



(Re)Constructing the Nation in Sunlight on a Broken Column: Hossain's Perspective on the Partition of the Subcontinent

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ABSTRACT

Gellner (1983) defines a nation as a myth whereas nationalism is an ideology through which people (re)invent traditions and culture to construct a nation. Nationalism revives extinct languages and reimagines extinct customs. To strengthen their nation's discourse, South Asian female writers have contributed significantly to the invention of traditions and the reconstruction of their lost culture. By addressing her nation's history and culture in her work, Hosain has also bolstered her national discourse. It is commonly known that history is typically presented through the eyes of men. Even though women have contributed substantially to the national process, their opinions are not included in history books. Since men write history, history favors men by making them the main heroes. This study aims to provide a female viewpoint on the history of the partition of the subcontinent. Thus, the researcher has selected Attia Hossain's novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, to view her perspective on the nation and the partition of India. The concept of a nation is complex to comprehend. Different theorists have different definitions of the nation. Renan (1883), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), and Anderson's (1991) theories related to the nation have been used to construct a theoretical framework for this research. This study investigates factors contributing to the construction of a nation and nation-state by referencing the partition of the sub-continent and the formation of two nation-states, Pakistan and India.

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1. Introduction

History is generally considered to be the documentation of past events; however, it is recognized that historical documents are not always completely accurate in their portrayal of these events. Historically, men have primarily written narratives of historical events, often portraying women as passive participants. Lerner (2012) argues that history books lack a comprehensive portrayal of society's history due to their emphasis on male experiences, which results in men being shown as the central figures. As a result, women's active role and involvement in socio-political events are often disregarded. This study aims to reassess the historical events of the partition of the Indian subcontinent by adopting a female viewpoint, which will be achieved through an analysis of Attia Hosain's novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1992). The work presents a narrative focused on women, particularly via the character of Laila, that explores the division and the creation of two separate nation-states. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is mainly set in pre-partition India during the 1930s. The story centres around Laila, a teenager from a wealthy and esteemed Muslim family who is now orphaned. She lives in her grandfather, Baba Jan's residence, being looked after by her aunts, Abida and Majida, along with her cousin Zahra. Baba Jan, a prominent and esteemed character, is initially portrayed as elderly and infirm in the story, and his demise brings about substantial transformations in Laila's life.

Hosain portrays a secular society by introducing people such as Baba Jan and his acquaintances—Mr. Freeman, Thakur Balbir Singh, and the Raja of Ameerpur. Laila's residence, Ashiana, is a microcosm of this heterogeneous community, showcasing individuals from different social, religious, and cultural origins. Laila's family, despite being Muslim, have servants and acquaintances from other religious and cultural backgrounds, demonstrating an early state of harmonious cohabitation in India. Nevertheless, the escalating religious and cultural intolerance ultimately resulted in the partition of their territory into two separate states. The work also explores the consequences of partition on Laila's family. Her cousin Saleem moves to Pakistan, while his brother Kemal stays in India, resulting in a division within the family. Aunt Saira undergoes the anguish resulting from the separation from her children. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* stands out among previous novels on partition because of its unbiased, empathetic depiction of the suffering caused by the partition. It advocates for abandoning hatred and violence while advocating for love and nonviolence as alternative approaches. This study highlights the substantial impact of Hosain in defining and strengthening the national discourse, by analyzing the female viewpoint and opposing the traditional male-focused approach to history.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, male viewpoints have dominated historical accounts of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, marginalizing or neglecting the significant contributions and experiences of women. The historiography which focuses primarily on men, fails to offer a thorough picture of the impact of the partition on women. History's inadequate representation of women's voices results in an imperfect depiction of the socio-political processes and cultural developments that occurred during the partition of the subcontinent.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To reevaluate the incidents surrounding the partition of the Indian subcontinent through the female perspective.
2. To examine how Hossain's novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* contributes to national discourse.
3. To challenge the conventional male-centric approach to history, by emphasizing the perspectives and experiences of women depicted in Hossain's novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

1.3. Research Questions

1. How does Attia Hosain contribute through her novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* to the construction of the nation and national discourse?
2. What feminine perspective does Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* offer on the history of the partition of the Indian subcontinent?

