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ATTIA HUSSAIN'S SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN AS A PARTITION NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

"Sunlight on a Broken Column" is a novel by Attia Hussain that explores the impact of the Partition of India in 1947 on a young woman named Laila. The story follows Laila as she navigates the changing political landscape and social dynamics of her country, grappling with the loss of her family's ancestral home and the upheaval of her once privileged life.

The broken column in the title symbolizes the shattered lives and fractured identities of those affected by the Partition. The sunlight represents hope and resilience, shining through the cracks and illuminating the possibility of healing and rebuilding in the aftermath of tragedy.

Through Laila's personal journey, the novel sheds light on the larger themes of nationalism, identity, and the enduring impact of historical events on individual lives. It is a poignant and powerful exploration of the human cost of political upheaval and the struggle to find meaning and belonging in a world torn apart by division.

(key words partition, religion, harmony, tolerance)

Introduction

Partition of the country on the basis of religion is the most unreasonable event in the Indian history after independence. The deepest wound and the greatest damage done by the British, to the people of this subcontinent who were living in religious harmony, is this careless division of its united people. Religion, then, was just a matter of faith, a way of life, and it had the capacity to make people accept a different faith and different way of life. But when a political colour was rendered to it, religion became a dividing weapon, which, in the hands of a fanatic, could only heart and kill, thus giving rise to violence and death in place of peace and harmony. Thus partition has left behind an unforgettable damage, cultural as well as emotional, for the people on both the sides of the border. The holocaust of the aftermath of partition, the violence and death, loss of a sense of belonging, the breaking of the hearts, the destruction of longstanding friendship between different communities, the emotional trauma -are all rendered in a realistic and touching manner by many Indian writers in English. Eminent novelists like Salman Rushdie, Kushwant Singh, Manohar Malgaonkar, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Attia Hussain have touched upon this theme and have rendered an artistic portrayal of that painful experience.

1. Attia Hussain, in her only novel, Sunlight On A Broken Column, brings forth the events that made the partition inevitable, and the aftermath of this unforgettable event in the history of the Indian Sub-continent. Attia Hussain is one of the pioneering Indian Women writers in English. Her Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) and Phoenix Fled and other stories (1953), have established her status as an outstanding writer in

English of the Post Independence Era. Autobiographical in nature, the novel tells the story of Laila, a fifteen-year-old girl from a renowned Taluqdar family. Through Laila's life and experiences, which have a very close affinity with those of Attia Hussain herself, the novel successfully creates a picture of the life of a Muslim woman belonging to an aristocratic family in Pre-Independence India, and through her eyes the reader is made to experience all the things that lead to the partition. Through Laila's narration, the novel also pictures the aftermath of partition-the total holocaust, and the traumatic experience, on the part of the people of both the communities.

2. Though the novel mainly contains a narration of Laila's life and her inner struggle for her personal freedom as a woman from an orthodox Muslim family, her struggle for and attainment of freedom, is concomitant to the national struggle for and subsequent attainment of freedom from the British rule. The Socio-political conditions during the period from the 1930's to the Post-partition days, provides the background to the story of Laila and her decaying feudal family. In the second part of the novel Attia Hussain describes the responses of the Muslim elites to the on-going anti-colonial struggle. The narrative presents an account of the tumultuous period of the anti colonial resistance. The partition figures nearly at the end of the novel as a backdrop and as a crisis. It presents the Muslim perspective or response to the ordeal. Though it does not appear as a central theme as in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) or Chaman Nihal's *Azadi* (1959), and Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), which focus only on the partition and the political turmoil that lead to it, the novel succeeds in creating a realistic picture of the pathos and pain that the partition left behind for the people.

