



Sunlight on a Broken Column

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Laila, orphaned daughter of a distinguished Muslim family, is brought up by her orthodox aunts who keep purdah. At 15, she moves to the home of a "liberal" uncle in Lucknow. Here, during the 1930s, as the struggle for independence sharpens, Laila is surrounded by relatives and university friends caught up in politics. But Laila is unable to commit herself to any cause: her own fight for independence is a struggle with traditional life as she falls in love with a man not chosen by her family. With its beautiful evocation of India, its political insight and unsentimental understanding of the human heart, this is a classic of Muslim life.

Sunlight on a Broken Column Details

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From Reader Review Sunlight on a Broken Column for online ebook

Anushka says

Only one feeling resonates throughout the book - bittersweet. That is the only way I can hope to explain this book to someone. I loved it.

Ritika says

My quest to learn more about Lucknow led me to this book. Just when I had moved to Lucknow, a colleague told me about Mr. Ram Advani and his bookstore at Hazratganj, and that I should definitely visit him to learn more about Lucknow. A quick Google search revealed that he is a legend. I was looking for a book to learn more about the city. Mr. Advani said that Attia Hosain is one of the best writers to come from Lucknow. It opens to the setting of Laila's life in a Taluqdari zenana with her aunts, rigorously dutiful to the code of patriarchy set by Baba jaan - Laila's grandfather and the Big Brother of the household. His role as the non proactive party in the household is also, ironically, corsets the lives, thoughts & emotions of the women in the family. The resultant anxiety is what Laila pens, however, in strict measurement. She finds herself at the cusp constantly - independence in abstraction in Asad, and the brainwashed product of this straitjacketed life in Zahra. Laila leaves behind the life of zenana after her grandfather's death. There begins another liminal phase where she engages with several perspectives on the British occupation and religion to an existential extent. For me, the most interesting part of the book is the arrival of Kemal and Saleem into the household. Laila is in her 20s and she is seen socializing outside the house finally. Kemal and Saleem are largely instrumental in getting Laila to party a little. There's a lot of armchair ideological bantering which turns serious later in the run up to the Indian independence - another blow of liminality. A time when being feudal was a matter of pride for this Taluqdari family, it was being challenged by the anti-zamindari movement. Yet, the coterie of Taluqdaris fights for their "right", like it is a cause. Another tragedy awaits Laila after she successfully conquers her family's disapproval to go after her love - the only cause she comes to believe in, in the clamour for cause appropriation.

I relived the slow & extreme oscillations of seasons of the Indo-Gangetic plains. Echoing my sentiments about summer she tells Zahra, "The sun on the roof must have been stronger than I imagined (...) Do you know what that means Zahra? Summer will be here before we know it. I hate the thought; but at least it will prepare us for hell when we die." And then Zahra quips, "You will not find me there, but I'll think of you in heaven."

I was repeatedly angry with Laila's acquiescent patterns, but, learned that it is not easy for everyone to rebel. I am still angry. Abida phupi's sense of duty was a regime in itself with no grey areas. I would have liked to read how an intense argument would play out between them, without either one willing to cave in.

Sairam Krishnan says

The second book about pre-independence Muslim life in North India I've read in the space of two months, and both of them have been gems.

The first was Ahmed Ali's 'Twilight in Delhi', which is enjoying a late renaissance, and this book, which

deserves one.

The books cannot be more dissimilar, Ahmed Ali's books is a lamentation of a story, sad, slow and meticulously told, while 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' is celebration of a world past, of a Lucknow long gone, dead and buried.

There are lines in Ahmed Ali's book about Lucknow, about the 'lucknawi' speech, sweet and respectful, dripping with what they call 'tehzeeb'. The difference in the novels is the same too. Attia Hosain's classic story is a triumph of storytelling. Characters flow into each other, scenes merge to form images in your head, and the passion and fervor among the people of a chained country finds its voice, albeit meekly. The voice is that of a Muslim girl, one with ideas, concrete thoughts and ambitions, but who is still afraid to exercise and affirm them.

