



HUMANISTIC CONCERNS IN SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

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ABSTRACT

For last so many years, Humanism has been under attack from all types of theoretical anti-humanisms structural Marxists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists, radical feminists, etc. Philosophically, the attack may be difficult to counter, but the truth that literature deals with is not the abstract truth or non-truth of philosophy, but the lived experience of concrete though transient human beings. All great literature, therefore, is primarily and implicitly humanistic. However, some literary works are not only implicitly but also explicitly humanistic. The present essay deals with one such work-Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column, Hosain's only novel written in 1961.

Keywords: Humanism, Humanistic concerns anti-humanisms, structural Marxists, poststructuralists, radical feminists.

INTRODUCTION

Before one takes up the novel, let me define what one means by humanism, and its derivative, i.e., humanistic concerns. Humanism as defined by the New Oxford Dictionary is an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human nature rather than divine or supernatural matters. Humanist beliefs stress the potential value and goodness of human beings, emphasize common human needs, and seek solely rational ways of solving human problems. The rational, autonomous self is given precedence over the unintegrated

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and conditional nature of the individual "Humanism stresses the importance of the individual human personality and its power to learn from suffering and to rise above circumstances and in the process it takes cognizance of the paradox that lies at the root of life the individual is part and parcel of the cultural environment that shapes him, while the self is always in conflict with the culture that shapes him" (Panigraha 20). Its aim is to allow human values to guide one's course in life and affirm those "universal truths" that transcend dogmatism and intolerance, loss of self, alienation, atomization, and gradual parochialism. It acts as a counter to all types of authoritarianism, deterioration from the level of the human to the mechanical or the animal. Humanism, as Kurtz puts it, is life affirming and not life-denying it seeks to elicit the possibilities of life, and establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all and not only a few (quoted in Panigrahi 39) It grounds humanitarianism, providing foundations for a normative critique as well as explanation of social conditions. The adherents of some radical theories like Marxism and feminism are divided into the humanist and non-humanist varieties, implying that at least some Marxists and feminists are not averse to aspiring to a world based on the principles of humanism and humanistic values.

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) by Attia Hosain (1913-98) is a, more or less, autobiographical novel. As there are many similarities between Hosain's life and the narrator-protagonist Laila's story, Laila can be described as the alter ego of the author herself. The novel is a first person narration by Laila of her life from the age of fifteen to mid-thirties. Covering a socio-politically turbulent period of Indian history from 1932 to 1952, the novel is a sensitive and poignant tale of the growing up of the orphan Laila (a western educated teenager in a purdah observing traditional Muslim feudal family), of her initial confusions, and her gradual coming to terms with herself. In the novel, we get the first hand experience of a young girl growing up in a traditional Muslim family, struggling to make sense of the confusion in value systems engendered by what she experiences at home and what she becomes aware of through her contact with liberal education. The personal turmoil gets all the more intense because it is worked out against the background of the nationalist movement, the communal tensions, the growth in power of the Muslim League, and the Partition that forced every Muslim to make painful choices at both personal and social levels. However, Laila's love for Ameer, her inferior in money and status, helps her assert herself by making the crucial decision of going against the wishes of her family. The more significant choice, however, is made in the concluding part of the novel, when after Ameer's death, Laila visits her old home and after some reminiscing, decides to leave with Asad, her distant cousin for whom she always felt a close affinity in ideas and attitudes, and who was the first in the family to rebel, and choose his life and career. Meenakshi Mukherjee's charge about the last section being superfluous does not hold because the novel is not a love story; it is primarily about Laila's discovery and assertion of herself, and the realizing of her potential as well as responsibilities -both humanistic concerns.



Sunlight on a Broken Column has evoked varying responses from the critics. The novel has been seen as a study of the changes in Muslim society (M. L. Pandit), and the revaluation of values in a Muslim socio-cultural milieu (Jaya Baliga). Attention also has been focused on the theme of independence and partition. Anuradha Needham, for example, describes it as providing an alternative account of the independence struggle from the viewpoint of a Muslim woman. While Ali Khan points out the emphasis Hosain lays on non-violence and communal harmony. D. R. More relates it to the theme of intra-Muslim conflict during the partition. The purdah motif has been stressed by Sarla Palkar, who also argues that the novel projects not only an insider's view of the purdah practice and its crippling effects on a woman's psyche, but goes beyond the boundaries created by the considerations of gender, race, religion, class, and nation to deal with the theme of marginalization of people. Amina Amin calls the novel a study of the disintegration of the family. In another article she stresses the issue of identity, and describes the novel as being about the attainment of selfhood, a journey from restriction to freedom, both physical and emotional. She points out how the novel's structure is governed by a contrast between a life within the household, ordained, enclosed, warm and secure but restricted by demands of modesty, and a life outside, free but restricted by invisible barriers and therefore insecure and confusing. Novy Kapadia also talks about the quest for identity, order, and social change. She feels that the novel interweaves the personal and the political into the fabric of partition.

