

SUMMARY OF THE MINOR RESEARCH PROJECT IN ENGLISH

**Title of Minor Research Project : Multiple Themes in Attia Hosain's
*Sunlight on a Broken Column.***

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SUMMARY

Attia Hosain, a Muslim Indian English female novelist, has occupied a prominent position in Indian English Literature with her contribution of a single novel and a short stories in Phoenix Fled. She was born and brought up in a rich *Taluqdar's* household and during 1910 her father was active in the politics of the time. Almost all the friends of her father were very prominent person who were quite active in the movements of the Indian fighting for independence against the British rule. This positive background helped a lot in developing her personality as well as her creative sensibility. Being a *Taluqdar* Attia's father was deeply involved in the work of a trade union called the "British-Indian Association." Her uncles and cousins were also *Taluqdars*. On the basis of this autobiographical background, the narrator heroine, Laila, shares this feeling of living in the two worlds. She feels an observer in the outside world and solitary in her own world.

Attia was the first daughter of a *Taluqdar* family who sought higher education and completed her graduation in 1933. It was a period when the male members of the family were allowed to go to the Cambridge for their higher education whereas female members were denied this right. She was a voracious reader and reading was a part and parcel of her growing up that spurs her imagination and intellect. Attia Hosain makes it clear that during 1920s and 1930s there was no such feelings in the minds of the Indians of a separate state for the Indian Muslims. Attia was much influenced by the movement for freedom initiated in India like the Swadeshi movement in the 1920s. In spite of a Muslim, she made no difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. Attia shared the values she shared that are upheld by several leaders and propagated through ideas of freedom, friendship and secularism.

Mulk Raj Anand holds the view that most of the characters in the novel, ***Sunlight on a Broken Column***, including Laila the chief protagonist, are based on Attia Hosain's own life and experiences. The family mansion depicted in the novel resembles 'Ashiana' in the novel in Lucknow. The quick political convulsion and the intensity of the political activity had influenced and shaped the mind of Attia Hosain to a great extent. The ill-effects if the partition had hit people not only at the political level, but also at personal and emotional level. People were forced to make choice whether to stay on in India or newly created Pakistan. Attia's own brother opted for Pakistan. The people from the both sides of the fence were not allowed to meet their

family members in across the border after the partition. The novel of Attia Hosain reflects the political convulsion experienced by Attia Hosain on the Indian subcontinent with her family saga and the destruction of the strong edifice of the world of the Taluqdars due to the throes of the Partition in her novel.

Attia was the strong supporter of the Indian National Congress and hence was against the division of the united Indian subcontinent. Therefore, unable to stay either in a truncated India or the newly created Pakistan, she decided to stay on in London. Doubtlessly, the novel has the autobiographical undercurrent. Nevertheless, it covers in its compass the social and political history of the days of Indian independence and partition and touches in nutshell the variety of issues which claim our attention even today. In spite of a member of the Muslim community, Attia Hosain has created decisive and strong female characters only because of the influence of Westernized family background and her experience of working for women's movement.

In 1947, freedom did not come to India without the nation torn asunder and left bleeding for some period. Actually, the partition is termed as the darkest period in the history of the Indian nation. This partition brought untold sufferings, tragedy, trauma, pain, and violence to the communities who had hitherto lived together with a sense of universal coterie and made practically difficult for the masses to know whether their

kith and kin were alive or dead. At the time of the Partition, the Muslims and the Hindus who were living in India were given free choice to opt to live in this country or go to Pakistan. The formation of the two new states led to the migration of population, one of the largest events in the history of subcontinent. The partition led to the massive holocaust as the people of opposite religion started avenging each other. Thousands of women were raped and abducted. People were forced to abandon their ancestral residence, business, industries, and other properties and became paupers and refugees. In spite of the tumultuous situation, the people who were overpowered by the cult of love and humanity, dared to maintain peace and harmony playing the role of the dregs of humanity.

The novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, depicts the socio-political situation of the period and the partition and the destruction of the feudal system with the India's independence in 1947 as her creative sensibility was shaped by her life in the big *Taluqdars* family. The novelist has enveloped in the compass of a single novel the multiple themes such as the theme to depict the *Taluqdari* system in India and its destruction due to the partition and impendence, the theme of restriction and *purdah* for women, theme of love and romance, theme to depict independent India under the British rule, theme of partition and its horrible aftermath and the theme to depict Muslim life in India. All these themes have not been treated as separate entities but form a part and parcel of the main narrative.

