

# Marginalized Women in Muslim Woman's Life Writing; A Study of Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961)

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Life writing, an evolving genre of literature has always served as a platform for the marginalized section of the society to convey their thoughts and emotions. Including various sub genres such as autobiography, biography, memoir, letter, dairy entries, novel, poetry and short stories, life writing has always been the avenue for recording the voice of the voiceless. This genre has enabled and encouraged the marginalized to speak out their views personally as well as collectively. This literary form of writing has paved way for representing the collective voice of a downtrodden community through a single authorial voice.

Dalit literature is an apt example to demonstrate how a single person's (author) voice can represent the status of the entire community. Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangathi* are well known works of Dalit literature which can also be considered as testimonial narratives for the author records the events in her Dalit community as an eye witness to the brutalities directed towards her society. Women's life writing whether it is fictional or autobiographical has always focused on marginalization of women and how social factors play an important role in suppressing women's freedom.

Attia Hossain's semi-autobiographical novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) set in the backdrop of pre-partitioned India represents the Muslim aristocratic life with special focus on the marginalization of Muslim women within the Talqdari system. By depicting the social structure of a feudal system, Hossain explores the status of women with relation to this structure and how the protagonist as young woman reacts to this rigid social system. Hossain herself was born in a Taluqdari family; she received a blend of Western and Urdu education which shaped her opinions about her community.

Her modern education gave her the freedom to write while the traditional education of Urdu and Persian made her a keen observer of her community's culture, thus making her novel more autobiographical in nature. Her writings comprises of historical and traditional stories of her own family as she observes in *Phoenix Fled* (1953), "The stories I kept on writing in my head were always to

do with the problems of human relationships, dilemmas in the context of social and political and philosophical conditions and problems I knew best like my own breadth, from my family's eight hundred years in India" (15).

The various female characters in her novel reflect the condition of women in the Muslim society by depicting how they are marginalized based on their religion and culture. Their day to day lives are ruled by the religious principles, though being common for men and women, the sole responsibility for maintaining the honor of the family rests with the women in the household. By subjecting themselves to the whims and fancies of the men in the family, Muslim women have always been taught to honor their menfolk by complete submission to their decisions. Laila, the protagonist of the novel whose life in many ways resembles that of the author, has always questioned the existing tradition and customs which limits the freedom of the women in the country.

An orphaned girl of fifteen years old, Laila's life is controlled by Baba Jan, the patriarch of the Taulqdari family. After Baba Jan's death, his son Hamid becomes Laila's guardian. Though Hamid is influenced by western education, he is strongly rooted in his culture due to which he opposes to the liberal views of Laila. The death of the old patriarch gives a sense of comfort to Laila who now thinks that her family members can enjoy certain amount of freedom, "After Baba Jan's death it is as if tight hands have been loosened, which had tied together those who have lived under the power of his will and authority. Laila observes, "After my grandfather's death more windows had opened, a little wider perhaps, but the world still lay outside while I created my own round myself" (173).

Laila's struggle for gaining her independence corresponds to the country's struggle to break from the clutches of foreign power. Her struggle for individual independence is the microcosm of the country's struggle for collective independence. The structuring of Hossain's novel clearly shows that marginalization of women in Muslim community happens at three different spaces. The first is the individual space where the woman's mindset doesn't allow her to think and act freely. The moment she identifies herself as a Muslim woman, she mentally frames a set of beliefs which limits her thoughts of freedom.

The second space of marginalization is the zenana (women's quarters) where the elderly women propagate the restrictive religious ideas and make sure that the younger women in the family are getting prepared to be submissive wives to their future husbands. Thus the matriarchs of the household play a crucial role in shaping the ideas of the younger woman who in future become the propagators of these religious ideals to the future generation.

The third space of the marginalization is the entire family household where the men exert direct control over their womenfolk. Hossain explores the conflicts in relationship at these three spaces to show how women are sidelined at every phase of their life. All the restriction faced by the women in these spaces are physically manifested in the form of purdah which has to be strictly observed by the women in the zenana. Purdah which was intended to protect the women from the male gaze was actually curbing their freedom of expression in both physical and mental aspects. Through Laila's voice, the author questions the established notion of male chauvinism in the Muslim society which is very evident in the exchange of dialogues between the narrator and the other women in the family. Laila's young mind questions the value system which fails to treat men and women equally.