3 The novel consists of four parts and sixty one chapters, covering a period of about twenty years in the life of Laila. Laila has lost both her parents and lives in the household of her grandfather along with her father's sisters Abida and Majida and Majida's 17 year old daughter Zahra. She is brought up by her orthodox but principled aunt Abida. As per the wishes of her late father, Laila gets the benefit of Western education, but she too keeps Purdah like her aunts. Death of her grandfather makes Uncle Hamid her father's elder brother, the new head of the family and her new guardian. Though a man of so-called liberal ideas, Hamid is autocratic guardian allowing little freedom to those who live under his authority. She now starts attending college. Her friends and her distant cousin Asad, are involved in the national movement for freedom and anti-British government protest. Laila, who is surrounded by people who are either Pro-British or against is unable to take sides. When Uncle Hamid asks whether she has no freedom of thought, she rightly says that she has no freedom of action-indicating the futility of the former in the absence of the latter. Her mind rebels against the hypocrisy of her uncle and his wife. This rebellion gets expressed in her actions when she falls in love with Ameer, a poor relative of a family friend. As this poor man would never be approved by her aristocratic family, Laila goes against their wishes and marries Ameer, thus asserting her own individuality, and winning freedom from their authority. The struggle for freedom for the country and the successful attainment of that freedom, finds an allegory in Laila's struggle for and attainment of her own personal freedom. In the beginning, politics hardly touches Laila's life. Her first awareness of politics comes, when her cousins Asad and Zahid give her information about political processions. It is a period of political activities with both Hindus and Muslims in the struggle against the British. Innumerable Hindus and Muslims are shouting slogans in the procession against the British. The novel shows that the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs made their effort together to oust the British and to preserve their traditions. Quite clearly this political amity between the communities becomes clear from the friends- circle of Laila's family, which includes even Christians. Cordial relationships exist among all the communities. For instance Mr. Free Mantel, requests in his will that he should be buried near his friend Syed Mohammed Hassan, Laila's grandfather.

4. Attia Hussain writes in this context; "A simple marble cross distinguished his grave from the others in the family graveyard in the mango grove at Hassanpur" Uncle Hamid comments on the cordiality between the Hindus and the Muslims in this way; "I always found it was possible for Hindus and Muslims to work together on a political level and live together in a personal friendship" (SBC, 234). Differences in food habits and ways of life did not affect the friendship between people from different communities. Laila says, "Ranjit's grandfather did not eat with Babajan, but was his greater friend (SBC, 197). As the communal tension starts mounting in the city, the whole story is narrated by Hakim Bua: "Just outside the big Hanumanji temple the top of their Tazia stuck in the branch of a peepul tree... the branch of their (Hindus) sacred tree could not be cut without getting the Hindus angry.... Someone began to blow a conch in the temple though it was known

there was a holy procession outside. Some hot blooded persons threw stones at the heathen sounds and the fighting began. This kind of mischief spreads like a fire in a field of dry grass" (SBC 75-76). Thus, the novel shows, the seeds of partition were sown.

5. The secular nationalism under the Congress banner was challenged by the communal nationalists under the Muslim League banner. The rift among the Muslims becomes wide when the secular Muslim nationalists remained in the Congress, while the communal Muslims level charges against the Congress terming it as a purely Hindu organization. The communal politics enters into the sophisticated households like that of Uncle Hamid. Heated arguments are seen between Hamid and his son Saleem. The politics of the street thus invades the drawing rooms, and even father and son find themselves in opposite camps. Criticising the Muslim League, Hamid sarcastically says, "The Muslim League in which you are so interested, I have heard it called communal and reactionary by nationalist Muslims" (SBC, 234). Saleem retorts forcefully and accuses the Congress of having anti-Muslim elements Saleem fears that the Hindu majority may rule over the Muslim minority after getting independence. The same feeling of fear makes aunt Saira say, "It would be better to have the British stay on, than the Hindus ruling" (SBC, 234). This fear and sense of insecurity ultimately becomes the very basis of the formation of Pakistan. Saleem is afraid of the Hindus' feeling of revenge; "The majority of the Hindus have not forgotten or forgiven the Muslims for having ruled over them for hundreds of years. Now they can democratically take revenge. The British have ruled for about 200 years and see how much they are hated" (SBC).

6. The novel tries to trace the causes of the growth of communal hatred and blames partly the British and partly the leaders of both the communities. Asad discerns the Divide and Rule' policy of the British and says that they encourage communal riots and 'teach us to hate each other' (SBC, 56).

7. It is therefore true that the British rule played an important role in the promotion of Communal hatred thus making partition inevitable. When Saleem says that the Muslims in the Congress are being used as dupes to give it a secular appearance, Kemal, his brother is surprised, and says, "How you have changed...you used to say the British encouraged Hindu Muslim quarrels to drive them apart in order to divide and rule" (SBC, 256). This throws light on the deteriorated relationship between the two communities.

