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ATTIA HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN*: AN APPROACH TO NEW HISTORICISM

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Abstract

This paper explores Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) through the lens of new historicism, examining how the text functions as both a literary work and a historical document reflecting the sociopolitical transformations of pre-partition and post-partition India. By analyzing the novel's portrayal of feudal aristocracy, religious tensions, gender roles, and national identity during India's struggle for independence and subsequent partition, this research demonstrates how Hosain's narrative interweaves personal experiences with larger historical developments. This new historical reading reveals the novel's significance as a literary text that engages with and critiques the dominant historical narratives of its time, particularly through its female protagonist's perspective. The paper argues that Hosain's work challenges conventional historiography by presenting history as experienced and interpreted by those traditionally marginalized in official historical accounts, thus providing valuable insights into the complex interplay between personal lives and political movements during a pivotal period in South Asian history.

Keywords: Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, new historicism, partition, feudal aristocracy, religious identity, gender roles, nationalism, postcolonial identity, Muslim women's experience, historical representation.

Introduction

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, published in 1961, offers a nuanced portrayal of India's transition from colonial rule to independence through the eyes of its protagonist, Laila. Set against the backdrop of pre-partition India between the 1930s and 1950s, the novel provides a unique vantage point from which to examine the sociopolitical forces that shaped the subcontinent during this critical historical juncture. While often categorized primarily as a feminist or postcolonial text, this paper proposes a new historical reading

that recognizes the novel's complex engagement with history, memory, and representation.

New historicism, as a critical approach, rejects the formalist view that literature exists in isolation from its historical context and instead emphasizes the "textuality of history and the historicity of texts" (Montrose 20). This methodological framework allows us to examine Hosain's novel not simply as a reflection of historical events but as an active participant in the construction and interpretation of history. As Louis Montrose argues, new historicism investigates "the

social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (Montrose 23). This bidirectional relationship between text and context is particularly evident in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which simultaneously functions as a historical document and a literary critique of dominant historical narratives.

This paper aims to explore how Hosain's novel engages with and challenges conventional historiography through its portrayal of feudal aristocracy in decline, religious tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, evolving gender roles, and the emergence of national identity in the context of independence movements. By examining these themes through a new historical lens, we can better understand the novel's significance as both a literary achievement and a valuable historical source that gives voice to perspectives often marginalized in official historical accounts.

Historical Context and Biographical Elements

Attia Hosain (1913-1998) was born into a taluqdari (landowning) Muslim family in United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), India. Her background closely mirrors that of her protagonist Laila, providing the novel with an authenticity that derives from lived experience. However, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, new historicism cautions against reducing literary texts to mere autobiographical accounts, instead examining how personal experiences are transformed and reimagined through the creative process (Greenblatt 1-20). In Hosain's case, her personal history as a member of the Muslim aristocracy during India's transition to independence informs her narrative but does not confine it.

The novel's historical setting encompasses several pivotal events in South Asian history: the civil disobedience movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, the growing demand for independence from British colonial rule, the rise of religious nationalism, and ultimately the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. This period witnessed significant social and political transformations, including the decline of feudal structures, the emergence of new political ideologies, and shifting power dynamics between religious communities. As Muneeza Shamsie

observes, "Hosain's novel captures a world in transition, where traditional hierarchies are being challenged by modern ideas about governance, social justice, and individual rights" (Shamsie 127).

What distinguishes Hosain's approach to this historical material is her focus on how these macro-level changes affected individual lives, particularly those of women and members of the declining aristocracy. Rather than presenting a panoramic view of independence movements and political negotiations, she explores history through domestic spaces and personal relationships. This approach aligns with new historicist interest in what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call "counterhistories" that challenge dominant narratives by focusing on "those traces of the past that survive precariously in the margins of official accounts" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 52).

The Decline of Feudal Aristocracy

Sunlight on a Broken Column offers a compelling portrait of a feudal aristocracy in decline, embodied primarily through the household of Baba Jan, Laila's grandfather. The novel opens with his illness and impending death, symbolically representing the waning power of the taluqdari class. Through detailed descriptions of the ancestral haveli (mansion), its strict hierarchies, and elaborate customs, Hosain documents a way of life that was rapidly disappearing during India's transition to independence.

The character of Hamid, Laila's uncle who assumes control of the household after Baba Jan's death, represents the aristocracy's attempt to adapt to changing times through political compromise. His decision to cooperate with British authorities and maintain traditional social structures positions him as a conservative force resistant to complete transformation. In contrast, Saleem, Laila's cousin who embraces nationalist politics, represents the younger generation's rejection of feudal values in favor of modern political ideologies.

As Antoinette Burton argues, "Hosain's representation of the declining taluqdari class is not merely nostalgic but critically engaged with both its privileges and limitations" (Burton 63). This critical

engagement is evident in Laila's ambivalent relationship to her class background—she benefits from its educational and material advantages while increasingly questioning its social restrictions and political complacency. This ambivalence reflects Hosain's own complex relationship with her aristocratic heritage, which she neither completely rejects nor uncritically celebrates.

