

# Idea of Home and Estrangement in Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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**Abstract:** This paper will aim to study the notions of home for different female subjects of mid-twentieth century India through Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). *Sunlight on a Broken Column* portrays a sense of displacement and captures the uncertainty that marked the lives of *talukdar*<sup>1</sup> families during the Partition. The paper will attempt to study the idea of belonging for women and aim to chart out the implications of an external imposition which results in shaping these ideas. It would also aim to highlight the ways in which these ideas are depicted in literary representations.

The novel also sheds light on another aspect of home through minor characters like Laila's ex-governess, Mrs. Martin, and her friend, Joan. Mrs. Martin, an Anglo-Indian, who has visited England merely once, considers it to be her home. On the other hand, Joan thinks of neither England, nor India, as home. The paper would trace the meaning of home and draw patterns of changes which come with the acquiring of identities and with subsequent generations. It will dwell into the question of Home for the Coloniser and argue that for the Coloniser, Home can never be the colony.

**Keywords:** Attia Hosain, Home, Partition, Belonging, Nation, Muslims, Anglo-Indians, Women

## Introduction

'Ila has no right to live there [in England] she [my grandmother] said hoarsely. She doesn't belong there. It took those people time to build that country; hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed. Everyone who lives there has earned the right to be there with blood: with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. . . . War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu or Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to achieve for India, don't you see?'

- Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (1988)

Homi K. Bhabha argues that the myths of origin get lost with time and what emerges is a highly romanticised and metaphorical idea of a nation created with the advent of modernity.<sup>2</sup> If one looks at the contemporary political rhetoric around the ideas of 'Indian-ness', they would realise that the version of nationalism of the 1940s, which was based on a drive to oust the colonisers, is very different from the one we come across today. The myths of origin of the *Sone ki Chidiya*, what India was popularly believed to be, has been lost somewhere around debates of who the original inhabitants of this land were.

Through her novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), such an idea is what Attia Hosain provides the literary world with. Another dimension, which stands apart from that of Hosain to look at the question of nationalism, is the one which has been hegemonized by works like *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie.<sup>3</sup> By distinguishing herself from the male canon, not only does Hosain portray the dwindling lives of *talukdar* families in the backdrop of the Partition, she also makes one question the idea of an imagined territory as a nation through the eyes of all its female characters. But even in works like these, which portray the world through the eyes of its female

characters who are oftentimes associated with the nation through their relationships with men (“Everyone who lives there has earned the right to be there with blood: with their *brother's* blood and their *father's* blood and their *son's* blood”), some identities are still left unrepresented. These are also the identities this paper would aim to address with the acknowledgement that the political, ideological, and cultural stakes of seeing the nation this way, as women, are multiple. Not only do women find themselves and their bodies to be analogous to the nation, but these bodies then become battlegrounds to fight for the nation. How do they juggle between this dichotomy of belonging to a land through relationships with men while also *being* that land?

### Finding Home in a Fragmented House

Partha Chatterjee claims that the Indian nationalist agenda was to purify the nation of any outside elements, western influence, and corruption. It was meant to restore the true fabric of India as it had been in the days of Antiquity.<sup>4</sup> This Renaissance-esque landscape and ambition, which was instigated not by an internal instinct, but by the enslavement of a power unknown and unmatched, resulted in the ostracisation of any foreign origin or blood. This is precisely the reason why Sikhs and Buddhists, then and now, get accommodated within the grand idea of the *Hindu Rashtra*, but the Christians and the Muslims do not. The former religions have originated from the subcontinent, unlike the latter ones, which are believed to have come with invaders who have made the social fabric of the subcontinent impure.

The novel is set during the years leading to the freedom struggle and the Partition of India, and West and East Pakistan. The idea of belonging for women, also dealt with by Hosain, is very complex because women are subjects born in homes not their own. Women in the subcontinent are taught from childhood to imagine their husband's residence as their 'legitimate' home. Around the time Hosain was writing, women's question in India was bordered around the concept of 'reform', not rights.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Priyamvada Gopal, this novel is a “domestic fiction” that can become “the vehicle for tales of life” for its female characters.<sup>6</sup> The novel talks at length about the experiences of two sisters who occupy the same domestic space but have entirely different lives. This can be credited to their education and social circles, which led to involvement/disinvolvement in politics (the Indian Freedom Movement). Nevertheless, these experiences make their domesticity distinguishable, they make way for these sisters to lead their own lives based on the decisions which were taken for them.

