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## **Patriarchal Hegemony as Revealed in *Sunlight on a Broken Column***

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**Abstract:** The novel is a keen portrayal of male chauvinistic society of pre and post-independence time. The novelist has sketched the contemporary society of her time as she perceives it. She has presented a very balanced approach to the sensitive issues of the time. She has been very honest and realistic in depiction of Taluqdar family. Though she herself belongs to a Taluqdar family, she did not try to hide the bitter truth of Taluqdar family. Her straightforward narration of different episodes in the novel makes it more alluring. She has very vividly described the female subjugation in patriarchal society. The novel also presents a society in transition, which aims to free itself from the shackles of traditions, customs, patriarchy etc. The narration is so thought provoking that it takes readers back to pre-independence time and readers are lost in a world that people have lived more than seven decades ago. The novel seems to address the issues, which are beyond the shackles of time and still relevant in the present time. Even today in 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are often victim of male dominance and could not free themselves in a patriarchal society. The present society still perceives how violence of all sorts whether physical, sexual or psychological is still perpetuated against the women by the men. Therefore, the novel has a universal theme and has not lost its relevance even in the present time.

**Keywords:** female subjugation, patriarchal domination, society in transition, violence against women.



Attia Hosaain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is an exemplification of Muslim patriarchal society of pre and post-independence time. The novel portrays a male dominated society where women hardly enjoyed any position. They are subjugated to men folk and are considered second to men. The most significant part of the novel lies in the manifestation of women's awareness regarding their rights and their changing roles in society. They continue to struggle to resist patriarchy and thus they shock readers with their extraordinary courage to stand against the patriarchal hegemony. That is why, it is often perceived as a society in transition. The novel criticizes patriarchal culture and male domination in the society. S.N. Kiran has highlighted how patriarchal figures, feudal system and their influences are glorified in the novel, "The ancestral house is symbolic of patriarchal hegemony and Feudal Aristocracy. Baba Jan, the maternal grandfather of the narrator is bed ridden; he is a Taluqdar and a commanding and formidable figure in the region"(4).

Laila, the protagonist of the novel, has taken a chief role against the patriarchal domination of women. Her exposure to western education made her question the superfluous influence of men on the lives of women. The pitiable condition of women has always been disturbing her. S.N. Kiran has rightly said, "These factors and practices had a strong impact on the moral development of the narrator. Gender and class prejudices always disturbed her. The sufferings of women in the patriarchal families made her unhappy"(7). Consequently, she had begun to question everything as an impact of liberal education on her. She began to question patriarchal domination, gender prejudices, moral values, misinterpretation of Islamic values as she states, "Everything in those days of my years ended with a question mark" (Hossain 175).

Though educated in the western schools, she still could not escape from the patriarchal influences. It hardly made a difference in the society whether the girls are educated or uneducated; their destiny is almost the same as Laila says, "I have no courage, Ameer. 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"(Hossain 265).



The clutches of patriarchal domination are not confined only to Muslim society but also to other communities. Sita, a representative of Hindu community also meets the same fate. She is also not allowed to make her own choice regarding marriage rather her parents decide the course of her life as she says, "I cannot ever marry for love and I do not want a masquerade. If it has to be this way, then my parents are the best judges of the man with the best qualifications for being a husband"(Hossain 216).

It is astonishing to see that even women have become instrumental in supporting and establishing patriarchal practices in the society. They hardly care for the feelings of young girls. Contrary to the teachings and norms of Islam, Muslim girls are not consulted for their marriages. The elder members of the family whether male or female dictate decisions regarding marriages as Aunt Abida says, "This child, Laila, must be of marriageable age. No doubt she will marry one of Hamid Mian's sons, and Zahra will marry the other"(Hossain 251).

As depicted in the novel, girls are programmed from the very beginning to fit into the patriarchal roles. They are not provided an environment to take decisions on their own. They are trained in the spirit of service to the male chauvinistic society. Aunt Abida says to Laila, "You must learn that your 'self' is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfill your duty" (Hossain 252). Therefore, the role of women is quite arbitrary in the society. The tradition of male slavery continues from generation to generation. Laila states, "I suffered more because of Aunt Abida's acceptance of her life –and her silence" (Hossain 252). It is a pity to see that elder women never raised a voice against the male dominance. Laila, who represents Attia in the novel, is a pioneer of women independence. It is for the first time that women like Laila have initiated to contemplate for their own rights. It was a time of socio-political transformation in the Muslim society. A direct contact with the west in the colonial time had ushered into a sort of renaissance in the Muslim society. Though Islam had been advocating freedom for women for a long time, its teachings could never be institutionalized in the society. Western education and ideals prompted women for



their rights, which Islam had already safeguarded for them. Because of the unexpected change in the Indian Muslim society, several critics have termed it as a society in transition. Asha has rightly marked, "Caught in the vortex of socio-political transition, the Muslim woman, living in Hyderabad, Lucknow or Punjab, experiences a cultural dislocation, exposed as she is to antithetical influences"(14).

