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ASHIANA – THE HOUSE OF PRIVACY ATTIAHOSAIN'S SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

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ABSTRACT: 'Ashiana' is the name of the house in the novel Sunlight on a Broken Column written by Attia Hosain. It is about the women who live in the four walls and the outer world is away for the woman because they remain in purdah. In Ashiana, there is a special place for women named as Zenana, where the girls have been brought up by Aunt Abida. She takes the whole responsibility of bringing up Laila, the orphan and protagonist of the novel. It is like a modern nuclear home. The traditional household gives women very limited access to the outside world because of Babbajan.

Key words: purdah, ashiana, zenana, nuclear

INTRODUCTION

The purdah brings out the values of duty and responsibility, but the new generation uses it for their selfish ends. 'Ashiana' is not just a house made of stones, but it consists of different women characters who lead a different way of life. In its four walls one could get the experience of a whole nation fighting its political and personal battles. Babbajan holds them to confine in their own quarters and survive and purdah to display in front of male members that fosters when characters of different temperaments are grouped under a common roof. Attia Hosain appointed some of the characters who effectively depicted some of the situations in their roles. The outer world is away for the woman because they remain in the purdah, but they could see everything by hiding themselves in purdah. Her experience is perhaps more intense and evocative than she cares to exhibit – so many lives snuffed out within the purdah.

Zenana, a place for women: Sunlight on a Broken Column is about feudal power. The household is generally divided according to the distribution of power. The architecture is designed to live with different spaces for men and women and it shows the house has two portions and a common corridor. The doors leading to the woman's quarters or the zenana are locked every night to be opened only the next day. The zenana included a courtyard which has an extended kitchen by the women during the time of festivities. Outside the house, there are quarters for the servants of the household.

The Zenana also implies purdah, which means curtain. Uma Parameshwaran says:

The word 'Purdah' has two related but distinct meanings. One is physical in the sense of women wearing a veil or burqa to cover their faces from public view; the other is more complex and attitudinal, in the sense of a social norm whereby women live in seclusion both from men and from the sphere of civic and public action. (Parameswaran Uma, "Purdah in Salman Rushdie Attia Hosain and Rama Mehta *"Margins of Erasure*, p.33)

Zenana is for only woman and only few men have an access to bring things which could not be trusted on their servants. As a result, young girls, Laila and Zahra had to depend often on their cousins. The women move out of the Zenana only in purdah. Even the cars had curtained windows and these women pay exclusive visits to the shops after they were closed for the general public. This reflects that the practice of purdah had an acceptance in the civil society as well. When Laila is sent to the school, an attendant has to wait for her for the entire day. This was ridiculed by her classmates for acting like a princess who cannot move on her own. Even the walks undertaken by these upper class women were accompanied by their servants, whose job was to warn any unintentional men from straying into their path. Hanna Papanek says "public spaces are often enclosed so that secluded women may move in them as if they were private." [Papanek Hanna, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter, *"Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, eds. Hanna Papanek and Gai Minault, Chanakya, New Delhi, 1982] 9.]

Laila says, "Zahra and I seldom had friends visiting as except when relations came to the city" (Hosain 63). The social life is limited, as the friends circle of these women does not grow beyond their relatives. Even among the relatives, the relationship is determined by the hierarchy of the member. Anita Desai says, "how the one unforgivable 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." [From the introduction, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, by Attia Hosain, Penguin, New Delhi, 1992, 1961.] For example, as Babajan is the patriarch of the family, restricts the relationship of the family members. He exercises "an unchallenged tyranny" (Attia Hosain 34) on all those under him, as his word is law for the entire family. He ruled over everyone "from his immediate household outwards to the family's tribal ramifications" (Hosain 34). In case of his illness, the members of the family should visit him. It represents a symbolic respect, "a ritual of audience" (Hosain 33). The girls, Laila and Zahra give their salutations on their visit and wait quietly so that he can acknowledge and permit for dismissal.

The Feudal Ways of living: Attia Hosain presented feudalism in Indian life through some characters. Feudalism bounded with tradition and culture in the hierarchy of ancestral home. The entire household is watched anxiously every movement by Old Babajan. Though confined to his bed, he commands and expects subservience not only from family members but from the group of dependents. Sunlight is about Zamindari system which was rich and feudal in nature. Babajan is the head of the large joint family – where uncles, aunts and cousins live together. Aunt Abida and Aunt Majida serve their father with the help of the servants. Aunt Abida is subservient to her father's command as she serves him uncomplainingly. Laila says that Aunt Abida often press his legs that resulted in stomach cramps in her. Laila recognizes that Babajan's voice even though it is of a sick old man is not robbed of its authority. When Babajan says "You may go" no one can challenge him.

The concept of home also undergoes a change. The house always represents a place where everyone had acted as an umbrella for people who had nowhere else to go. It is like a modern nuclear home. We learnt already that in Sunlight, the traditional household gives women very limited access to the outside world. Babajan's word is the word of law and at home he demands formal respect as Laila says that he was a "powerful man who lived the lives of so many people for them, reducing them to fearing automatons." Aunt Abida the subservient to him is very efficient in keeping her emotions out of the way as she evacuates the defaulting tenants. But before the death of Babajan, his son Hameed was called from abroad to look after the household and so she resolved from the decision making role so that his brother to continue and take the role of her father.

The death of Babajan marks the end of feudal ways of living for the family. His son Hameed does not like joint families as it need intricacies in manners and can involve a lack of privacy. Uncle Hameed's detests the "entanglements, unreasoning restrictions, unreasonable demands and lack of privacy" (Hosain 167) of a

joint family. Uncle Hameed's wife, aunt Saira's life "imposed another pattern in which friends and acquaintances had acquired more importance than relations"(Hosain167).The relatives are no longer welcomed in Uncle Hameed's house for any period of stay. The informality of the servants of the house was replaced by servants who are trained in running homes with an air of formality. The servant courtyard was changed, as the relationship among the servants was no so good.

Aunt Saira follows the western style .She moves out of Zenana and plays the part of a modern and sophisticated host. Her life becomes a reflection of her husband's, as he needs her to be an active part of women's group and other social organizations. Their sons, Kemal and Saleem are sent to England for their education and this marks the beginning of the complete dismantling of traditional structures.

CONCLUSION

The sense of duty is replaced by personal interest in everyday actions it signifies the end of the rule of the elder in the house. It has also signified the end of the life in the Zenana for women, as they begin to make their own decisions. Women were successful to move away from their families to have their own way of life although the decisions initiated by the women, resulted in their alienation. Some of them followed the rules laid by Babajan, some rejected and some exercised according to their own families. Indian behavior has two ruling concepts – izzat/honour and sharam/dishonor. Though Laila, Nandi, aunt Saira, Zahra and Sita are free from a life in the Zenana they remain trapped in the idea of what constitutes izzat and sharam.Of these, Laila and Nandi refuse to conform to these ideals and lose her place in the society. Such a society is inturn, intolerant of any challenge by those people to whom it assigns a lower status in its order.

It is an attempt to highlight the role of controlling and preventing the expression of self-will among women. The life of Laila and the liberation given by men in the family shows that she choose to discard the male ideals. In the novel, Uncle Hameed accepts the need for education for Laila but does not approve of her marriage. He asks his son Saleem to leave the house before having his choice in his marriage. The unquestioning acceptance of education and the liberation of women felt difficult and even the absence of the physical restrictions of Zenana.

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