Laila constantly reminds the reader that her grandfather's (Baba Jan) bungalow, *Ashiana*, is the house she was brought to after her parents passed away. This house is the symbol of the power of the *talugdars*, their legacy, and the living testimony of their wealth. This house would remain even after the death of Baba Jan, even after the death of Uncle Hamid, and the division of the family due to the Partition. The house only becomes Laila's *own* when she visits it for the last time, when they have lost everything. It is at this moment that Laila wishes to revive the past, the past which had seemed burdensome under the weight of patriarchal institutions and nationalistic dilemma. It is because of that nostalgia that the willingness to go back to the time when this house was her 'home' is felt. It is then that she realises how much the house has grown with her and all that it has seen. The house, through the years, along with Laila, witnesses a complete change in its inhabitants, especially after Uncle Hamid inherits it. It is interesting to note how this house becomes a home in an instant for Laila's aunt (Hamid's wife), who had lived all her life somewhere else, but not for Laila, who spent her entire life in it. This paper argues that similar to how a nation belongs to a woman through her relationships with men, so does a house. This is because the potential marital home which a woman is made to strive for since childhood, is not concrete. The idea of Home then takes the shape of the abstract, similar to that of the boundaries of a nation. It becomes more of an imagined territory than a four-walled defined structure. Moreover, in *Sunlight*, this idea is further problematised through an external imposition, essentially from the State (the patriarchal father figure), which results in altering

these ideas for a woman and making her nostalgic for a home she never had. But it would certainly be a narrow reading to see Laila's estrangement from the house and her community only as a result of her gender, therefore, the paper also highlights the struggles that this intersection of identities is marked with. At different instances in the novel, her religious (minority) identity, her class (which sympathised with the British and supported them), and her politics also play a role to designate her position. Fourteen years later, by the end of the novel, Laila's perspective is foregrounded in the house highlighting the impact of the Partition and segregation of it. Sarla Parker writes, 'One cannot neatly compartmentalise the personal history of Laila from the social or national history – what makes *Sunlight on a Broken Column* a three-dimensional novel is the manner in which the personal, social, and national issues keep interacting and reflecting on one another.'<sup>7</sup>

Laila, and her cousin Zahra, are represented as two poles of elite Muslim womanhood. Where on the one hand, the same house for Laila changes after she starts living in it with her uncle's family, Zahra's departure and investment in being the ideal wife for her husband makes the reader believe that the house of her childhood had been buried by her, with her childhood.

In her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Urvashi Butalia talks at length about her maternal home in Pakistan which her mother had to leave during the Partition. Ranamama's House,<sup>8</sup> back in the suburbs of Lahore, is a reminder of a broken family. Butalia, when she visited that house in 1987 after years of her mother and her aunts leaving it, discovered that her uncle had converted to Islam after the Partition in order to survive in that Muslim-majority neighbourhood. His wife and children were all followers of Islam and a house which once echoed the verses of Gita,<sup>9</sup> then did the Quran.<sup>10</sup> That house stood for hatred that the Muslim-born children of Rana had towards their father who was a convert. It stood for a nostalgic past that one could never get back. It was a reminder of the Partition and the separation that came with it.

Contrary to this house, is the Vij Bhawan, Aanchal Malhotra's maternal ancestral home of which she talks at length in her work.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Ranamama's house, this house (akin to the house of Laila's grandfather), stands for tradition. It has housed generations of the Vij family and reflected love and solidarity. She writes, 'The *ghara* and the *gaz* weren't the only things that had survived over the years. It was also the seemingly antiquated principle of a joint family structure, of which Vij Bhawan had become an embodiment and which it somehow managed to keep alive all these years. [...] As the sun began to set and we retreated into the dark rooms, the *gaz* and the *ghara* in hand, I thought of my *nana's* words: "We lived together then – in Lahore, in Amritsar, through the Partition in Delhi – and we live together even today." This was the legacy of Vij Bhawan, I decided, this was what had withstood time and dark events. This was what had *remained* despite the separation.'

Houses, therefore, have always been perceived or remembered as embodiments of the lives lived in them. Unlike the male domain of the outside, the domestic sphere of women, with its politics and *pardah*,<sup>12</sup> becomes the site of feminine voice and representation. This is where the personal becomes the political. This feminine sphere within a home is where stories and traditions are passed on from one generation to the next, this where memories are made and shared, cultures are preserved. This sphere has a very personal relationship to the nation because its boundaries aren't supposed to be tread. This feminine sphere, similar to the nation, labels women who defy its boundaries as the outsiders.