2. Literature Review

Previous research on partition narratives has mostly focused on topics like psychological suffering, oppression of women, and acts of violence. Nonetheless, more recent research has started to delve into the complex and intricate elements of women's lives throughout this time. In her analysis of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Atia Hosain, Choudhury (2022) focuses on the psychological anguish and social injustices the female protagonists endure. During India's independence movement, this study highlights the convergence of historical context and fiction to show the struggles of women in a strict patriarchal culture. Choudhury analyzes these figures to highlight their underappreciated nationalistic efforts and repressed emotions, often ignored in historical and literary studies. Similarly, Dey (2016) examines *Sunlight on a Broken Column* via the lens of the home sphere. According to Dey's analysis using Partha Chatterjee's postcolonial theory, the novel questions the separation of personal and public spheres. By focusing on purdah/zenana culture, the article shows how the public and private realms are interdependent. Dey demonstrates how patriarchal control and regulation transform the house, which is meant to be a safe haven, into an oppressive space for women. Paul (2015) offers a comprehensive evaluation of the evolving identity of Indian women through the lens of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. The study traces the journey of Laila, the protagonist, from adolescence to adulthood, highlighting her struggle against patriarchal codes and her quest for self-definition. Paul underscores the novel's portrayal of the dichotomy between male and female spheres, where nationalism relegates women to the private sphere, tasking them

with cultural preservation. The narrative contrasts the official, male-dominated nationalism with a feminine perspective on nation formation and identity.

2.1. Research Gap

This research aims to address the research gap by redirecting focus from the victimization of women to their active participation in influencing and strengthening the national discourse. Hosain's novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, highlights the fortitude and endurance of her female characters while showcasing their vital involvement in the socio-political framework during the partition. This study aims to provide a more equitable and thorough comprehension of women's experiences and contributions during India's independence movement. Through an examination of the female point of view, this study highlights the considerable influence that Hosain has had in forming and reinforcing the national discourse.

3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The researcher has employed a qualitative research methodology, focusing on a comprehensive examination, analysis, and interpretation of the text. This approach emphasizes understanding the text within its social and cultural context, rather than evaluating it based on quantitative criteria (Denzin, 2003). This research aims to examine the partition narrative authored by Attia Hossain, a female writer, to identify her noteworthy contributions to the advancement of national discourse. The study is based on theoretical frameworks that explore the concepts of nation and nationalism. Comprehending the notion of nation and nationalism is intricate. According to Anderson (1991), the nation is a conceptual construct that represents an imagined community. Renan (1883) posits that the formation of a nation occurs when various disparities are disregarded and instead, a collective focus is placed on a common distinguished past and a mutual aspiration for future coexistence. National narratives are constructed to strengthen a nation. National narratives serve as a means of acquainting individuals with their national culture, cultivating the belief that their traditional culture sets them apart from other nations. This realisation validates the significance of their traditions and rituals, in contrast to the disparaging assertions made by colonisers. As a result, people are driven to create an independent state for their nation that protects their national identity and preserves their cultural legacy. Formulating and advocating a national narrative seeks to foster a collective sense of identity and enhance the communal bond among people (Bhabha, 1994). With time, national narrative change results in a change in the nation's fate. Women's rights are often disregarded during the process of nation-building. Feminism is frequently perceived as opposing nationalism, as the national agenda typically disregards individual distinctions and instead concentrates on attaining collective liberation via the unification of all individuals by disregarding all types of disparities based on gender and class stratification.