This is the moral thread of 'Sunlight on a Broken Column', the friction between a traditional upbringing, a desire to stay true to one's traditions, to the words of our elders, and the pull towards rebellion, towards love, towards what you know is right. This is no dead debate; even now, in our country, these thoughts rage in young heads, and find outlets in dangerous ways.

Beautiful prose, unforgettable characters (Abida being my favorite), and a premise that is still so very relevant, Attia Hosain's novel should be a staple for literature and religion studies classrooms.

An important, wonderful read.

Zanna says

I picked out this book among the remainders and I see no sign of its having been reprinted. This is very unfortunate, because, as Anita Desai explains vividly in her brief introduction to this edition, Hosain's work emerges from a richly coloured world that has been swallowed by changing times: the world of the privileged class of *talukdar* families, aristocratic landowners, in Lucknow in the early twentieth century. She lived and wrote through Partition and her novel reflects the political and cultural currents in motion during the period.

As Desai points out, her style is not modern, rather, a little ornate, formal, agreeably ponderous, yet delicately restrained and never frivolous or sentimental, soaring with powerful emotions and relating the commonplace and the extraordinary with sure-footed, carefully chosen phrases: 'Ugly buildings had sprung up, conceived by ill-digested modernity and the hasty needs of a growing city'. That indigestion speaks - to the faint, persistent pain of bad architecture as much to the sad misinterpretation of the work of modernist visionaries like Le Corbusier (and perhaps I can add the later Indian architect Charles Correa) or listen to this: 'the gossip of women whose minds remained smothered in the *burqas* they had outwardly discarded, and the men who met women socially but mentally relegated them all to harems and zenanas'. How crisply she puts down hypocritical sanctimony!

Our narrator, Laila, is fifteen at the start of the action and lives in the house of her grandfather in the care of the extended family, but is particularly close to her freethinking, religious and dutiful aunt, Abida, who has taken on responsibility for carrying out her dead parents' wishes for her to receive a 'Western' style education. She seems quite introverted and lives in her books, and often clashes with her traditionally educated cousin and age mate Zahra, who is frivolous and sometimes narrow-minded. Her confidantes also

include the girls' beloved nurse Hakiman Bua and other Hindu female servants with whom they chat. The household, including Laila and Zahra, observes purdah, so its female members rarely leave its comfortable confines: when they travel to ancestral lands a few miles away for a funeral, they cannot suppress their curiosity and exclamations over what they see outside their carriage, despite Hakiman Bua's chidings and injunctions to pray for the departed.

Gracefully, economically rendered conversations among people with a wide variety of backgrounds and opinions is one of the richest pleasures of this book, revealing the strong integration of Hindus and Muslims and hinting often at the British hand in setting them against each other. Laila and her group of college friends have different perspectives on the political and religious topics that preoccupy their varied milieus and they discuss them, often in passionate arguments, while remaining very fast friends. Each young woman thinks, I suppose, what might be predicted based on her class and faith background (the group includes three Muslims, one in favour of partition, one totally indifferent, and Laila herself who is engaged and uncertain, a radical egalitarian Hindu (closest in views to Laila) and a pro-Empire Anglo-Indian.

This vibrant array counterpoints the atmosphere within Laila's extended family, where such contrasts of background are less distinct, but ideological and religious opinions are if anything more divergent. While behaviour is controlled (quintessential to Laila's class as exemplified and articulated by her aunt Abida) thought is free, and the ability to articulate arguments and debate is prized among the venerable arts of conversation. I absorbed a mode of respectful, loving tolerance amongst people compelled by tradition to live and speak and act in each others lives however incompatible their temperaments and ideas might make them. There are exceptions, but in general I felt that each person had their confidantes and ample thoughtspace within the joint family structure. This changes during uncle Hamid's time, and it's surely because of his Westernised lifestyle, in which family ties are subordinated to a restricted, individual social life and are hollowed of feeling and joy into arid duty.