As an unmarried young girl Laila was not allowed to attend certain formal parties fearing that she would fall into the company of some strange men. Her radical views and questioning would always land her in trouble as her aunt would accuse her of reading too many books and thus the habit of questioning. At this instance, Hossain tries to make a point that education plays a pivotal role in attaining freedom as it teaches to question the existing system. Laila's education shapes her values towards achieving freedom as a result of which uncle Hamid is reluctant to give her permission to pursue her postgraduate studies fearing that she would become a rebel.

The elderly women and the menfolk of Baba Jan's household fear that education would corrupt the young girls and knowledge of books would encourage them to think freely. Hossain points out how Muslim women are not allowed to gain empowerment through education by describing the negative attitudes of Laila's aunts and uncles towards the education of women. By exploring the relationship of Laila with the other family members Hossain's novel depicts how women's rights are being denied especially in the decisions regarding marriages.

Women are not allowed to choose their life partner and it becomes the responsibility of the elderly men to find a suitable match for the women in their household. Women are forced to accept the life men choose for them. Even as a young girl she bravely expresses her opinion regarding arranged marriages to her aunt Abida, "I won't be paired off like an animal. How could you sit there listening to them talking as if you were a piece of furniture going to be sold to the highest bidder? How can you bear the idea of just any man?" (30).

Growing in a situation where her aunts are forcibly getting married, Laila makes a decision to marry the man of her choice who is much beneath her social status. Her decision makes her to leave the family with her lover Ameer after which she leads an independent life. Laila's transformation from a young girl to an independent woman forms the crux of the novel. During the process of transformation she has a lot of questions which remains unanswered. Sometimes Laila feels she has been crushed by the burden of her feelings which she is not even able to share with her cousins or relatives. Her conversation with Ameer clearly depicts the pain and dilemma she has been carrying throughout her life:

I have no courage Ameer. I have never done anything I really believed in. Perhaps I believed in nothing enough. I have never been allowed to make decisions; they are always made for me. In the end not only one's actions but one's mind is crippled. Sometimes I want to cry out, 'You are crushing me, destroying my individuality.' If I did that they would think me stubborn and rude, or say I imagined things (265).

Being a keen observer of her family system, her questions always focused on the status of women in her family and society. Through Laila's character Hossain emphasizes on the need for women to observe and question the system. Hossain was steeped in progressive views right from her childhood as her parents embraced modernistic approaches and later she got married into a family where most of them were actively involved in politics. Her husband was involved in the civil war while mother in law Begum Habibullah was the leader of progressive women's Muslim league and Hossain herself was a member of the Progressive Writer's Association. Surrounded by such progressive people, Hossain was privileged to have a good education and pursue her career of interest. As a BBC broadcaster she was active in addressing various issues pertaining to women.

Unlike her family many of the young Muslim women in other households weren't given the freedom to pursue their education and career. Thus Hossain has used her first novel to record the lives of marginalized Muslim women who still wait to achieve their freedom. Though her novel portrays the sad state of Muslim women, it also gives a sense of hope through Laila who walks out of the rigid system and travels towards the road of freedom which coincides with birth of the new country after partition resulting in collapse of feudal and patriarchal systems where both men and women are given the freedom to lead an independent life. Hence the novel ends with an optimistic note that Muslim woman empowerment is certainly achievable.

Though Hossain spent many years in UK she never failed to throw light on the issues pertaining to her motherland and always stood up to represent her country on a global level as she observes in *Distant Traveller: New and Selected Fiction* (2013):

There is that sense of belonging one never has except in one's own country. Anywhere else, no matter how long you stay, they never let you forget you are alien. Indeed, it is a good thing, because it is on foreign soil that you are made more conscious of your own roots and consequently become more knowledgeable. And that is why, in my writings, I talk of my country, present my people to others. I grew up with the English language but not with the culture behind it. I was always outside that and deeply rooted in my own (15).

### **References**

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