It can be argued that the genre chosen by Hosain for her novel, *bildungsroman*, becomes the reason for Laila to question her belonging within the folds of her identity. She is unlike all the women she lives with because of her English education. She is treated differently as well, within and outside the house, for instance, when Uncle Mohsin talks of getting Zahra married off, he says, 'I am sure Zahra will do as her elders decide. She has not had the benefit of a mem-sahib's education; though I am glad to see certain abhorrent signs of it have been removed, and your young mem-sahib [Laila] has given up walking around dressed like a native Christian.' (23) And amidst the constant reprimands, she feels claustrophobic within the confines of the *zenana*<sup>13</sup> of her huge ancestral home. Her western education in a house rooted in orthodox Islamic culture, coupled with the loss of her parents, renders her root-less and makes her rebel in her own ways in attempts to escape the confines of her house. She

asks 'Why did you not bring me up like Zahra? Why did you send me among those other girls who are not torn apart?' (38) In her attempts to root herself to her traditions, Laila's search for Home becomes a futile one because this idea has no defined boundaries, analogous to that of a nation. For most of her life, she looks for Home in her ancestral house or the house of her husband after marriage. The dilemma for Laila, and other women like her, is based on the idea of a defined territory.

This paper, through the arguments above, has tried to establish similarities between home and nation and the ways in which these similarities lead to the formation of a relationship between the two. Since the paper has tried to establish that home and nation are abstract ideas, this relationship between them, then, also becomes abstract. Here, the argument of Homi Bhabha stands true; with modernity, what emerges is a highly romanticized idea of a nation. Similarly, when women are made to believe in a home that would-be theirs through their relationship with their husbands, a highly romanticized idea of an abstract home is created. Thus, for women, a home can be imagined through a nation (Zahra) and a nation through a home (Laila) because they don't belong to either on their own.

### Finding Home in a Fragmented Nation

*Viceroy's House*,<sup>14</sup> a 2017 movie directed by Gurinder Chadha, is about Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, and his task of dissolving British rule. One of the concluding scenes in the movie, after Partition has been declared, is the distribution of objects of national importance. It is a clip where one can see people who used to live together since forever fighting over silver spoons and trumpets. The part in the film where two librarians in the Viceroy House are having an argument and one says to the other that if she keeps the copy of *Jane Eyre* for India, *Wuthering Heights* would go to Pakistan, is symbolic of a greater divide. The obvious inference is that this quarrel is over the inheritance of British literary canon at a time when the people of a fragmented subcontinent are fighting to oust them. But the scene becomes integral also because analogous to the people of India and Pakistan, who had always lived together as brethren but are drawing borders between themselves, these two women are seen dividing the two Brontë sisters.

This paper would chart out similar divisions that arose within women of different ancestries (Muslim and Anglo-Indian) and how the notion of home and belonging underwent a drastic change for them in the aftermath of the Partition of 1947.

#### *Muslim women*

'We can bear the pain only by possessing something that belongs to that instant.'

- Orhan Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence* (2008)<sup>15</sup>

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said talks at length about the challenges that 'Third World' nations faced because of the rising nationalistic fervour, especially ethnically marginalised and minority groups. He writes, 'It is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order... And in so far as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.'<sup>16</sup>

Said suggests that the struggle to migrate and find new homes within and outside the peripheries of newly emerging states was not homogeneous. With the onslaught of cultural imperialism, these migrations resulted in keeping alive the divide between communities; racial, religious, and gendered. The search for a new home came with shedding of some identities and adapting to new ones. For the Muslims in India and the Hindus in both East and West Pakistan, the decision to leave or stay

depended on such identities. The situation becomes more nuanced when we talk of female subjects because their decision of calling a place Home mostly depends on their male counterparts (father/husband/son). They are relegated out of the inner courtyards of their houses and made to move and to flee, thus, bringing outside the inside. For instance, Zahra leaves for Pakistan with her husband and in doing so, she comes across as opportunistic; the daughter who forgot her mother and motherland. On the other hand, women like Laila, who choose to remain in India, are portrayed as defiers — neither of their motherland nor of their religion. Is there no Home for women then? Or does the choice to call a place home not rest with them? Through another reading, Zahra can be seen as a good wife who is supporting her husband in his decision but then, leaving her mother behind can be seen as dereliction of duty. In either of the cases, her identity is based on her relationships with others. Laila, who chooses Ameer's home by going against the wishes of her family, and later India, by going against the dictates of her religion, is the big defier. Defiance, in the contexts of the nation, nationalism, and the Partition, indicates not only going against the dictates of the family structure or religion, but also the assumed agency of a woman which leads her to exercise a choice that never really lay with her. Laila becomes the defier of a land to which she never belonged. How do women reconcile with such a paradox? How do they imagine their bodies to be symbolic of lands which have to be protected, those same lands where they do not have citizenship of?