From a new historical perspective, Hosain's depiction of feudal decline does more than document a social transformation; it interrogates how power operates across different historical moments. As Foucault argues, power relations are not simply replaced but reconfigured through historical transitions (Foucault 92-93). In the novel, we see this reconfiguration as traditional feudal authority gives way to new forms of political power based on nationalism, religious identity, and economic modernization. Yet Hosain reveals how certain forms of oppression persist despite these changes, particularly those related to gender and class.

Religious Identity and Communal Politics

The novel's treatment of religious identity and communal tensions provides a nuanced historical perspective on the forces that eventually led to partition. Rather than presenting religious differences as natural or inevitable sources of conflict, Hosain shows how communal identities were increasingly politicized during the independence movement. As Aamir Mufti notes, the novel "offers a critique of the ways in which colonial governance and nationalist politics both contributed to the hardening of religious boundaries" (Mufti 245).

This critique is developed through the novel's portrayal of relationships that cross religious lines, such as the friendship between Laila and her Hindu classmate Sita. Their personal connection exists alongside growing political tensions, suggesting alternative possibilities for inter-communal relations. Similarly, the character of Asad, who embraces a secular nationalist ideology, represents a political vision that transcends religious divisions. However, the novel does not present these alternatives as ultimately successful; instead, it

shows how they are gradually overwhelmed by the dominant narrative of religious nationalism.

Particularly significant is the novel's depiction of diverse positions within the Muslim community regarding nationalism and partition. Through characters like Hamid, Saleem, and Asad, Hosain presents a range of Muslim responses to the political developments of the time, challenging monolithic representations of Muslim politics in conventional historiography. As Joya Chatterji argues, "The diversity of Muslim political thought during this period has often been obscured by post-partition narratives that retroactively impose a teleological view of Muslim separatism" (Chatterji 182). Hosain's novel works against this teleological view by showing the contingent and contested nature of political alignments.

The novel's conclusion, set after partition, powerfully conveys the human costs of religious nationalism through the figure of the refugee and the divided family. Hosain's description of Laila's return to her ancestral home, now partially occupied by Hindu refugees from Pakistan, captures the ironies and tragedies of partition without resorting to simplistic political judgments. This complex engagement with religious identity and communal politics exemplifies what Edward Said describes as literature's capacity to "resist the tendency of power systems to stabilize and affirm dominant narratives" (Said 47).

Gender Roles and Female Agency

Sunlight on a Broken Column offers a multilayered exploration of gender roles during a period of significant social transformation. Through Laila's developing consciousness and the contrasting experiences of other female characters, Hosain documents changes in women's status while also highlighting persistent gender inequalities. As Sangeeta Ray argues, "Hosain's novel tracks the incomplete and uneven nature of women's emancipation in colonial and post-colonial India" (Ray 213).

Laila's educational opportunities and gradually expanding freedoms reflect historical changes in elite Muslim women's lives during this

period. Her progression from the sheltered environment of purdah to university education and eventual independent living traces a trajectory of increased female mobility and agency. However, Hosain does not present this as a simple narrative of linear progress. Instead, she shows how women's choices remained constrained by family expectations, community pressures, and economic dependencies even as formal restrictions were lifted.

The characters of Aunt Abida and Zahra offer contrasting images of women's relationship to tradition. Abida, who maintains traditional piety while possessing quiet moral authority, represents a form of female agency that works within rather than against established social structures. Zahra, who outwardly conforms to modern behaviors while internalizing conservative values, demonstrates how superficial changes in women's status could coexist with continued patriarchal control. Through these characters, Hosain complicates standard narratives of women's emancipation that equate modernization with liberation.

Perhaps most significant is Hosain's attention to class differences in women's experiences. The limited options available to servants like Nandi contrast sharply with the relative privileges enjoyed by women of the landowning class, highlighting how gender oppression intersects with economic inequality. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid note, "Feminist historiography must recognize how gender is constructed differently across classes and communities" (Sangari and Vaid 17). Hosain's novel makes this differential construction visible, challenging universalist accounts of women's status during this historical period.

Through Laila's ultimate choice to marry Ameer against family wishes, Hosain portrays female agency as achieved through personal resistance rather than systemic change. This individualist resolution reflects historical limitations on collective feminist movements during this period while also suggesting the importance of personal choices in navigating social constraints. As Joan Scott argues, attention to such "strategies of resistance within the terms of dominant discourses" is crucial for

understanding how gender operates historically (Scott 22).

