



## **NARRATING TRANSFORMATIONS: READING ATTIA HOSAIN' SHORT STORIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Narratives of nation and history are prominent features of Indian English fiction. Transformations in public spheres influenced private lives, and the Indian English fiction was quick to engage with the trend. For instance, Attia Hosain, like her contemporaries, documented pre and post independence India in her short stories, Capturing the period of turmoil and transition, as also the impact of social change on personal relationships. The present paper focuses on select domestic or familial short stories narrating such transformations and their impact on individual and personal or familial relationship.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Indian English literature is preoccupied with the questions of nation and history. It also captures the influence of social and political events on individuals, domestic life and personal relations.

According to Aijaz Ahmad, “modern literature in indigenous languages such as Urdu is far less concerned with the nation as a primary ideological problematic and much more with our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of our bodies and sexualities, our idealisms, our silences” (118). Narrative of nation and history are prominent features of Indian English fiction, transformations of public spheres affected private lives and Indian English fiction is engaged with these.

This paper examines the select short stories of Attia Hosain which can be categorized as “familial” or “domestic” short stories, as they are set in the home and concerned mainly with personal relations, emotional lives and influence of cultural encounter and socio-political

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events on individuals. Like domestic or familial short stories of other women writers in English and in other Indian languages, Hosain's short stories are also autobiographical in nature, dealing with personal relations, love, sexuality, family matters and everyday life experiences. Her short stories offer picture of particular community such as Muslim minority community in colonial and post colonial era. As mentioned elsewhere, Indian English fiction is engaged with the transformations of public spheres and how such transformations affect individuals and familial relationships, one such short story of family life that is also the story of an elite Muslim society is Hosain's "The First Party". Like her contemporaries such as Kamla Markandya, she narrates influence of transformations of public spheres on personal relationship which is due to colonial encounter.

In this short story she presents, the contrast between old and new values. This contrast is accompanied by individuals' struggle in the cultural encounter with the West. Women are specifically vulnerable because on the one hand they are brought up in a traditional environment, are protected and sheltered in purdahs, on the other hand they are expected to change and respond to the changed mindset of their husbands who have been abroad. This cultural encounter not only affects the social relationship or the external world but it also affects the personal relationships and marriage and disrupts domestic life. In this short story a woman is protected and brought up in purdah, to avoid male touches, when she is thrust into the Western style party which centres around dance and drink where purdah, female modesty has no significance. This party becomes a kind of traumatic experience for the woman. She feels a sense of anger when her husband goes on drinking and finds it against religious training. Hosain's view is that hybridity does not come into being when two cultures are segregated. When two cultures meet, the dominant aspects of cultures are not affected and remain unchanged. Like certain areas of personal relationships, one's attitude to physical touch and the body which are culturally internalized are unaffected. The writer also shows that women are expected either to change drastically or to live splited lives.

The impact of Western culture is also visible in "Time is Unredeemable." Here husband is different from the husband of "The First Party". He is not proud of his wife. He made his mind that there is no likelihood of continuing the relationship but his wife during his absence bridging the gap between her upbringing and her husband's lifestyle. She learns English and tries to be modern and goes through long bridal wait hoping to get rewarded by her husband's love but everything goes wrong. In the same way husband in "Gossamer Thread" being abroad for a longtime altered his outlook focuses on struggle for power and conflict of ideologies and process of individuation. He responds irritably to the queries of his wife and their relationships present two approaches of life – human and personal, one sensitive and the other personal. The woman in "Time is Unredeemable" is submissive and timid and The Woman in "Gossamer Thread" too but being sensitive she shows her human concern and ask Arun to stay at home.

