling that change is incomplete and uneven.

Hosain uses this domestic setting to demonstrate how patriarchy operates not only through physical restriction but also through emotional conditioning. Women are taught that being obedient, feeling guilty, and making sacrifices are moral virtues.

Laila's Identity and Negotiation of Freedom

In a world that has grown, Laila becomes the one who deals with this negotiation of faith. She studies and gets an education, which not many women in her house do; she upholds liberal ideologies. But her growth intellectually does not provide for emotional freedom.

Family expectations, in constant circulation to inform her relationships and choices. Even her rebellion against power is so understated and subverted as to appear more internal than external. It is a reflection of the restricted instances of agency that women can make use of within patriarchal nationalist frameworks. Loss represents family members dead, political unrest and finally Partition violence traps and encloses Laila in a stunted emotional existence. The experiences cut her identity into fragments, putting it between belonging and alienation.

This un-does the wholeness within her subjectivity, thus fracturing it: a microcosm to the broader theme of structural disintegration in the novel overall. However, among this disconnection in Hosain's work are instances of consciousness and muted resistance, as though the mere act of emotional survival is a silent liberation.

Partition and the Intensification of Gendered Suffering

In this way, the Partition of India serves in the novel as a geographical and visceral divide. On the one hand it is representative of political independence at the national level, but then produces violence, displacement and trauma. As for women, not only are they often displaced physically but emotionally dislocated by Partition. Stable categories of home, identity and belonging become destabilised. Laila and other female characters experience a loss that echoes the systemic erasure of women's history in nationalist histories.

It is told as a story of nationalism that heralds liberation from colonial rule, but which ironically reproduces new forms of division and suffering. According to Hosain, Partition not only presents the political violence she described but also relocates and attaches strong gender inappropriateness status, because the history turns women into emotional labour to help carry and sustain this transformation across time.

Conclusion

Sunlight on a Broken Column functions in overlapping critiques of nationalism, tradition and gender. Attia Hosain examines the gendered exclusions of nationalist ideology

through Laila's life by showing how women are limited on personal, spatial, and social levels. As men exist in the visible space of political action, women are consigned to the hidden sphere with confined emotions and identity. That kind of division creates a type of emotional prison that lingers in spite of history.

Hosain finally takes issue with the idea that political dislocation equals a secondary universal freedom. Instead, she reveals how patriarchal structures remain, albeit repackaged within a newly conceived nation. So, the novel turns out to be an urgent intervention in postcolonial history from feminist perspective with a double insistence, that there can never be one without the other national and gender justice.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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