Attia grew up listening to the talks of politics in the 20s and 30s as Lucknow being a member of the big *taluqdars* family. The novel also reflects the innate glory of the world of the *Taluqdars* during the British rule. Laila's grandfather, Baba Jan, owes a great respect in the British Government. At Lucknow they lived in a mansion called 'Ashiana'. After the death of Baba Jan, his only son, Uncle Hamid and his wife Saira take over the family property. After uncle Hamid's arrival on the scene, the government announces its decision to hold popular elections to the provincial assemblies. Hamid gets elected but in this election the Congress party gets a majority in the legislature and is asked to form the government. *Zamindari* is thus to be abolished as promised by the Congress.

The disintegration of the *zamindari* system is a great shock to uncle Hamid from which it becomes difficult for him to recover. In part IV of the novel Laila visits her ancestral home, Ashiana, and retrieves all the painful events that had taken place during the interval and narrates in the form of a flashback, the splitting of her family due to the throes of the partition in 1947. Of the two grandsons of Baba Jan, Kemal decided to stay on in India and Saleem chooses to go to Pakistan. With the departure of the British with India's independence, the new Government abolished the constitutional rights of the feudal lords. They lost their source of income. Due to the abolition of the feudal system, no previous powers or privileges of the *Taluqdars* exist. Attia Hosain has depicted how the event of partition

completely collapsed the world of the *Taluqdars*. The novel depicts that the partition not only destroyed the glorious world of the *Taluqdars* but also shattered the peace and harmony of thousands of families. After the partition, these dispersed people had to adapt themselves with the changing habits of mind and the living conditions they had cherished for centuries. After the partition, new citizen added to the city of Lucknow but at the cost of destroying its royal era of the *Taluqdars*. It must be noted that Attia Hosain's own *Taluqdars* family got disintegrated due to the partition. This shock inspired her creative sensibility to depict the ruined world of the *Taluqdars* due to the calamity brought by the partition.

The novel depicts a Muslim family. Therefore, almost all aspects of the family life of the Muslims have been exposed by the novelist in course of her narrative. With the arrival of the British in India and with the spread of education, a tremendous change was taking place in the way of thinking among the youths. Now the girls from the Muslim community were also taking advantage of this facility of education. Attia Hosain has depicted this change in the way of thinking and attitude in her narrator heroine, Laila. The matter related to the marriage of Zahra is a fine example of how the women had no voice even for taking decisions of their future. The author is fully aware of the social change and aptly projects even a small change that was taking place and the contrasting situation that leads to create dissatisfaction among the people of the old and the new generation. Aunt Abida insists on

discussing the marriage proposal in the presence of the girls. The narrator heroine, Laila and Zahra both are shown in contrast to each other. Laila keeps herself busy in reading books and does not think of her marriage. The tension between the restriction and freedom influences the lives of the womenfolk of Baba Jan's family, especially of Laila.

The strict compartments are shown for men and women which is separated by the drawing room of the house – the zenana and the men's wing. All women of the house, Laila's aunts Majida and Abida, Laila, and her cousin Zahra lived in this walled zenana. Women had no freedom to stray in men's wing unless and until they were asked to. Hakim Bua keeps a strict vigil on the movements of Laila and Zahra. After certain hours of the day even their cousins, Azad and Zahid are not allowed in their rooms. But the life of the womenfolk in Ashiana is free from repression or what is called subjugation. Many times they adapt to the situation by working behind the purdah. Another remarkable feature we see in Ashiana is that even men and women servants lived separately. Maid servants were restricted to stray into the domain of men servants. Laila's visit to her ancestral village, Hasanpur, is a glaring example of how the village people observe the norms of the purdah society with rather more rigidity. After the death of Baba Jan, this change is conspicuously seen in Uncle Hamid's wife Saira who is attached with social welfare and various women's organizations. The third part of the book shows the disintegration of Baba Jan's family with the

partition of the subcontinent into two sovereign states - India and Pakistan. During this period Laila enjoyed a lot of freedom that she was permitted to go out with her cousins. But this freedom for Laila was a sort of controlled freedom which is granted to the educated and elite female members of the Muslim community. The life of the *purdah* and restriction for women among the Muslims was slowly changing with the change in time and with the growing facilities for women of taking education.

The close study of the novel explores that it has in nut and shell the theme of love and marriage. In the beginning of the we see Asad and Zahra attracted towards each other. She could not sleep the whole night as Azad was feverish. Aunt Majida got disturbed to know this affair. The same night she decided to marry Zahra to the first suitable person. Asad was Laila's cousin. Laila was also in love with Asad. Thought she never exposed her heart in front of Asad. Then we see that Laila was so much attracted towards Ameer that she would always wait for the chance to go out just to meet Ameer. Sita and Kemal loved each other from the core of their hearts. But Sita, being an Hindu, had problems to marry with Kemal as he belonged to the Muslim community. Laila felt safe and secure in the presence of Ameer only. She would wait eagerly for his arrival at the appointed time.