The influence of transformation in public spheres and cultural encounter is not only limited to personal or familial relationship but its influence can be seen on faith of an individual as in

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“White Leopard”. This short story deals with religious conversion. It also deals with religious harmony and shows possibility of two religions living side by side. Shiv Prasad practices his own religion and join practices of other religion. Hosain shows that one can be like Shiv Prasad, or one can be like Mr. Bela Ram who becomes Mr. Bell for economic reasons. She is deeply rooted in her culture which is visible in her short stories and that has given authenticity to her short stories. But she has not thrashed the question of identity. Attia Hosain is aware of its challenges. For example, the transformed character of Bela Ram is despised both for his origins and duplicity. Shiv Prasad asks: “That Bell Sahib, how can he tell the difference between lies and truth when he lies even about his name and origin?” (187-88). She is suggesting that if a person loses contact with his roots, he becomes alienated as the progressive pseudo-intellectual in “Gossamer Thread”.

“Phoenix Fled” is the most intense story as it works on several metaphorical levels. Here is an archetypal grandmother, now great grandmother, relating to her great grandchildren. The old woman is identified with the existence of the village; she is both history and connecting link and through her past lives in. The writer has given her graphic details:

*She used her withered hands for feeble grasping, her crooked fingers for uneasy touching, her bent legs for unsteady shuffling, and not her eyes but time's familiarity for seeing and recognizing her changeless, circumscribed world .(9)*

Here grandmother's life has not changed even through the passage of time like the grandmother in R. K. Narayan's *A Grandmother's Tale* and the grandmother of *Kanthapura*. There are other grandmothers in fiction and short fiction, lovable, adorable and changing possessive and tenacious in their hold on power.

But the grandmother in this short story is older than them all and works through simultaneity with history. It is a gender narrative. Her world is static but outside her world everything has changed. Her world is alienated in the world of change. There are several intruders in her life, like the grown up children, visitors from the city, technology and space but these are tentative and momentary. The young great grand children are spontaneous in their responses to her. Children ask questions and she replies. It is like the question answer session between the world-grandmother and Red Riding Hood. Her responses are like trapping a victim:

*“Can you see us, Granny?”*

*“Of course, of course. An elephant has a tiny eyes, but it can pick a needle off the ground”.*

*“Can it, can it really? Tell us the story of the Elephant and the Needle, Granny.”*

*When she walked, her back a broken spring, bent to the ground, they laughed.*

*“What are you looking for, Granny?”*



“Looking at the ground into which I must go one day to look for treasure that is buried there”.

“Tell us the buried treasure, Granny. Tell us a story”. (11)

Attia Hosain has adopted the fairy tale model. Her narrative simultaneously distances itself from the present and pushes it into the realm of cultural narrative. There is an embedded structure within the larger framework of the neutral narrator. This technique is used as a contrastive structure, a world within a world, the expatriate's personal world, shared by other expatriates. The cultural code establishes an eternal private code of communication.

This short story functions at so many levels – historical, allegorical and mythical. The meeting of two cultures and cultural conflict, the reversal of a relationship with the symbols of power, the collapse of the code of community culture and neighbourhood, they all add up to the life of an exile which begins to reconstruct life once again from its ashes. Commenting upon Attia Hosain's short stories, Anita Desai highlights the presence of the past, the sense of honour and its counterpoint-dishonour- and the reconstruction of the feudal society. “Phoenix Fled” and some other stories reflect the writer's pride in ancestry and heredity as well as dismay and disenchantment at the frequency with which they are tarnished or shattered by some heedless action. “The Street of the Moon” and “The Daughter-in-law also reflect the same feudal society which represents the pride and ancestry of the author. Like her short stories, Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is also an important document of its contemporary time period, marked by changes in family, community and socio-political life. As a social historian she documents period of turmoil and transformation which is due to partition of India. Anita Desai pointed out that Hosain's text captures a society that was “not then in flux, it was static and it was feudal society.” Societies which are stable, they are generally in process of transformation, sometimes transformation is gradual, but sometimes transformation is at dramatic pace. Short stories of Hosain are narrating transformations, which are often in the minutest ways, provides an unending supply of grist to the mill of family drama.

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