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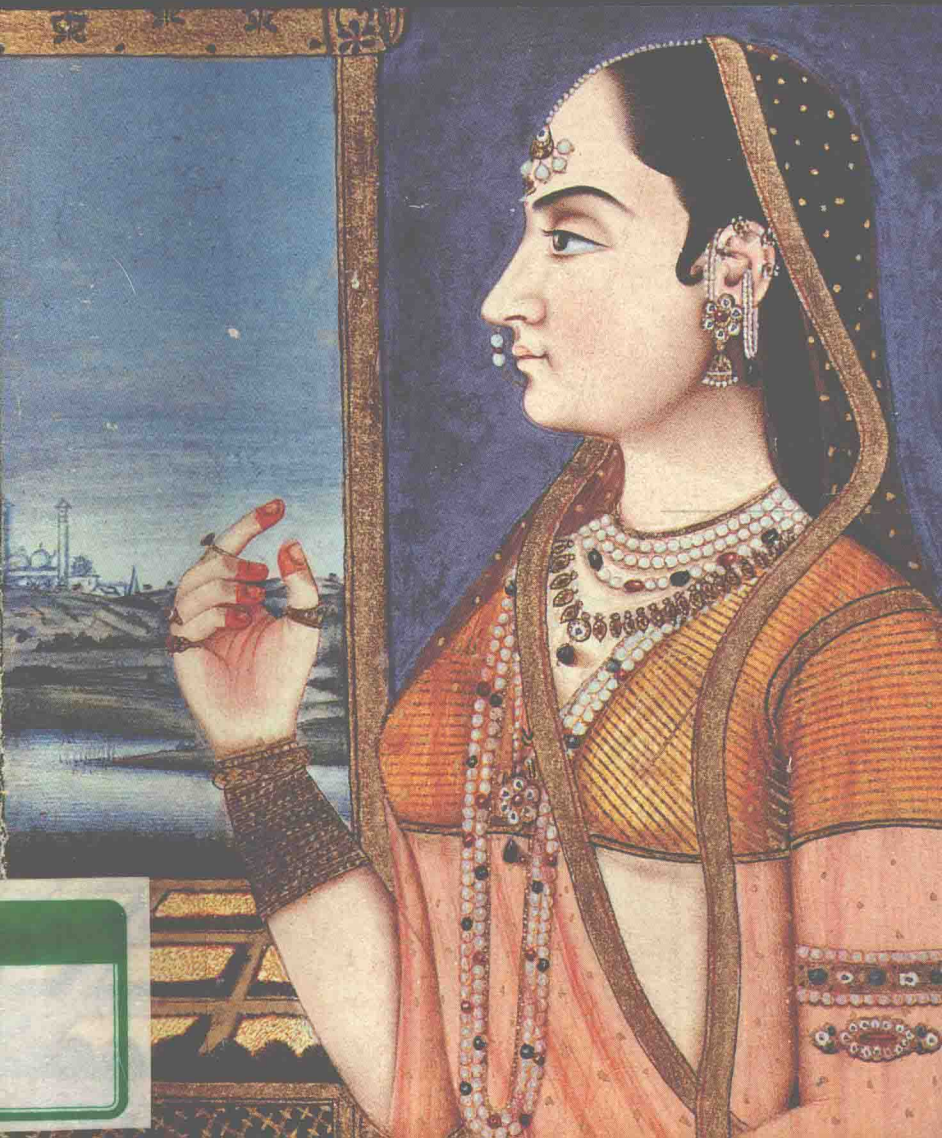
Attia Hosain

Sunlight on a Broken Column



Attia Hosain

SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
ANITA DESAI

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ATTIA HOSAIN

was born in Lucknow, UP, India, in 1913. She was educated at La Martiniere and Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, blending an English liberal education with that of a traditional Muslim household where she was taught Persian, Urdu and Arabic. She was the first woman to graduate from amongst the feudal, "Taluqdari" families into which she was born.

Influenced, in the 1930s, by the nationalist movement and the Progressive Writers' Group in India, she became a journalist, broadcaster and writer of short stories.

In 1947, the year of Indian Independence, she came to England with her husband and two children. Presenting her own woman's programme on the BBC Eastern service, amongst others, for many years, she also appeared on television and the West End stage. In addition she lectured on the confluence of Indian and Western culture, and wrote *Phoenix Fled* (1953), a collection of short stories, and *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), a novel. She had previously written stories which were published in magazines in India, the United States and in Britain.