If I'm making this sound like a nostalgic paean to the aristocratic *talukdari* lifestyle, to feudalism, purdah and traditional family structures, then I'm doing it no justice. Perhaps it is that, in one reading, or in one of its aspects, and I see some reviewers chafing about Laila/Attia's class position and privilege and her according focus. Some critics make it sound as if Hosain should not have taken up her pen at all if not to take the part of the underprivileged classes, which in fact she does as part of a larger, much troubled but passionate impulse towards justice. In her introduction Desai opines that 'perhaps the most attractive aspect of her writing is the tenderness she shows for those who served her family' and Laila criticises Zahra strongly for her thoughtless classism. Hosain's valuable and humane, thoughtfully sympathetic yet astutely critical view of the feudalism she grew up in could not have been revealed by anyone but an insider. In a conversation about Attia and Virginia Woolf, a writer who is often spoken of in the same way, my friend Fionnuala wisely said 'While narrowness should not be totally excused by historical context, context can explain narrowness and help us to put the pieces of the history of our evolving world together.'

Besides which, Laila's view does not seem at all narrow to me; her broadening milieu and education position her exceptionally well to throw light on a variety of ways of life. She is unjudgemental, generous, strong-willed, open and independent of mind, curious, outspoken and she enjoys both varied company and solitary reflection. As a teenager she admires the Satyagrahis and longs to 'march in peaceful protest, to defy the might of the arrogant whites'. Later she criticises the 'stupid and ridiculous' 'old-fashioned nonsense' of the tradition of modesty that prevents husbands and wives from speaking to each other in the presence of parents, and sneaking like thieves into each other's rooms at night even after they have children of their own. We witness her character developing, especially gaining self-awareness, though she maintains the core of herself, her humanistic and empathic beliefs and responses.

This novel, in style, mood, and setting, was for me a glorious change of scene, and I hope it is taken up and enjoyed by many more readers.

Anshul says

This is a type of autobiographical story in the last days of British rule in India and revolves around the life of a young Muslim girl just entering into nobility. The author describes the lifestyles of the rich Nawabs of India at that time in a very realistic way. As old people were like in this novel there are a lot of incidents that makes us feel that girls at that time of period use to be a burden on their families. The elders of the community use to think that the presence of a female in making decisions is not at all necessary. The novel tells us that the women of elite classes at that time were greatly dependent on their female servants which were doubly brought under control by caste and class. Hosain has greatly represented the whole of the society, both men and women of both the lower as well as upper classes.

Navaneeta says

I am in love with this book. And not just because it's a haunting love story. Attia Hossain beautifully captures a bygone age in all its subtleties. Her characters are alive and so is the pre-independent Lucknow that she depicts.

A must read for fans of Indian historical fiction.

Ronald Morton says

Zahra was full of information, "The cleaner is to be dismissed and Nandi will get the beating she deserves from Jumman, I am sure. Such wickedness, when she is so young! Immoral people cannot be allowed inside the house."

"That will be awkward for certain people."

Zahra ignored my remark. "The insolence of these menials that she should have dared to talk to our uncle in such a manner, and in front of everyone, of all those servants! Laila, how could you have interfered? Aren't you ashamed?"

"Yes I am. I'm ashamed to call him uncle. I'm ashamed that you have no pity because Nandi is a servant girl. Besides, I don't care what anyone thinks. I don't care."

"Do you know what is wrong with you, Laila? All those books you read. You just talk like a book now, with no sense of reality. The only cure for Nandi is to get her married quickly."

"The cure for a good girl is to get her married quickly; the cure for a bad girl is to get her married quickly. Do you think of anything out getting married quickly?"

This book, in great part, is about boundaries (specifically those in pre-Partition India). Boundaries between children and their elders; boundaries between Hindus and Muslims; boundaries between Indians and the British; boundaries between rich and poor; and, intertwined into these boundaries, the overarching

boundaries between men and women.

This book is predominantly set in 1930's India (a brief bit at the end is post-Partition), and is narrated by Laila - at the beginning of the book she has just turned 15, and she is 23 in the middle portion - a strong voiced, bookish teenager, who's persistent and keen sense of observation ties the many threads of the narrative, and the many themes of the novel, together. The book touches on a rather overwhelming list of social topics relevant to 1930's India, especially as it related to young women, but the narratorial voice makes it all come together perfectly.

