

The Creative Launcher

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Patriarchal Domination and Quest for Identity in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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Abstract

Feminist perspectives have acquired a significant place across the country and world, beyond a number of established boundaries irrespective of caste, religion and creed. Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* converses about a Muslim girl Laila, the main protagonist and also the alter-ego of Attia Hosain, who headed for all the restrictions and exploitation. She sets an example for the women, who belong to the Muslim conservative family. She sharply protests against dishonor of human dignity, prejudices and exploitation. She obeys all the code of conduct meant for girls but at the same time, she was affected by the new wave of the college. Attia deserves applause for the portrayal of this new woman in the novel. The present paper is an endeavor of the study of deconstruction of patriarchal system and how that girl, Laila comes out of this complex society. The novel is an autobiographical story of the novelist herself. And not only she challenges the society, but also breaks all the shackles of the male hegemony. She has come out of the cocoon of domination of patriarchy in the present study of the novel.

Key Words- *Woman, Patriarchy, Dominate, Quest For Identity.*

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“You are your own refuge. There is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve”
The lines in the epitaph of the novel *Dark Holds No Terrors* by Shashi Deshpande explains that, how a woman is caught between the chaos of the society. The protagonist of the novel *Dark Holds No Terrors* uttered these words. In fact, these words were the voices of all those women who were suffering in the hands of patriarchy and male domination. The above lines were significant in the context of every woman who was continuously searching their identity in the male dominated society.

The primal and seminal concern of feminism is to declare that a woman is a living being. She is not a burden and not an attachment of man. These grasping terms certainly got our attention and also invoke humane feeling among women as an ‘individual entity’. The paper is an attempt to ponder over the fact that Feminism has never been a movement, but a concept and moreover a belief which have been constantly intersected by many social, political and cultural histories.

Feminist perspectives have stimulated across the country and world, beyond a number of established boundaries irrespective of caste, religion and other margins. Gender based struggles, in India as elsewhere, have had a long and eventful journey over the centuries, more so in a society fighting patriarchy and other societal odds since time immemorial. Moreover, the paper aims at the limitation and insufficiency of the society, people and norms and also the plan is to set equilibrium between the two sexes. The contemporary literature works on the complex terminology of feminism, feminine, empowerment and many others, but the question arises that whether we understand all these terms in general or not? What is the real meaning of all the terms? Are we applying these terms in daily lives? And overall, the practical application of all these terms in our day to day life with respect to the analysis of the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

The discussions, hot debates were the topics for thought but the same questions hunts to us that what is the basic endeavor of all the feminists’ debates, if we were unable to bring out an equal society and comfortable zone for women sex. It is indeed said that after seventy

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years of independence of the country women are still under bondage, unable to assert their rights, silently putting up the atrocities. Once Pandit Nehru said, you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. This argument is very strong and relevant as the women are also considered as nation builder. The growth of the nation and country depends on that how strong the women are.

Women these days break all the shackles of society. With the advent of television, internet and other social media the scenario of the society and others changed a lot. The movements embarked many changes in the society as well as the people. The feminist's thinkers have been in the continuous reworking of the female liberation, empowerment and emancipation. Moreover, their main aim is to bring an equitable society in terms of gender. Their focal point is the struggle against the odds of the society but to prove the fact, that woman is an independent human being. From independence to modern day literature the stories represented the imbalance between male and female. The differences are socially constructed.

Helene Cixous in one of her essay opines that, "A woman without a body, dumb, blind can't possibly be a good fighter." it seems, women were seen as objects, to be owned by men. Women writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century have come a long way. In modern literature, images of women have been deconstructed and reconstructed. No longer does the writing of women concern itself with the search for identity alone. Now-a -day's women literature has striven to establish a separate ethos, an exclusive feminine myth as a counter point to the existent male standards. The approach of the writers and the reformers is to treat women simply as a living and individual being who is free enough to take her decisions and move forward.

The Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960's in the First World empowered women with self-confidence as never before. Feminists such as Kate Millet, Chandra Mohanty, Spivak and others interrogated and rejected conventional images of women. In one of the interviews Kamla Das declares:

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I wanted to make women of my generation feel that if men could do something they could do it themselves too. I wanted them to realize that they are equal. I wanted to remove gender difference. I wanted to see that something happened to that society which had such strong inhibitions and which only told lies in public.

The novel, which has been analyzed in this paper, is Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which was published in 1961. The novel, mainly set in Lucknow, is an autobiographical version of a fictional character called Laila, who is a fifteen-year-old orphaned daughter of a rich Muslim family of Taluqdars. Because of the autobiographical aspect of the novel, there are many convergences between Attia Hosain and her fictional narrator, Laila.

Laila's observation of socio-political events of mid-twentieth century and their ramifications on her own life, her family and her community are extensions of Attia's own experiences. The world of Laila is a reflection of Hosain's contemporary society. Laila's father dies at an early age and she had learned many things from her mother. She says, "I learnt from her how strong women can be when faced with tragedy and pressure." The reminiscences of the past totally transformed the little girl into an outrageous personality. Moreover, she was grown into a patriarchal society but still her mother has larger influence on her.

The novel breaks the traditional shackles of the society. Hosain during pre-colonial rule wrote a marvelous piece of art, and who right from the beginning has a strong urge to do some extra ordinary task, as she was fascinated by the nationalist movements of her age. In Attia's literary and political activities, two streams of thoughts (i.e. leftist and Congress) had great influence. She was highly influenced by Sarojini Naidu and attended the All India Women's Conference. She tried to portray her in every modest way and that is why she retaliated to the set norms and rules in the family. Jyoti Puri in her work commented about the different roles of women which are related to their gender, like the reproducers.