She now divides her time between London and India.

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

T. S. ELIOT, *The Hollow Men*

Principal Characters in the Novel

Laila	
Baba Jan (Syed Mohammed Hasan)	Laila's grandfather
Majida	his elder daughter
Abida	his younger daughter
Hamid	his eldest son
Ahmed	his younger son (deceased) Laila's father
Mohsin	his kinsman
Saira	Hamid's wife
Zahra	daughter of Majida
Kemal	Hamid's elder son
Saleem	Hamid's younger son
Asad	A distant cousin to Laila
Zahid	his younger brother
Raja of Amirpur	a friend of the family
Raza Ali	his son
Ameer Husain	his kinsman—married Laila
Ranjit Singh	Laila's friend
Nadira Wa heed	Laila's friend, married Saleem
Harish Prasad Agarwal	businessman, friend of Hamid
Sita	his daughter
Nita Chatterjee	Laila's friend
Hakiman Bua	Laila's nurse
Nandi Saliman	Maidservants

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Mrs. Martin	Laila's ex-governess
Waliuddin	Hamid's friend
Ejaz Ali	Abida's husband

It is disrespectful to address elders by name, hence various forms of address are used, such as:

Baba Jan, Mian, Bua, Bibi, etc.

Dadi	Grandmother
Mamoon	Mother's brother or cousin (female—Mumani)
Chacha	Father's brother or cousin (female—Chachi)
Bhai	Brother or cousin
Bahen	Sister or cousin
Ammi	Mother
Abba	Father
Apa	Sister
Betay or Beta	Son
Bitia or Beti	Daughter
Dadi	Paternal grandmother

Dopatta	Head-covering
Takht	Wooden divan
Angréz	Englishman
Piaray	Darling
Achkan	Long coat
Angarkha	Old-fashioned long coat fastened with loops
Lota	Vessel for water
Tazias	Replicas of the tombs of the Prophet's grandsons

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Burqa	Robe and veil for purdah
Khaddar	Hand-spun cloth
Dholak	Long two-sided drum
Charpoy	String bed
Ghazals	Love poems
Ji	Yes
Nikah	Wedding ceremony
Lathi	Long staff for protection
Khuda Hafiz	A term of farewell (God protect you)
Gharara	Wide pyjamas

INTRODUCTION

In India, the past never disappears. It does not even become transformed into a ghost. Concrete, physical, palpable—it is present everywhere. Ruins, monuments, litter the streets, hold up the traffic, create strange islands in the modernity of the cities. No one fears or avoids them—goats and cows graze around them, the poor string up ropes and rags and turn them into dwellings, election campaigners and cinema distributors plaster them with pamphlets—and so they remain a part of the here and now, of today.

In other ways, too, the past clings. As sticky as glue, or syrup. Traditions. Customs. "Why do you paint a tika on your baby's forehead?" "Why do you fall at your father's feet and touch your forehead to the ground?" "Why does a woman fast on this particular day?" "Why bathe in the river during an eclipse?" "Why does the bridegroom arrive on a horse, bearing a sword?" It is the custom, the tradition. No further explanation is required than this—it has always been so, it must continue to be so.

If there is a break in that tradition, then—"What will happen?" Things too terrible to be named. The downfall of the family, of society, of religion, of the motherland, India herself.

So a woman will paint a tika on her baby's forehead, a young man touch an elder's feet, a marriage need to be approved not only by parents but an astrologer as well . . . and so life is lived according to its rules, rules prescribed by time, centuries of time.

Of course time moves in other directions as well—TV and radio sets invade homes, the sari is given up for jeans, the old astrologer laughed at and the priest avoided, the past scorned. But it remains. Like the colour of one's skin, and eyes, it remains. It does not leave.

Attia Hosain's novel and collection of short stories are

monuments to that past: the history of north India, before Partition. A monument suggests a gravestone—grey, cold and immutable. Her books are not: they are delicate and tender, like new grass, and they stir with life and the play of sunlight and rain. To read them is as if one had parted a curtain, or opened a door, and strayed into the past.