Most of these critics are right in identifying the major issues in the novel; the argument of the essay, however, is that what binds and underlies all these issues is primarily Hosain's concern with and assertion of humanistic values. I look at Sunlight on a Broken Column as a bildungsroman that traces how the protagonist, after some initial confusion, grows into accepting those values, which she seems to have cherished from the beginning, but was too timid to uphold in action. It is an assertion of the primal feeling of love and how it acts as a catalyst in turning thoughts into action. Coming long before Indian adherents of Western feminism had started claiming every woman novelist as a militant feminist, Attia Hosain seems to believe and practice what Shashi Deshpande argues for vociferously now, i.e. that men and women share more similarities than dissimilarities. In spite of this being one of the major novels about women in purdah, Hosain is not concerned only with women's oppression but with the more common humanistic values like the assertion of freedom and individuality. She castigates all types of authoritarianism, hypocrisy, and intolerance, irrespective of their source in the old traditional taluqdari system or the new superficial belief in Western values.

Laila, who at one place imagines herself to be a poetic rebel against false values, is quite critical of authoritarianism in the garb of paternalistic authority. When Baba Jan, the feudal patriarch is dying. Laila comments, "Surely he could not die, this powerful man who lived the lives of so many people for them, reducing them to fearing automatons" (31), and "was there



ever a time when in his presence anyone could talk and laugh without restraint"(32). Talking of her famous ancestors, Laila exclaims, "their ghosts had stood sentries over all action, speech and thoughts" (39). Baba Jan, like the class that he symbolizes, is shown in the last stage of his life, but Uncle Hamid, his son and the new patriarch is no different. Dressed immaculately in western clothes, preferring to speak English, having adopted the ordered, individual, Western way of living, having brought his wife out of purdah, and preferring to send his sons to England for study instead of giving them religious education, Uncle Hamid still turns out to be as much of an autocrat as his father was. After assuming headship of the family, Hamid makes decisions about the future of the other members. In spite of saying that he does not want to force his decision on the young, he loses his cool when Asad, a distant cousin of Laila, wants to choose his own career. Hamid taunts him about wanting to take decisions without considering those who have made him fit to do so. And Laila observes, "It might have been Baba Jan speaking when his wishes were thwarted by those he considered inferior or beholden to him I was frightened, recognizing the voice of authority. Why must power always be used to humiliate?" (111). Another time when Laila sees her uncle walking across the lawn. she feels that her laughter and her sense of freedom were congealed within her. Towards the end of the novel, when the taluqdari system is under threat of abolition, Hamid admits, 'I am a part of feudalism, and proud to be. I shall fight for it. It is my heritage. "(234).

And when Laila decides to marry Ameer, Hamid like has sisters. Laila's aunts, too has problems, accepting the marriage. Laila is more disturbed by his objections because of their inherent hypocrisy. She says, "How much easier, I thought, it was to face positive, prejudiced emotional cruelty than this farce of broad-minded reasonableness" (280). Like repressive authority, hypocrisy, whether in the society in general or in its members like Mohsin and Hamid in particular, is constantly under attack in the novel. Sincerity is a positive value while double-facedness is attacked right from the beginning. Commenting on Aunt Saira and her superficial modernity, Laila says:

Inside me however, a core of intolerance hardened against the hollowness of the ideas of progress and benevolence preached by my aunt and her companions. Rebellion began to feed upon my thoughts but found no object. (138)

And Laila's cousins talk of "the gossip of women whose minds remained smothered in the burqas they had outwardly discarded, and men who met women socially but mentally relegated them all to harems and zenanas" (207). In the first section itself, we are introduced to Uncle Mohsin who Laila dislikes a great deal more so after his sexual double standards are exposed by the servant girl Nandi who says to him, "A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?"(28) And the class barriers, too, are breached when Laila at the tender age of fifteen has the courage to tell her cousin Zahra that

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she is ashamed not at Nandi's brazenness, but at calling Mohsin her uncle. If in social parties, Laila wonders at the variety of expressions that could be conveyed by facial contortions, she also is filled with anger against the murderous hypocrisy and bigotry that allows women like Saliman, her maid, to suffer. As Sarla Palkar sees it, her maid, to suffer. As Sarla Palkar sees it

The author shows great compassion and understanding for the plight of the marginalized people who are deprived of their subjecthood and reduced to the role of the "other" -whether they are women in an orthodox Muslim household in Lucknow, or the poor tenants labouring under the cruel yoke of their feudal lords or the Indians struggling for their freedom from their imperial masters. (109)

Though Laila expects her education to make her a better human being, and believes that it was books which had taught her to think of human dignity, she is also aware that sometimes an uneducated person may be "closer to the people than us, sitting, standing, eating, thinking, and speaking like them, while we with our Bach and Beethoven, our Shakespeare and Eliot put 'people' into inverted commas" (258).

Animal imagery is often used to bring out the dehumanization of human beings and human relationships, particularly man woman relationship. Choosing a boy for a girl is like choosing a new horse for the carriage, except that horses "are chosen with more care than husbands these days." Laila from the beginning is different. She says to Zahra, "I won't be paired off like an animal How could you sit there listening to them talking as if you were a bit of furniture to be sold to the highest bidder" (29-30). And of the hawk-like Begum Sahiba who is on the look out for a bride for her son. Laila says she "hated her for looking at me as if examining goods in a shop window" (133).