Here, this paper would argue that the instinct to defy lies at the heart of the educated Laila who has always been criticised for not having an opinion of her own. The selective freedom that she has, owing to her western education, operates within nationalistic questions of belonging through native languages and cultures. It is this education, which was supposedly designed to control her and the likes of her, that has given her the weapon to dream and to be free. She defies three of the most important patriarchal institutions in her bid to find and establish a home – family, religion, and the State.

For most of the diasporic or displaced subjects, 'home' is, essentially, a space of conflict. They fail to place themselves within any boundary and therefore, belong nowhere, like Manto's Toba Tek Singh.<sup>17</sup> They become outsiders in the land they have occupied and also in the one they have evacuated. For most Partition survivors, rehabilitation could never result in belonging. There are countless narratives of survivors who talk about their lives on the other side and how different it would have been had the Partition not happened. This forced displacement, which resulted in so many people crossing the border, has rendered an entire generation homeless.

#### *Anglo-Indian women*

In the newly independent nations, India and Pakistan, after the mass migration of millions of people across both sides of the border and the subsequent deaths, rapes, loots, and abductions, it had become a matter of privilege for those Hindus and Muslims who finally found a place to *belong*. But when we talk of the displacement caused by the Partition, we often forget to talk about the Christians (missionaries, Anglo-Indians, converts, etc.), the population which was rendered doubly-displaced overnight. It had become extremely difficult for these people to sustain themselves while carrying with them a faith that had come from continents afar in this newly built but fragmented subcontinent.

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams  
 In death's dream kingdom  
 These do not appear;  
 There, the eyes are  
 Sunlight on a broken column  
 There, is a tree swinging  
 And voices are  
 In the wind's singing  
 More distant and more solemn  
 Than a fading star.'

– T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men' (1925)<sup>18</sup>



Analogous to Eliot's depiction of a state between life and death, a sort of paralysis, on the border, was the condition of Anglo-Indians during the Partition of 1947. The novel, though partially, sheds light on other (less conventional) aspects of home during the Partition, through minor female characters like Laila's ex-governess, Mrs. Martin, and her friend, Joan. Mrs. Martin, an Anglo-Indian, who has visited England only once with her late husband, is everything British. She speaks the Queen's English with the British accent, dresses and eats English, and considers England to be her Home. Another such character who is given a little space in a couple of pages in the book is Laila's Anglo-Indian friend at the University of Lucknow; Joan. The question that arises then is, how can Home, a place of rootedness, be only once or never visited? Does this have to do with the fact that 'home' for the Coloniser can never be the colony?

Laila's Aunt Abida asks Mrs. Martin, when Mrs. Martin remarks on how she wishes to be buried in England, 'But, mem-sahib, to whom will you return? You said you had no one of your own alive, and when you went there your brother's wife, God forbid, made you pay to stay with her, and for your food.' (48)

For Mrs. Martin, the distinction between herself and the colonised has to be far greater than between herself and the English back in England. She is nostalgic for a world she has hardly known, reminisces the history of a place which might never accept her completely. This nostalgia might be the result of a constant battle with oneself to stand apart from the natives. This differentiation, for her, shouldn't only be limited to skin colour, but should also include some inherent values which make one a citizen of a nation. More than anything, these differences should be duly noted at all times to reiterate the inherent distinction between herself and the Indians. Mrs. Martin's constant efforts to draw the line is captured by Hosain in a number of her dialogues like, '... dear Lily's [Laila] father, well, he was just like one of us' (48), or 'I love your country, but my bones must rest in my own land.' (49)

Despite having to pay for her stay and food by her relatives in a country she was visiting for the first time, Mrs. Martin wishes to be buried there. This might be because in death she visualises an opportunity to be united with her land, the superior land inhabited by the superior race, something she couldn't do while she was alive. In death, especially in funeral ceremonies and burials, the dead is commemorated back into the society. Mrs. Martin wishes to seek her place, after death, in a world which never offered her a stay while she was alive. The idea of commemoration and assimilation of the dead into the congregation of the living through ceremonies like funerals and burials is touched upon by Thomas Gray in 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) and then later by Philip Larkin as well.

'Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built  
This special shell?'