Laila belonged to a rich *Taluqdars* family whereas Ammer was poor. Therefore, Ameer was doubtful whether their marriage proposal would be granted by the family members of Laila or not. Ameer gives importance to

money and position and feels that he is inferior to Laila in terms of them. But Laila opines that for her money and position are less important as compared to her love for Ameer. It is true that when man is in love, he always try to find time to meet the lover even giving false excuses for the purpose. When Ameer was going and his train was leaving late at night, Laila was eager to meet him when it would be dark at six in the evening. Initially Laila was much frightened and was shivering but her complete fear vanished when she found herself in the arms of her lover. Laila's marriage was arranged at the same time as Saleem's. After marriage Laila's home was small as compared to her house, Ashiana. But she becomes ready to adjust the situation without making any complaint.

After the close of part III, the novel skips some fourteen years. It is here that the readers are informed about Laila's post-marital life. Again we get to know that Ameer joined the army as a public relations officer, was captured as a prisoner of war and got killed in his attempt to escape. Here we see that Ameer, the lover and husband of Laila are cleared out of the way and his death is found as an excuse for Laila's union with Asad. Kemal also love and marries Mrs. Wadia's daughter, Perin much against the wish of the family members. Zahra being a product of traditional upbringing, could not go against the wishes of her aunts and marry Asad risking their disapproval. Zahra is hurriedly married off because of the suspicion that Asad was in love with her. The novel exposes the relationships of love,

romance and marriage that gives the novel an enthusiastic touch from its mere historical theme of partition and its after effects.

The novel is divided into four parts and the first two parts throw enough light on the pre-partition India under the British rule. It gives a thorough account of the freedom struggle initiated by the Indians against the British. We see almost all the communities of India taking active part in the freedom struggle. While acquainting her cousins, Asad and Zahid, Laila makes it clear that even the Muslims had taken active part in the freedom movement. The novel also depicts the barbarism of the British rule. The procession of the non-co-operators and the agitations for freedom were rampant on the Indian streets. Asad wished to do something greater like his father for the sake of his motherland. He could not bear the animal like treatment given by the rulers to the patriotic Indians. Though Baba Jan was one of the *Taluqdars* and was loyal to the British Government, he also opposed the Western ways of living. Influenced by the ideas of reforms among the Muslims, he had sent his sons to English Universities for education.

Getting immensely inspired by the idea of freedom, even women were ready to go to the prison for the sake of national freedom. Laila's friend Nita Chatterji was one of them. Laila also expresses her desire to actively participate in struggle for independence. The young blood of India was not ready to bear mutely the suppression policy adopted by the British. But this

united struggle for freedom suffered a setback as soon as the religion entered politics. This unfortunate development made some power-hungry political leaders put their demand for a separate home-land for the Indian Muslims.

The Indian subcontinent got divided into India and Pakistan parting their respective ways in trends and achievements in 1947. The partition had the religious background and therefore it created enmity and hatred among the masses of both the religious communities. Attia Hosain depicts the event of the partition as an 'already accomplished act' in part IV of her novel. This part of the novel opens in the year 1952, some fourteen years after the event of partition where part III of the novel closes. The narrator heroine, Laila, visits her ancestral home and retrieves almost all the painful events that had taken place during the interval. Just after the declaration of the 'partition,' the people living on the either side of the fence resumed the journey of migration in the opposite directions, leaving behind their home and hearth and the ancestral land of their birth. For these people taking decision to migrate was very easy but the actual migration was frothing with so many challenges as the religious tension was mounting up in those days and the people of opposite religion was ready to take revenge upon each other.

It is a fact of the Partition days that the Radcliff Commission granted some of the cities which were the cultural centres of Muslims with more

Muslim population to India. This was shocking for the Muslims which made them inflict pain against each other. Even the train was used as a means to kill the people of opposite religion and as the carrier of corpses and the wounded as the train massacre was rampant in those days. Attia Hosain depicts this picture through Zahid who boards on the ill-fated train just to become a prey of the malice of the avengers before reaching the destination. People, getting mad in the name of religion were searching the people of opposite religion which made it difficult even to sleep at night with peace due to the fear of sudden attack.