Nationalism and Postcolonial Identity

The novel's engagement with Indian nationalism and emerging postcolonial identity provides another dimension for new historical analysis. Rather than presenting nationalism as a unified movement with clear objectives, Hosain depicts it as a contested terrain with competing visions for India's future. Through characters aligned with different political positions—from Saleem's Congress-oriented nationalism to Uncle Hamid's loyalism to Asad's leftist politics—she captures the ideological diversity that characterized the independence movement.

Particularly significant is Hosain's attention to the class dimensions of nationalism. As Aijaz Ahmad notes, "Nationalist movements often obscured internal class contradictions through appeals to cultural or religious unity" (Ahmad 110). In the novel, we see how nationalist rhetoric sometimes masked continued economic exploitation, particularly in relations between landowners and peasants. The character of Raja, who combines nationalist sympathies with traditional feudal authority, embodies this contradiction, suggesting how independence could leave certain power structures intact.

Laila's evolving relationship to nationalism reflects what Homi Bhabha describes as the "ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy" (Bhabha 292). Initially distant from political movements, she gradually develops a political consciousness that connects personal freedom with national liberation. However, her perspective remains critical rather than fully aligned with any single nationalist position. This critical distance allows Hosain to examine how nationalism, while challenging colonial rule, could reproduce other forms of oppression based on gender, class, and religion.

The novel's post-partition conclusion, with its images of displacement and divided communities, offers a sobering assessment of nationalism's outcomes. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, "Partition

revealed the limitations of secular nationalism as a basis for postcolonial identity" (Pandey 153). Through Laila's final return to her ancestral home, now transformed by history, Hosain suggests that postcolonial identity must acknowledge loss and fragmentation rather than embracing triumphalist national narratives.

Narrative Strategies and Historical Representation

The formal aspects of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* are integral to its historical significance. Hosain's narrative choices—including her use of first-person perspective, non-linear chronology, and symbolic imagery—shape how history is represented and interpreted in the text. As Hayden White argues, "Historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found" (White 82). Hosain's novel acknowledges this constructed nature of historical accounts through its self-conscious narrative strategies.

The novel's first-person narration through Laila privileges subjective experience over objective historical documentation. Major historical events often appear obliquely, filtered through their effects on personal relationships and domestic spaces. This narrative approach challenges conventional historiography's claim to comprehensive knowledge, suggesting instead that history is always partially known and differently experienced depending on social position. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, such narrative strategies can "provincialize dominant historical accounts by highlighting their partiality" (Chakrabarty 42).

Hosain's use of symbolic imagery, particularly the broken column of the title, creates a visual metaphor for historical rupture. The column, representing classical civilization and continuity, appears in a garden where "the sunlight fell like a benediction" (Hosain 272), suggesting both the illumination of the past and its fragmentation. This symbolism aligns with Walter Benjamin's concept of history as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" rather than a narrative of progress (Benjamin 257).

The novel's non-linear chronology, with its shifts between present narration and remembered

past, enacts what Pierre Nora describes as the complex relationship between history and memory. According to Nora, "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition" (Nora 8). Hosain's narrative moves between these poles, combining documented historical events with subjective memories, suggesting that complete historical understanding requires both approaches.

Conclusion

This new historical reading of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* reveals the novel's significance as both a literary text and a historical document that challenges conventional historiography. By examining how Hosain represents the decline of feudal aristocracy, religious tensions, changing gender roles, and emerging national identity, we can appreciate the novel's contribution to our understanding of India's transition from colonial rule to independence.

Unlike traditional historical accounts that often prioritize political events and public figures, Hosain's narrative illuminates how large-scale historical transformations were experienced in everyday life, particularly by those whose perspectives have been marginalized in official histories. Her focus on domestic spaces, personal relationships, and individual consciousness offers what Michel de Certeau calls a "heterology"—a discourse about the other that disrupts dominant historical narratives (de Certeau 3-4).

The novel's enduring significance lies in its refusal of simplistic historical judgments. Neither nostalgically celebrating the feudal past nor uncritically embracing nationalist futures, Hosain presents history as a complex process in which continuity and change, oppression and resistance, coexist. This nuanced perspective is particularly valuable for contemporary readers seeking to understand the historical roots of present-day issues related to religious identity, gender equality, and postcolonial politics in South Asia.

As a woman writing from the intersection of multiple identities—Muslim, aristocratic, educated, and politically progressive—Hosain offers a unique

vantage point on a pivotal historical moment. Her novel demonstrates how literary texts can preserve aspects of historical experience that might otherwise be lost, particularly those related to private life and subjective consciousness. In this sense, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* exemplifies what Stephen Greenblatt calls literature's capacity to "speak with the dead" by recovering voices and perspectives from the past (Greenblatt 1).

This new historical reading ultimately suggests that Hosain's novel does not simply reflect history but actively participates in historical meaning-making. By presenting alternative perspectives on familiar historical events, challenging dominant narratives, and illuminating connections between personal experience and political change, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* continues to enrich our understanding of South Asian history and invite critical reflection on how that history is represented and interpreted.

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