That is their charm and significance. To read them is like wrapping oneself up in one's mother's wedding sari, lifting the family jewels out of a faded box and admiring their glitter, inhaling the musky perfume of old silks in a camphor chest. Almost forgotten colours and scents; one wonders if one can endure them in the light of what has come to pass. But guiltily, with a laugh, the reader can't but confess "Really? Is that how it was? It must have been—" Glamorous? Fascinating? Outrageous? Impossible?

What are the precise ingredients of that now difficult to visualise past? For Attia Hosain it was an undivided India in which Muslims and Hindus celebrated the same festivals and often worshipped at the same shrines.

> Not only did he observe the rituals of his own religion, but in the month of Moharrum, he kept a "tazia" in a specially prepared shed. On the tenth day of the month, the elaborate man-high tomb made of bright-coloured paper and tinsel was carried to its burial in a procession. The Muslim servants recited dirges in memory of the martyred family of the Prophet, while he and his sons followed in barefooted, bareheaded respect. (Shiv Prasad, "White Leopard", *Phoenix Fled*)

Society was not then in flux, it was static, and it was a feudal society. To know what feudalism meant, one has to read *Sunlight on a Broken Column* or *Phoenix Fled* and learn how it was made—how the land belonged to the wealthy *taluqdars*, how the peasants worked upon it, what was exacted from them and what was, in return, done to or for them. How women lived in a secluded part of the house, jealously protected by their menfolk, and what powers were theirs, or not. How deference had always to be shown to the ancestors,

to the aristocracy, to the priests, who could choose either to exploit or harrass their dependents or, if they had any nobility of spirit, protect and nurture them. How the one unforgiveable sin was to rock this hierarchy, its stability. How no one could offend religion or the family or society by going against it and only those who lived according to its rules could survive.

Born in 1913, Attia Hosain came from a background and a family that equipped her with all the knowledge she needed to write these books. Her father was a *taluqdar* of Oudh, a state in north India that the British knew as the United Provinces, the home of nawabs who dazzled even the wealthy colonists by the splendour of their courts. She belongs to the clan of Kidwais that has produced many distinguished and prominent men of this century. Her father studied at Christ College, Cambridge, and the Middle Temple, and like other young men in his circle of contemporaries, became well known in the political and national movements of his time. A great friend of his was Motilal Nehru, the father of Jawaharlal Nehru. Attia Hosain's mother came from the family that had distinguished itself in another world—the intellectual one—and had been educated in the old Persian and Urdu tradition. When her father died, Attia Hosain was only eleven years old. They were a family of five children, the youngest born two months after the father's death, yet the mother took over all responsibility for them, and for the estate—an unusual step for a woman at that time—and brought up her children very strictly, according to tradition. Attia Hosain says "I learnt from her how strong women can be when faced with tragedy and pressure." Although she had English governesses and studied at the La Martiniere School for Girls, she had lessons in Urdu and Arabic when she returned home, and read the Quran, kept close to the roots of her own culture by her mother and, before her, by her father who made sure they never lost touch with their ancestral village. During his lifetime their house had been filled with the political leaders and great figures of the society of the time and "We seemed to

live with the cultures of the East and the West in a way that was not dissimilar from that of many Indian families," but the daughters of the house had a traditional upbringing nevertheless, and lived sheltered, rather secluded lives. Their religious education was liberal and they did not wear *burqas* but the car had silk curtains at the windows!

Attia Hosain read "any books I could lay my hands on" and as her father owned an extensive library, she grew up—"unsupervised"—on the English classics. She went to the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, then the foremost college for women in India, and won scholarships. She persuaded her mother she should not be kept at home with her sisters and was the first woman from a *taluqdar's* family to graduate—in 1933—from the University of Lucknow. In spite of this not inconsiderable triumph, she resented the distinction made between sons and daughters in the family and the fact that she was not sent to Cambridge as her brother had been. Her rebellion took the form of a marriage to her cousin, against her mother's wishes. He had been educated at Clifton and at Cambridge. Her father-in-law was also a *taluqdar* and, like her father, played a prominent role in the political, civic and social life of the UP; he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lucknow.

The family tradition of weaving together the political and the intellectual strands influenced Attia Hosain's life and thought. She claims

> I was greatly influenced in the 30s by the young friends and relations who came back from English schools and universities as left wing activists, Communists and Congress socialists. I was at the first Progressive Writers' Conference and could be called a "fellow traveller" at the time. I did not actively enter politics as I was (and may always have been?) tied and restricted in many ways by traditional bonds of duty to the family.