Even the sane people had become inhuman getting blind in the name of religion and they started behaving in a beastly manner. After the large-scale migration and settlement of the people, most of the cities were ardently altered. Attia Hosain makes bare the agonizing experiences of the Partition days exploring the unsympathetic and unattached attitude towards the migrating masses. Laila's home, Ashiana, after Partition, is sold and occupied by the refugees. The novelist has thrown sufficient light on the irresponsible attitude of the government servants and their acts of the entrapment of the people in the clutches of the newly enacted government laws. Government seals the property of Saleem when he leaves for Pakistan. Attia Hosain concentrates her attention on the mental suffering of her protagonists rather than describing the aspects of physical assaults on the

victims of the Partition. How the glorious world of the *Taluqdars* ruined due to the throes of Partition is her centre of attention.

Being a member of a rich *Taluqdars* family, Attia Hosain shows how the Partition and the holocaust that follows destroyed the glorious world of the *Taluqdars* as well as shattered the peace and harmony of the thousands of *Taluqdars'* families. With the abolition of their earlier rights and privileges, they had to adapt themselves with the entirely changed situation, the habits of mind they had cherished for the centuries together. Not able to bear the shock of this ardent change, many of the *Taluqdars* lost their mental balance. It is true that during the days of the Partition, people getting blind becoming religious fanatics, were inflicting pains on the people of their opposite religions. On the other hand, there were some dregs of humanity who were serving as helping hands to the victims of Partition. Laila, taking the side of the Indian Muslims, praises the Hindus like Sita and Ranjit who saved the lives of the Muslims at the cost of their own lives. The reply of Zahra to Laila's question throws light on the identical situation on the both sides of the fence. In addition to it, when Saleem, now a Pakistani, visits India after two years, is shocked to see his old friends loving him with the same sort of affection and the Hindus and Muslims living together with the sense of universal brotherhood forgetting the dark memories of the past.

The theme of Partition depicted by the novelist has the universal appeal that satisfies the Muslims in Pakistan and also the Muslims who

stayed behind in India. Attia Hosain highlights the fruitlessness of the cult of violence and the bloodshed in the name of religion as her narrative itself gives negative reply to all the above questions on the basis of which this senseless partition was worked out. The novelist herself had witnessed the historical split among the Muslim community that some of the Muslims supported the Indian National Congress whereas the others believed in the principles of the Muslim League during the pre-independent India. While designing the plot of her novel too, she took the support of this major historical phenomenon that created great split between the two major communities in India- Hindu and Muslim for the depiction of the theme of partition. Being a writer belonging to the Muslim community, she thought it necessary to present the fact which created doubts in the minds of the Indian Muslims that resulted in the split among the Indian Muslim people and also in the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

Attia Hosain has presented a realistic picture of the socio-political condition before the partition and the independence of India. The changing political scenario created a kind of disparity between father and his sons. Uncle Hameed and Asad were affiliated to the Congress party while Saleem, being a staunch communalist and an ardent follower, supported the Muslim League. It must be noted that Attia Hosain was an eye-witness to the political upheaval going on in India during the pre-partition days. In spite of her own ideals and those of many other Muslims in India, Partition proved

inevitable at Independence and, rather than go to Pakistan, she chose to settle in England where her husband was posted to the Indian High Commission. Another reason for taking decision to settle in England after the partition for Attia was that the relations between India and Pakistan had reached the lowest watermark. Attia thought England a safer place where her relations from India and Pakistan could meet her easily as compared to living in India.

In order to reflect the real scenario before the partition days, Attia Hosain has shown the picture of the last family meeting in the ancestral home of her narrator-heroine, Laila in which all the members of her family sit together to discuss and decide whether to stay in India or to migrate to newly created Pakistan. In this meeting, Kemal, Laila's cousin takes decision to stay on in India. In this way Attia Hosain has shown how Uncle Hamid and Saleem's ideology places father and son into opposite camps and finally the same ideology prompts Saleem to migrate to Pakistan after the partition. Attia supported the ideology of the Indian National Congress. She opposed the principles of the Muslim League.

In fact, we find Attia Hosain taking the side of the Indian Muslims and blaming those Muslim leaders who inspired the Muslims for their demand of a separate state Pakistan. Laila blames the Pakistani leaders like Jinnah for migrating to Pakistan without thinking of their Muslim brothers in India. The novel is a blistering attack on the leaders of the political organizations who

worked out the partition of the Indian subcontinent making India a cauldron steeped in every ingredient calculated to produce poison and leaving the nation without thinking of those elements for which they initiated the cause. By depicting the act of Muslim leaders betraying their millions of brother in India, the novelist, indirectly preaches the doctrine that it is the love and not religion that maintain the sense of unity, equality and brotherhood among the Indian communities. Her theme instruct the people not to engage in inhuman and senseless acts becoming prey to the power-politics. Because the religious struggle, war and destruction in the name of religion is futile and senseless.