Laila, a distressed and considerate child, is raised by her orthodox aunts and uncles who are against female education and keep on reminding her feminine duties. The male chauvinistic society is afraid of modern education of women, as they perceive it as a rebellion against the patriarchal system. Laila is a revolutionary figure as she raises her voice against the system. She questions her family's rules and society's customs and paves the way of a new dawn to the female world as depicted in the novel. Hakim Bua's discouragement for female education is quite symbolic when she insists, "Child, put away that book. Those insect letters will eat away your eyes"(Hossain 17). Laila's visionary response to Hakim Bua is quite symbolic of revolution of female education as she responds, "Bua, Bua," I said, hugging her. "These books will be garlands of gold round my neck" (Hossain 17).

Contrary to the female education scenario, there has been no restriction on the boys' education. It is always with the women that they have been subject to different sanctions. She is always critical about this gender discrimination. Another example to be cited is Zahra's marriage. Laila, here, exposes the bitter truth of feudal and patriarchal society, which has captivated women and reduced their existence to oblivion. She has portrayed Mohsin as a patriarchal figure, who sternly opposes Zahra's presence while discussing her marriage prospects, "Is the girl to pass judgement on her elders? Doubt their capability to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?"(Hossain 20).

The novel also exposes some implicit barriers for the women in the name of caste and creed while choosing their husband. Therefore, the novel demonstrates how feudal system has given birth to caste system. The feudal lords are glorified because they have wealth, influence and power. Their women are supposed to marry the same status men. Thus, class-



consciousness is also a big fascination of the novel. Ram S. Kandhare has rightly expressed his views:

Women are victims of the patriarchal system even within the domestic space that is supposed to be their sole domain. The novel re-emphasizes that a woman can exercise her will and choice in a quest for her selfhood, as exemplified in the characters of Nandi and Laila. Zainab is fond of Asad but she could not think of marrying him because he is not his equal in blood. (37-38)

Laila's maturity regarding the patriarchal hegemony is quite evident as she considers even modern and western education inspired by patriarchal influences. Aunt Saira presents her views regarding female education, "I believe our daughters will find it easier, having the benefit of education. That is why I believe in education for women- to prepare them for service" (Hossain 131).

She embraces the patriarchal education system to prepare the women to fit in the new patriarchal roles. Women are never free from patriarchal influences despite the implementation of modern education and mannerisms. For example, Laila considers Zahra's appearance, speech and mannerisms a hypocrisy as she succumbs to her husband's wishes but inwardly she adheres to conservative values. Laila implicitly terms her marriage to be a shift from one patriarchal order to another:

I knew she had not changed within herself. She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful purdah girl... She was all her husband wishes her to be as the wife of an ambitious Indian Civil Service officer. (Hossain 140)

Attia exposes the futility and injustice of Taluqdar family that perpetuates violence against the socially backward women. One example of social inequality and female exploitation is a





discourse between Uncle Mohsin and the servant girl Nandi for immortality as he says, "This slut of a girl is a liar, a wanton"(Hossain 28). Nandi retorts, "A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?" (Hossain 28). For her outbreak, Nandi is, "hit across her shoulders" with a stick, and Laila impulsively goes to her friend's help. Blinded by tears she runs to her screaming, "I hate you, I hate you" (Hossain 28).

Nandi grows up as an individual from an illiterate lower caste background and shows her suitability for existence in the most hostile of situations. She is never given freedom of choice. She is always subjugated to male world. Women are not only sexual slaves of men, they suffer for making their personal choices. Laila is never accepted in her family because of marrying a man of her own choice. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* illustrates that women's subjugation is a universal phenomenon irrespective of faith, caste, creed and financial positions.

Laila's western education and intellectual development have a direct clash with patriarchal functioning at Ashiana. She cannot envision the world of her dreams in a strictly male dominated world that makes her secluded with her own western and modern values as she says, "I felt I lived in two worlds; an observer; in an outside world, and solitary in my own"(Hossain 124). Her own world did not visualize only a society free of patriarchal influences but also the value system that she adopts during the years of her education and bringing up. *Jamal and Sandhya* have rightly marked:

Laila's fight is not just with the external elements of patriarchy but is also against the value systems she internalizes in the process of growing up. She is the only lady given the benefit of formal education unlike the other women in the household. Laila's exposure to learning changes her attitude and began to analyze and make her own decisions and believes to be correct for each incident that happens. (71)



Despite all moral and social sanctions, women actively resisted the patriarchal influences as depicted in the novel. They are shown to be struggling for gender equality. Nandini Kumari has rightly stated:

Women's conscious struggle is to resist patriarchy, which subordinates the female to the male, to treat the female as inferior to the male and this power is exerted, directly or indirectly, in civil and domestic life to constrain women. (121)

Women are victims of the patriarchal system even within the domestic space that is supposed to be their only territory. The novel re-emphasizes that a woman can exercise her will and choice in a quest for her selfhood, as demonstrated in the characters of Nandi and Laila. Nandini Kumari has rightly asserted:

Laila's intellectual development is accentuated through the observation of the patriarchal functioning at Ashiana. Though Laila is being educated to fit into the but she is bound by old traditions and culture. (126)

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