Her mother-in-law was right wing and represented the Muslim League in the UP Assembly but maintained her independent view that Muslim leaders should remain in India,

not go to Pakistan, and look after the interests of Muslims in India. Attia Hosain confesses that her own ideal of womanhood was embodied in Sarojini Naidu, the poet/politician who made her "overcome my shyness and go the All India Womens' Conference in Calcutta in 1933".

As a well-educated, thoughtful young woman at the heart of the storm in an India on the brink of Independence and Partition, she wrote for *The Pioneer,* then edited by Desmond Young, and for *The Statesman,* the leading English language newspaper in Calcutta. She also wrote short stories—"some published, some unpublished"—but "never believed in myself as a writer!" In spite of her ideals and those of many other Muslims in India, Partition proved inevitable at Independence and, rather than go to Pakistan, the Muslim ideal in which she did not believe, she chose to take her children to England, a country she had come to know when her husband was posted to the Indian High Commission, and earned her living by broadcasting and presenting her own women's programme on the Eastern Service of the BBC.

Events during and after Partition are to this day very painful to me. And now, in my old age, the strength of my roots is strong; it also causes pain, because it makes one a "stranger" everywhere in the deeper area of one's mind and spirit *except where one was born and brought up.*

To read her novel and short stories is to become aware of the many and varied threads that go to make up a rich and interesting life as well as the many doubts and struggles and contradictions it contained. They reflect her pride in ancestry and heredity as well as sorrow at the frequency with which they are tarnished by some heedless, unjust or selfish action. They present her ardent love for all that was gracious and splendid in the aristocracy she knew as well as her awareness of the dark obverse side experienced by hapless dependents. They show her keen sense of the two ruling concepts of Indian behaviour—*Izzat*/honour, and *Sharam*/dishonour—passionately adhering to the former and reworking in her

mind the many forms taken by the latter, not always the traditional ones. They show her appreciation of the warmth, supportiveness, laughter and emotional richness to be found in the joint family as well as an acknowledgement of how often the joint family could become a prison and a punishment. She displays an enormous pride and belief in womanhood but creates many, widely differing representatives of it, some worthy of respect, others of pity, still others of shame. The pleasures she takes in privilege and all its accoutrement are never divorced from a sense of the responsibility of possessing them, an almost queenly sense of *noblesse oblige*.

The many-coloured threads that go to weave the matter of the two books on which Attia Hosain's reputation is based also give a distinctive quality to her prose. It is as rich and ornate as a piece of brocade, or embroidery, resembling the sari she describes in the short story "Time Is Unredeemable": "deep-red Benares net with large gold flowers scattered all over it and formalised in two rows along the edge as a border". Not for her the stripped and bare simplicity of modern prose—that would not be in keeping with the period—which might make it difficult for the modern reader not as at home as she with the older literary style, but it is in harmony with the material. It is also important to remember that Attia Hosain is actually reproducing, whether consciously or not, the Persian literary style and mannerisms she was taught when young, and reading her prose brings one as close as it is possible, in the English language, to the Urdu origins and the Persian inspiration. Urdu is a language that lends itself to the flamboyant and the poetic and so it is a suitable medium through which to describe the Muslim society of Lucknow and the Persian influence in north India, although married to the local Hindi of the Hindu population and modified by a Western education in the English language.

And the literary and the stylised are balanced by a certain delicacy and freshness as well as lightened by flashes of wit and humour. Her greatest strength lies in her ability to draw a rich, full portrait of her society—ignoring none of its many

faults and cruelties, and capable of including not only men and women of immense power and privilege but, to an *equal* extent, the poor who laboured as their servants. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of her writing is the tenderness she shows for those who served her family, an empathy for a class not her own.

Attia Hosain's only novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column,* first published in 1961, presents these themes within the framework of a family living in old Lucknow, a city loved by the nawabs and celebrated by the poets of its heydey, now long past. Faced by a daunting list of characters that prefaces it, and an even more bewildering one of the various forms of address used in speech, readers may doubt their ability to master the intricacies of such a world, certainly not today's. One has to remember that in India the nuclear family is considered unnatural and freakish, the joint family the only proper one for man, woman and child. Also that Attia Hosain has attempted not merely a portrait of a character or a family but of the feudal society as it existed then, ruled by traditional concepts, sometimes struggling to break or to change them and so presenting us with many aspects of this particular kaleidoscope.