- Philip Larkin, 'Church Going' (1955)

Another character providing a significant insight into the lives of Anglo-Indians is Laila's friend at the University of Lucknow, Joan. 'My grandfather came here from England; we still talk of England as home, we have more in common with the English than with Indians, but we still remain just Anglo-Indians. It makes one feel like those riders who canter round the ring of a circus, balanced on two horses, except that those horses are trained to keep in step, and their riders are respected.' (127) Joan neither considers herself to be Indian, nor British. Her identity is an emblemization of the conflict that comes with the anxiety of not belonging. Unlike Mrs. Martin, Joan represents the generation which is growing up and becoming politically aware of the increasing nationalism within the Indians. She is of the generation which is hearing talks of a Muslim nation deemed to be carved out of the subcontinent. She is well aware that in this mixture of identities which are hunting for land and people to call their own, someone with her name, colour, and blood, will have no place.

Laila describes her as someone who ‘did not hate Indians as we hated the British; she merely considered them a race apart. Yet she did not identify herself with the English.’ (127) It can be argued that she did not have as severe a reason to hate Indians as Indians had to hate the British, but the fact that she did not consider herself to be English can be attributed to her university education, her ideas of a nation which were somewhat influenced by her native friends, and the lack of a place she could call Home. She is that subject of the diaspora who knows that she will not be able to belong in England even though her ancestral roots lie there. It is a time when ancestral roots do not matter, when neither culture nor language nor skin colour is enough, when a nation is made by the blood of those who are willing to bleed for it.

### Conclusion

The ‘history’ of Partition’s continuous focus has solely been on Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Just like the Dalits, others who have been made invisible, are the Christians. Even though their lives were equally affected because of the violence, they are never talked about when we talk about Partition. Due to the close links between Christianity and Islam, both emerging as Abrahamic religions, Christians are often imagined in the popular Hindu imagination as being one with the Muslims,<sup>19</sup> which is one of the reasons as to why the narratives of Partition render them silent. This could have also been because they were seen as being within close ties with the colonisers who brought in the missionaries and convinced a lot of people to convert. Unfortunately, not much material survives, apart from some findings by Partition scholars like Butalia, to provide a glimpse into the lives of people from this minority community because of historical neglect.

This paper would make a final argument trying to tie the notions of Home and Nation for colonists who stayed and the ones who left. ‘Home’ can be found nowhere for them, since they would always be a race apart *here* and a race below *there*. In certain ways, this is similar to Muslim women like Laila who decided to stay back in India because like Joan or Mrs. Martin, they would never be completely accepted. Does this mean that the coloniser and the colonised can empathise with each other? In most cases, unfortunately, not. Empathy would come from a place of understanding but when two people(s) do not consider themselves to be similar, there is no space for any sort of sisterhood. Therefore, finding a Home in an individual would also not be possible in the aftermath of the 1947 devastation. Partition, then, ceases to mean simply a bifurcation. It means alienation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A landowning class of Muslims.

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>3</sup> Needham, Anuradha Digwaney “Multiple Forms of (National) Belonging: Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39 no. 1, 1993, pp. 93-111.

<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee, Partha. “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India.” *American Ethnologist* 16.4 (1989): pp. 622-33.

<sup>5</sup> Kazmi, Zehra. “Misfit of Modernity: The Anxiety of Belonging in Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*” *Harf: A Journal of South Asian Studies*. pp. 101-116.

<sup>6</sup> Gopal, Priyamvada. *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration*.

- <sup>7</sup> Palkar, Sarla. "Beyond Purdah: *Sunlight on a Broken Column*." *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. Eds. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin. pp. 106-18.
- <sup>8</sup> Butalia, Urvashi. "Blood" *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*.
- <sup>9</sup> A holy book of the Hindus.
- <sup>10</sup> A holy book of the Muslims.
- <sup>11</sup> Malhotra, Aanchal: *Remnants of a Separation*.
- <sup>12</sup> Curtain.
- <sup>13</sup> The part of the house which is segregated from the front for the seclusion of women.
- <sup>14</sup> *Viceroy's House*: British-Indian historical drama film, directed by Gurinder Chadha, 2017.
- <sup>15</sup> Pamuk, Orhan trans. Maureen Freely, *The Museum of Innocence*.
- <sup>16</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.
- <sup>17</sup> Manto, Saadat H. "Toba Tek Singh," In *Phundne*, edited by Saadat Manto, 7-20.
- <sup>18</sup> Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 'The Hollow Men' *Poems: 1909-1925*.
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