This was a joy to read; it is beautifully written, and at the same time densely informational. The book contains a keen intelligence, bolstered by a righteous indignation at the boundaries between it and the world, and a caustic regard for the hypocrites who placed and enforce those boundaries. Really damn great.

Karmen says

Published in 1961, Attia Hosain's ideas were beyond progressive. This is a beautifully written book about transition: From British India to Independent (divided) India, from girl to woman; with a changing social order forming the backdrop. Hosain captures a bygone era of opulence with the nostalgia of one who has truly lived it. A highly recommended read for fans of historical Indian fiction.

Yasmin Rahman says

a very lyrical book on the claustrophobia of growing up in not just a Muslim but any other traditional home. Reflects the search for individualism in extended families that put "honour and duty" and "keeping up appearances" above even truth and freedom. Alternatively, it can be read as a book about the freedom struggle through a woman's eyes.

P says

During his lifetime, the painter Raphael exceeded the fame of Michelangelo among their contemporaries. Now, of course, most people recognize the name 'Michelangelo' and Raphael is one of the sidelights of Renaissance art. Attia Hosain's novel was one of the most well-regarded of its time when it was published in 1961. Reading it today one struggles to understand why. As George Orwell put it, the only real critic of literature is Time. Hosain's novel is brimming with tiresome and claustrophobia-inducing descriptions of endless dinner parties, luxurious dresses woven by unseen hands, sumptuous food cooked in kitchens that do not merit a word of acknowledgement, delivered to the table by silently obsequious bearers. It is the sunlight on a broken column, the "dried voices whispering together" (the words from T.S. Eliot's poem The Hollow Men). It is also the dull lives of indolently rich women of the feudal landed gentry who would come to be increasingly irrelevant by the rise of the mercantile class. Read it for its occasional gems, such as an Englishwoman's well-meaning but devastating compliment of Nehru as almost British himself. I enjoy Hosain like I would admire a Raphael but give me the fiery Michelangelo of Ismat Chughtai's Tehri Lakir (Crooked Line) any day.

Hena says

An Indian partition and love story all in one, how can you go wrong? This is the one book that I loved from my "Modern Muslim South Asia" class in college. For a few years I only had a photocopied version of the whole book, and then I finally found a cheap, used version online. Yay!

Ali says

Attia Hosain's only novel, first published in 1961 is a classic novel of Muslim life, portraying the traditional feudal society into which Attia Hosain was born, in pre-partition days.

"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"

(Anita Desai – in the introduction to the 1988 Virago Modern Classics edition)

Set mainly in Lucknow of the 1930's, Sunlight on a Broken Column centres on Laila, the orphaned daughter of a distinguished Muslim family. As the novel opens fifteen year old Laila is living in her grandfather's house, brought up by her two aunts, who observe purdah, alongside her cousin Zahra. Zahra is frivolous yet happy to submit to the traditional life mapped out for her, as the novel begins conversations around Zahra's marriage have already begun. Baba Jan, Laila's grandfather is a formidable figure, hugely respected the entire household is run around him, he is old and ill as the novel opens, and his eventual death brings change for Laila.

Soon Laila is living with her uncle Hamid – a "liberal" though a cold and autocratic figure. As Laila grows up and starts to attend university – she is surrounded by a variety of people; politics is very much on the agenda for many relatives and friends, though Laila herself is unable to commit herself to any one cause, but that of her own freedom. Uncle Hamid's more liberal household, and Zahra's marriage allows Laila access to a society that unmarried girls traditionally didn't experience. In the younger generation of Laila's friends and relatives we are able to see something of the future of India and the changes that are on the horizon. While in the characters of Laila's aunts, Aunt Abida in particular, Attia Hosain has portrayed the traditional self-sacrificing obedient role that Laila struggles to understand.

"I think Destiny's purpose is merely to shock us at moments into a state of awareness; those moments are milestones in between which we have to find our own way."