8. When the partition is announced, the whole country witnesses the scene of Muslims going to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs from that region coming to India. The creation of Pakistan provided the Muslims with a nation of their own where, they think they can have better prospects. This resulted in the splitting of the families as it happened with Uncle Hamid's family. His two sons, Kemal and Saleem part ways as Saleem decides to leave for Pakistan while Kemal like Laila, prefers to stay back in the place of his roots. The parting of these two brothers represents the predicament of the Indian families in general. It also symbolises the division of the Hindu Muslim brotherhood. The country was a witness to the total holocaust of the ordeal. "Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly and despite many a warning the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion: they had not anticipated that the fear and uncertainty created by the drawing of borders...would force people to flee to a place where they would be surrounded by their own kind."2

9. This resulted in splitting of families over the option of choosing Pakistan as their destiny or staying back in India, the place of their birth and growth.. Saleem hopes for better opportunities in Pakistan where as in India, he feels that the Muslims who do not migrate might have to face suspicion and hatred. Kemal, on the other hand, believes that India is his country and that he belongs to it. Kemal is not fascinated by the promise of a 'new paradise of the Muslims across the border.'

10. After partition, Laila visits Ashiana with nostalgia, to realise that nationalism was only a garb worn for convenience, that "...it is no longer the moving spirit as it was in the country before independence; (SBC, 293). Soon after partition, the latent hatred that had developed between the two communities, gets unleashed in the form of communal riots. The novel describes very pathetically, the communal riots that broke in the train. Zahid, who had fought for the freedom with a dream for an ideal nation, is killed in a train tragedy. Attia Hussain describes the pathos and irony of it all thus: "Full of bright hope and triumph Zahid had boarded the train on that thirteenth day of August, which was to take him to the realization of the birth of the country for which he had lived and worked, when it had reached its destination not a man, woman or child

was found alive (SBC, 310). Attia Hussain criticises both the communities for their blind hatred. She also criticises those Muslims who left their relatives to their plight and fled the country, as also those who turned a deaf ear to the helpless cry of their fellow men. A refugee who had lost all his family members in the holocaust, is not given any help by the fellow Muslims, he calls them 'bloody traitors.' Laila too is not helped by other people of her community at her critical moments. She praises the Hindus who come to the rescue of the helpless Muslims who are left behind by their opportunist relatives. Laila expresses it to Zahra: "Where were you Zahra, when I sat up through the nights, watching village after village set on fire.... Do you know who saved me and my child? Sita, who took us to her house, in spite of putting her own life in danger with ours. And Ranjit who came from his village.... He drove us back, pretending we were his family, risking discovery and death. What were you doing then? Getting your pictures in the papers distributing sweets to orphans whose fathers have been murdered" (SBC, 304). The novel also shows the amity between the two communities which has not been completely destroyed. This gets revealed by the friendly welcome that Saleem gets from his old Hindu friends when he visits India. "Saleem is touched to find old friends (Hindus!) unchanged.... He was glad of the feeling of recognised identity in Hasanpur after having lived among strangers who knew him as an individual without a background" (SBC, 299). Laila, a sensible, mature and educated woman, is able to rationalize against the partition that has shattered many a dream, parted brothers and killed friends and relatives. Laila has lost her husband and has returned to India after many years with her daughter. Her childhood friend Sita Agarwal has arrived to share her grief. The after-effects of partition are very much felt. Saleem has to report to the police everyday for visiting his own house and family in Lucknow and Hasanpur, the family ancestral house.

11. Thus, it can be concluded that Attia Hussain's novel, *Sunlight On A Broken Column* is a significant Indian English novel that presents a realistic picture of the crisis of Indian partition. It is unique among the partition novels of its kind, as the first to render a woman's perspective on the partition. It also stands as the first of that genre to give a Muslim's account of the partition.

12. As Meenakshi Mukharjee opines, it is one of the few significant novels, "... where partition of India is presented as the enormous event it was, and the narrator being a Muslim, the issues of loyalty, idealism, and expediency are brought out with a special significance."³

References:

1. Attia Hussain; *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (New Delhi: Arnold, 1987) 162. All subsequent references to the text, (SBC) are to this edition.
2. Urvashi Butalia; *The Other Side Silences. Voices from The Partition of India*. New Delhi: Viking, 1998) 3.
3. Meenakshi Mukhaarjee, *The Twice Born Friction* (New Delhi: Arnold, 1971) 53.