One realises that she could have found no better way to describe feudalism than to bring to life its many representatives. The older ones are entirely ruled by the concepts of *Izzat*/honour and *Sharam*/dishonour. "You must never forget the traditions of your family . . . never forget the family into which you were born" is the echo that sounds throughout the book, coming from all directions, both high and low. The highest-born are Baba Jan, old and ill when the novel opens but still a commanding and formidable figure whose every cough brings the whole household to attention, and his circle of friends that includes Thakur Balbir Singh, "a fierce and generous Rajput," and Raja Hasan Ahmed of Amirpur, "a poet and builder of palaces". Of them it is said "They loved the city to which they belonged, and they lived and behaved as if the city belonged to them," and that they "in varying

degrees had been helped by birth, privilege and wealth to assume such a position, but without some intrinsic quality they could not have maintained it".

What is the intrinsic quality? The abounding love of the land they own and dominate, yes, and ideally the sense of duty and responsibility that could justify such a power, but the younger men in the family, and some of the young women, begin to question it, stirred as they are by their liberal Western education as well as the ideas of freedom and independence that they have imbibed through their reading and heated discussions at school and college. The confrontation between generations is at its height during the election when sides have to be taken. Uncle Hamid, not in himself an impressive or forceful figure, feels confident enough to say

"I am a part of feudalism and proud to be. I shall fight for it. It is my heritage and yours. Let me remind you of that. And that you enjoy its reactionary advantages. You talk very glibly of its destruction but you live by its existence . . . not according to your beliefs. Be prepared for sacrifices. Have the courage of your convictions and stop living on reaction."

The younger men are quick to notice a significant slip of the tongue made in an address of welcome to the visiting Viceroy by one of the representatives of the aristocracy they have come to question: "'We, the *taluqdars* of Oudh, are a special class with special privileges . . . we are aware that the property—er, prosperity of our tenants is our proper—prosperity.'" They laugh when, on hearing her son proclaim "'I am no Lenin and can establish no Soviets,'" the mother queries "'Linen serviettes? I do not know what you are talking about.'"

In spite of occasional laughter, the struggle is serious, and it is not only the wealthy and titled who live for *Izzat* and die for *Sharam*. The same primal passions possess those who live in the lowly servants' quarters of the compound. The washerman Jumman speaks in those terms of his daughter Nandi who he feels has disgraced his name when she is found

in the garage with the cleaner. "'My honour was besmirched, and I felt possessed by a thousand devils,'" he says after beating her severely. But Nandi belongs to the younger generation and when the debauchee, Uncle Mohsin, comes along to prod her "with his silver-topped cane" contemptuously, saying "'This slut of a girl is a liar and a wanton'" she looks up at "that cruelly silent, staring ring of trappers" and cries out "'A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?'" Of course she is thrashed again for her impertinence, even though the young Laila flies to her rescue only to be told "'How could you have interfered? Aren't you ashamed?'" "'Yes, I am, I'm ashamed to call him uncle.'"

It is Laila, a troubled, thoughtful child, who questions her family's rules and society's customs and is often chastised for reading too much (education is seen as synonymous with "Westernisation" in its destructive effects).

"Child, put away that book. Those insect letters will eat away your eyes."

"But, Bua," I said, hugging her, "these books will be garlands of gold round my neck."

Others do not share her faith in education, or science. When the washerman Jumman's wife falls ill after a still birth—of gangrene, not possession by the devils as others imagine—she is infuriated to hear the women say "Go to hospital and have a baby with men standing looking on? Be shameless and be seen by all those doctors and half-doctors? Better to die at home." Laila tries to save her life by sending her to the hospital, but fails.

Her questing mind gives her loving aunt Abida much pain. "'Do not disappoint me,'" she begs the girl. "'I would have you strong and dutiful.'" Laila replies "'Dutiful to whom? To what? To what I believe is true? Or those I am asked to obey?'" She is told "'Your elders are your well-wishers and guides. You must honour and obey them.'"

Aunt Abida is the embodiment of duty and in fact sacrifices