Laila sees herself as inhabiting two worlds at once the traditional and the modern, the inner and the outer, the world of imagination and the real world. One of the ways of looking at the structure of the novel can be in terms of how she gradually reconciles the two. In contrast to the ideal world of imagination. she counterposes a real world based on power relations. domination, and control. She says, "I used to forget that the world was in reality very different... always I lived in two worlds, and I grew to resent the 'real' world" (128). And in Part II of the novel, she says "I felt I lived in two worlds; an observer in an outside world, and solitary in my own..."(124). But in the third part of the novel, she feels that she was drawn out, made to join in, and not stand aside as a spectator. She finally overcomes the utter confusion in her mind when in the end she makes the conscious decision of going with Asad. Earlier at the time of Baba Jan's impending death, Laila bemoans her uncertainty, "what was wrong with me inside? What was 'wrong' in itself, and what was 'right'? Who was to tell me?" (31). Initially this ethical confusion troubles Laila a great deal and she exclaims, "Why did

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you send me among those other girls who are not torn apart" (38). But by the end of the novel, she understands that confusion is a part of growing up, a spur to the discovery of the self.

Freedom, the cornerstone of humanism, is the most important concern of the novel. Throughout the novel, Laila and other positive characters like Asad debate and deliberate on the nature of freedom (for example, Romana's marriage is aptly described as being sentenced to a life of luxurious incarceration), and its relationship to action. Blending the personal with the political, something that distinguishes Hosain from the many women novelists that have come after her, Laila argues that freedom is something positive and not limited to a choice between the rulers. The parallel between Hamid's control on Laila and the British domination of India can be seen from this exchange:

"Have you no freedom of thought?" he asked with sarcasm

"I have no freedom of action."...

"You must know that freedom of action must be controlled until the mind reaches maturity and one's powers of judgement are fully developed."

"Mine are more likely to atrophy." I mumbled, my rebelliousness beginning to outstrip my fear.

He answered sharply, "I respect an independent mind, but while you are in my charge and until I consider you are fit, you will be guided by me. I will not allow any action of which I disapprove." (160-61)

And a little later, Asad tells Laila that the urge for action must come from within. It is, however, in her love for Ameer that Laila finds that her fears have been finally overthrown, and she decides to do what she thinks is right with her. She rebels not only in thought but in deed. While Abida, Laila's favourite aunt, always talks of duty to the others, Laila's Western education has prepared the ground for being true to oneself. Ameer and Asad act as catalysts for Laila's assertion of the self. They help her resolve her conflicts. Ameer tells Laila, "You have a duty to your self; your own life to live.... One has to make a choice, even if it is difficult" (206), and to Asad Laila says in the third part, "Some day when I am independent, I shall learn to live as I want to" (246). On her love for Ameer and how it has changed her, Laila says, "I have never done anything I really believed in, perhaps I believed in nothing enough. I have never been allowed to make decisions; they are always made for me" (265). The novel ends with Laila being shown as able to decide for herself, as living the way she wants to. It is Asad, and the thought of her daughter, that lead Laila out of self-pity, "through the negation of despair, into a recognition of struggle and positive acceptance" (317).

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Hosain's attitude to body, sex, and love is in touch with her emancipated views. Commenting on Zahra's looks after marriage. Laila finds a refreshing change, "No more loose, shapeless clothes, no more stooping and hunching of shoulders to control and deny one's body "(141). Hosain definitely seems to be ahead of her times and milieu when she describes the encounter between Laila and Abida in which the latter is accusing Laila of soiling the family's honour by going in for a love marriage. Laila says:

I knew then that understanding was impossible between us. She was part of a way of thinking I had rejected. I had been guilty of admitting loved, and love between man and woman was associated with sex, and sex was sin. (312)

And sex, though within marriage, of course, is glorified, in fact spiritualized.

Through the body's worship, the consummation of passio and the desire for each sense I was filled with a profound sense of mystic fulfillment. Through physical union came the knowledge of the oneness of separate beings. We being part of each other were part of the whole creation, knowing no beginning nor end, only the consciousness of being (314)

In fact Laila's relationship with her aunt Abida is depicted by Hosain as one between two women sharing a lot in common but going in different directions in practice. Both are fond of each other, but while Abida allows herself to be governed by cold reason and the traditional notion of honour to which she sacrifices herself. Laila moves beyond, asking questions of herself and her society, on her way to freedom and authentic choices. To conclude one might be tempted to say that Hosain emerges as a person with radical beliefs, a feminist who pierces patriarchal hegemony and hypocrisy, or a nascent postcolonialist who understands the ideology of the white man's burden, or a progressive writer who understands the nuances of class conflict, but these would all be unwarranted appropriations, because what Hosain seems to be looking for is not what separates one human being from the other but what can and should bind them together - their essential oneness. Her values are the simple humanist values of sincerity, authenticity, empathy, and tolerance, and an enabling environment that allows each one of us to realize our potential, in short to be free.

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