It must be noted that a novelist evolves multiple narrative strategies to present his theme before the readers. Trying to envelop the theme during the course of his composition, he chooses some locale for his novel and makes use of some characters to weave his targeted theme. Attia Hosain seems to be very curious about using a perfect narrative technique while depicting the multiple themes in her single novel. She employs the resourceful technique of the first person narrative in present tense to probe deep into the inner psyche of her protagonists in a dispassionate and objective vein.

From the reading of the novel, the readers get the impression that the central figure is going to tell the story of her own life in a big *Taluqdar's* family. As a part of narrative strategy, Attia Hosain divides her novel into

four parts. The first three parts throw light on Laila's growth in her Muslim *Taluqdar* household in Lucknow in India during the pre-partition period. But in part four of the novel, Attia Hosain has depicted the partition of the nation into two separate states. Attia Hosain is well aware that she is projecting the historical theme of partition and the centre of her focus is the destruction of her family and the projection of Muslim point of view of partition. Keeping both the things in mind, she has depicted the life of the *Taluqdars* on a grand scale.

With the very purpose of bring out the impact of divisive forces in the form of the partition of the nation and the splitting up of Laila's family, Attia Hosain has delineated the pairs of contrasting characters belonging to the same family and from the close relations. The ideologies in which her characters believe become the national ideologies, which eventually bring about the partition of the country. This twin structure, planned by Attia Hosain, works successfully and helps her to delineate the picture of the partition of the nation and the disintegration of the family simultaneously. Being a female writer Attia uses a female character, Laila as a chief protagonist. In addition to it, Attia Hosain's male characters, becoming prey to the socio-political convulsion on the Indian subcontinent. But her female characters show their strength and courage to fight even in the critical situations.

Attia Hosain makes good use of the tool of debate as she assigns special roles to Laila and Zahra engaging them in debate on the issue of the future of the Indian Muslims left behind and those who migrated to the newly created Pakistan. Using perfect narrative strategy Attia brings her two characters back from Pakistan after two years stay to show how the Hindus and the Muslims start working together with the sense of the universal brotherhood forgetting the past event of inflicting pains on each other. Attia Hosain has depicted Laila's house, Ashiana, with double image. The house projected as a protective shell in the first three parts of the novel becomes the symbol of rejection in the last part, as it disowns all its members with the event of the partition. Her pictorial description becomes quite powerful due to the use of the effective images.

Attia Hosain transcribes many Hindustani words in Roman script for criticizing the leaders. She shows her skill in presenting the dialogues between the characters in order to delineate effectively the pains of separation. Her dialogues are so powerful that they evoke pathos and the readers shed tears from their eyes. There are abundant instances of similes and metaphors in Attia Hosain's novel. Laila's shivering at the gate is metaphoric of her pain caused by the memories of the lost world due to the partition. Attia Hosain is remarkable for using very powerful and pithy sentences pregnant with meaning. In a single stroke, she amalgamates the

quick destruction of the world of rights and privileges of the *Taluqdars* and the end of their struggle for existence due to the throes of the partition.

There are certain humorous situations in her narrative. Nevertheless, the readers cannot enjoy her humour for long as beneath that humour we see an underlying sense of seriousness that reflects the trauma and the victimization of her protagonists due to the calamity brought by the partition. Attia Hosain, taking help of the myth of the good old days, depicts the impact of the partition. In the beginning of the novel Attia Hosain narrates the grand reception given by the *Taluqdars* on the *Baradari* as usual, but after the partition, the same reception takes the shape of a small tea party without any pomp and show.

To sum up, Attia Hosain, though a single novel novelist, has shown her skill in depicting the variety of themes in a compass of a single novel and ending the novel depicting the horrors of the partition. To achieve her very purpose she has adopted the perfect narrative strategy and techniques suited to project her particular point of view. It is very difficult to mingle the national, social and personal themes into a compass of a single novel. But the skilled novelist like Attia Hosain could achieve it with better success. It is true that the novel is autobiographical in nature. But unfolding the story of her own life Attia Hosain goes on handling the national story of socio-political convulsion on the Indian sub-continent with great success in which lies her prominence as a skilled novelist. While narrating the story of a big

Taluqdars family with socio-political interest, the readers find it difficult to differentiate the personal and the political as it is a cohesive mixture of action that proves Attia Hosain's greatness as a novelist.