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...women are linked to the politics of nation- state in five overlapping ways: as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; as participators in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and transmitters of culture; as signifiers of ethnic/national groups; and as participants in national, economic, politic and military struggles.

The main protagonist of the novel, Laila orphaned daughter of a distinguished Muslim family is brought up in her grandfather's house by an orthodox aunt who keeps purdah. At fifteen she moves to the autocratic uncle in Lucknow. Then during that time the independence movement is in high spirits, 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 against the claustrophobia of traditional life, from which she can only break away when she falls in love with a man whom her family has not chosen for her.

Attia's radical approach against the pseudo morality and strict gender segregations in the novel seems to be influenced by the Progressive Writers. The novel presents a considerable account of nationalist movement and question of Muslim identity. The story of the novel starts with a huge family who lives in Ashiana. The character of Laila can also be interpreted and deduced a buldungsroman, as the novel elaborates the story of the development of the character of Laila right from the beginning. The involvement of the women in the family matters was totally discarded. When in the novel the discussion of marriage takes place, Aunt Abida says, "the girl cannot choose her own husband, she has neither the upbringing nor the opportunity." (21) This dialogue converses that a girl can't choose the man of her choice. Here it is related to what Gayatri Spivak justifies in her theory of subalternity. She opines in her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" about the dominance of men over women. She says," as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant... the subaltern

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has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow” (287)

The trifling particulars of the family make Laila to think for her future herself. The author presented nostalgia for the departed glittering world of the old aristocracy, and has balanced with profound criticism in their way of life, particularly in its affect on the lives of women. Laila, is strong enough to face problems. Being a Muslim girl ran away with her Hindu lover, as their families would not accept it. She is very much influenced with English Literature or stories of love where love overcomes obstacles through only struggle. After marriage, she realizes the mistake she has done. But before that, Romana, one of her friend, considers it as an idea of romantic love is an escapist dream, for Laila and it is a vehicle for social criticism.

The present paper is an attempt to discuss about the views on this fiction that all these bondages to Laila right from the beginning, in the family resulted into her rebellious personality. She openly criticizes and rebukes her own uncle who tries to molest the maid servant and in this process she develops a kind of bond with Nandi which enables her to understand the pain of another woman. Laila and Zahra are two teenage girls in that upper middle class family. Zahra rebuke Laila for showing favor to Nandi and says “Aren’t you ashamed?” (26) She immediately replies: “Yes I am. I am ashamed to call him uncle. I am ashamed that you have no pity because Nandi is a poor servant girl.” (29). This conversation of Laila with Zahra made a valid point that Laila treats every women as equal whether she belong to high class or low class family. She feels the same pain and ache for women of any class. There are many references in the novel, from which we can sort out the fact that Attia has successfully broken the silence of the women imprisonment and custody.

The other reference here is the different views of marriage by Zahra and Laila. Both belong to the same upper high class family, but still the difference prevails in the ideologies of the two. Zahra brands Nandi as a ‘bad girl’ and suggests her that the best cure for a ‘bad girl’ like Nandi is, “to get her married quickly.”(29) Laila rejects this idea and criticizes

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Zahra for taking marriage as solution for everything: “the cure for a good girl is to get her married quickly; the cure for a bad girl is to get her married quickly”? (29) Moreover, Zahra had not any views on marriage but Laila feels about marriage, “I won’t be paired off like an animal” (29) which proves that she has a very clear idea in her mind and she is of the free mind personality.

The novel tells that women need to be pure so that she could seek the help of relatives in difficult situations. Laila is the character who believes in free and liberal ideas and she articulates that, “I believe my education will make me a better human being.” She is enmeshed in the struggle for her own personal freedom. Once when asked by her uncle to opine about the agitation going on in the university, she refuses to do so. On being asked whether she had no freedom of thought she answers that she has no freedom of action. Her rebellion against the hypocrisy visible in the so-called liberal views of her uncle and his wife remains limited to her mind until she falls in love with Ameer. Ameer, a poor relative of their family friends, would never be approved by her family. She goes against their wishes to marry him, and wins her freedom from their authority.

The process of maturity, and quest of identity is colossal and slow and consists of many clashes between the individual’s aspirations, needs, desires and the value system entailed by the social order in which the individual lives. Finally the protagonist is accommodated in society, displaying the spirit and values of the social order. She wrote in the post colonial times and during that time when feminism was an alien word in Indian English Literature. The realization of exploitation of women in male dominated society motivates her to challenge the double standards and codes of conduct that perpetuates this exploitation.

Thus, in the end it is argued that the novel is totally an exceptional piece of work written at the time when the society was not even familiar with these terms. Attia definitely deserves applause for portraying this new woman concept in her novel. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society. Laila despite

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belonging to upper crest of society identifies herself with the deprived and victimized women while Nandi manages to get punished the person who exploited her. The unconscious integrity to develop the same sex bonding comes up as a new and powerful strategy to overcome male dominance that would, ultimately, break the patriarchal hegemony in the society. The need of the hour therefore is sisterhood with mutual empathy. Jean Baker Miller also writes in this connection:

It is important to sustain the understanding the women do not need to denigrate other women in order to maintain a nonexistent structure of dominance; therefore, women do not need to take on the destructive attributes engendered by that structure. Women need the power to advance their own development, but they do not need the power to limit the development of other.

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