Laila is a girl with a strong spirit – her struggle for her own independence matching that of India herself. Hosain portrays the claustrophobia of this world and frustration felt by a forward thinking young woman to perfection. Brought up in a world where the traditional rules of obedience, honour and dishonour are more important than personal happiness and the feudal society is still controlling the lives of the servant class, Laila begins to pull against these traditional ways. Laila is horrified when ignorance prevents a servant woman's family seeking medical help – desperately trying to save the woman Laila sends her to hospital – only it's too late. In these "Taluqhdari" families – into which Attia Hosain herself was born in 1913 – the rules for the servant classes are just as harsh, maybe more so, the judgments upon a female servant seduced or preyed upon by a man, abysmally cruel.

The conclusion of the novel – is brilliant – as through Laila's older eyes we see the changes that partition brought to families of this kind, the fracturing of households and the ending of a way of life.

Sunlight on a broken Column is an engaging and evocative story of traditional family life in the decade

before partition ripped India apart. I am not sure how well this novel is known now, but it certainly deserves to be well known. I have enjoyed reading this novel so much, – and very much look forward to hearing how Liz and Karen – who have been reading this novel at around the same time as me – feel about it. I really now need to find myself a copy of Attia Hosain’s short stories, what a shame she only ever wrote one novel.

Saburi Pandit says

It is not always that you find a book, that resonates your fears, your questions, of course never your answers. Because your answers you must find on your own. Through every page that I turned of this book, Laila became me, and I, Laila. It was after long that I could identify with a protagonist so deeply that the story in this book seemed to be something I had read before, rather lived before in some other life. Attia Hosain, I can say after reading this book is a beautiful good woman, someone who can write with so much heart, simplicity of manner and thought, would have to be beautiful inside out. It's sad that she did not write many novels. This book is one of those rare complete novels that truly encompasses the trajectory of thought, personalities and conflict of action and ideas in politics and social life. A true and rare glimpse of the India before and after partition. I would highly recommend this novel to be read and cherished as one of the best in the Indian literature.

Abhaga says

I gave up on it once - not being able to get accustomed to lyrical Lucknowi zubaan literally rendered into English. But on my second attempt, got over it and enjoyed the book in the later half. There is not much to the plot and narration is simple - though the last part of the novel does uses nonlinear narration quite effectively.

It is more like a portrait of the old elite lifestyle, the pressures and tensions it experienced as India moved towards independence and how it scattered into pieces as times changed. That is was set in Lucknow, the city of my birth, made it a nostalgia trip for me as well although I have seen little of the city that she describes.

Paul says

I really enjoyed and appreciated this novel, after having read some of Hosain’s shorter fiction last year. It is set in the 1930s and 1940s towards the end of British rule in India and on to partition. It is told from the perspective of Laila, a member of a fairly privileged taluqdar family. It starts when she is fifteen and spans almost twenty years. It covers a period of great change and Hosain illustrates how the change affects a family with traditional values and the strains of modernity vs tradition. It is also told from a woman’s perspective and looks at the changing nature of the role of women in that society. The novel is partly autobiographical and the title is a quote from T S Eliot, The Hollow Men;

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 insight into what purdah meant for women and how marriages are arranged. Reflections on the interior life of a family are set besides the struggle for independence, colonialism and religious tensions within the community. The very different lives and roles of the servants are also part of the picture.

The family home (or Ashiana, the nest) is immensely important in the novel and everything centres on it and it is society in miniature. Jasbir Jain argues;

“Ashiana in Sunlight on a Broken Column serves as a microcosm of the world at large with not only its womenfolk in purdah but its retinue of servants who represent the community at large. It has a living relationship with the past not merely through the culture it cultivates but also through the house at Hasanpur at the outskirts of the city, which symbolizes continuity and permanence”

Laila is given an education and this creates tension within herself as she realizes how restrictive her upbringing has been. There is however a tension here as she realizes that freedom of thought does not equate to a freedom of action. This is a critique of the old traditions and ways; not without nostalgia however. The family is split at Partition and Hosain is able to portray different approaches to the ending of colonial rule and different ideas about the future; some support Congress, some the Muslim League.

The novel is beautifully written and I have the virago edition (thanks goodness for virago). It’s about tradition, change, love and loss and it is also a snapshot of a particular ending of colonial rule and all the struggle and danger that went with it. Well worth reading.