4. Textual Analysis

According to Renan (1883), a nation is characterized as a collective consciousness, a spiritual essence formed by shared achievements in history and a shared determination to coexist and accomplish remarkable goals in the present and the future. Additionally, he argues that nations are inherently unstable entities due to their social construction. Over time, individuals' viewpoints and preferences evolve, leading to the emergence of new nations and the fading away of established national identities. Therefore, the existence of nations is not everlasting. According to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the fabrication of historical narratives is frequently employed to support a nationalist agenda by legitimizing a claim to a territory. Anderson (1991) is credited with coining the term 'imagined communities'. He has proposed that individuals within a nation are not acquainted with one another. They have not yet encountered them, but they experience sorrow in their heart for the people of the same nation/social group. Their affection stems from their collective cultural heritage and shared national identity. A nation is a socially produced entity reinforced by national narratives and can lead to establishing an autonomous state. Hosain's work, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, portrays the emergence of two nations due to a change in the national discourse. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were all on the same page before the commencement of the Pakistan freedom movement. Their shared objective was to expel the British from their territory. They were prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of their objective. Their divergent social and religious beliefs had no impact on their relationship.

They demonstrated reverence and embraced their divergent religious and cultural beliefs. In her novel, Hosain portrays a sense of cohesion among Indians from diverse religious backgrounds. In the novel's opening, the author presents Laila's grandfather and his three friends, who come from diverse religious backgrounds yet share a deep connection. 'The four men loved the city to which they belonged, and they lived and behaved as if the city belonged to them' (35). Laila's grandfather and his three friends—Thakur Balbir Singh, Raja Hassan Ahmad, and Mr. Freemantle—are mentioned in the line. Despite her grandfather's paralysis and inability to talk, they maintained a daily meeting with him. They shared a mutual interest, which led to a full and unrestricted meeting of their families. They cherished their customs but refrained from using their diverse religious beliefs to justify harbouring hatred against one another. According to Laila, her aunts did not adhere to the practice of purdah in their presence, indicating that they were regarded as family members. Her grandfather refrained from imposing purdah on his daughters in the presence of his friends, and this sentiment permeated across the entire country, contributing to their sense of national unity. According to Renan (1883), a nation is formed by the collective will of its citizens to live together. In the novel, it is shown how Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs share a determination to coexist. Both in their personal lives and the spheres of social and political affairs, they demonstrated love, respect, and solidarity.

In the colonial era, the inhabitants of the sub-continent initially had identical political objectives. Congress emerged as a prominent and influential political party. Muslims and Hindus were politically aligned. The Muslim and Hindu political leadership collaborated to unite dispersed individuals into a single platform, initiating their resistance against the British. Uncle Hammid is portrayed as a member of Congress who actively supports his Hindu friends during elections. In his later years, he realized that Muslims and Hindus could not coexist peacefully after gaining independence. However, his friendship with his Hindu friend Agarwal remained unchanged. He acknowledged the efforts of the Congress and Hindu political leaders in their fight for independence while discussing the political situation with his friends Agarwal and Waliddin. He emphasized that Congress had gained strength through years of unwavering dedication to the cause of freedom for their nation (195), which illustrates the nation's collective amnesia over their religious and cultural disparities. The cultural beliefs and values of the Indian population diverged significantly from those of their colonial masters, representing the essence of their identity. These ideological disparities emerged from their opposition to British governance and their quest for autonomy. Hosain's story offers an intricate depiction of the Indian way of life, emphasising the distinctive traditions, festivals, and ideals that set them apart from their colonisers. Although they were strangers, the British frequently assessed Eastern culture by analogies to Western society. Nevertheless, the authentic identity of the native inhabitants of the subcontinent was primarily shaped by the amalgamation of Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh customs, intricately intertwined with English influences, constituting the rich tapestry of Indian culture. Hosain's work provides a thorough and detailed description of various cultural customs and festivals, which were distinctive features of the Indian community at the time of partition. The narrative effectively portrays the diverse and inclusive nature of Laila and her family's national culture through its detailed description of the different festivals they observe.

The characters exemplify a spirit of unity and mutual respect by celebrating both Muslim and Hindu festivals. Various Hindu festivals, such as Holi and Diwali, were also observed in Laila's household. Laila reminisced about her parents by recalling their tradition of celebrating *Shubrat* with a basket containing enchanting fire, vibrant star rockets, explosive crackers, and beautiful spiralling starlets attached to the silver wire. On Eid, she requested that her father lift her higher so that she could view the Eid moon. (40) They altered their attire and cleansed themselves. They make social calls to friends and family and request eidi from their elders. During Bakra Eid, sheep, and lambs are offered as sacrifices, symbolizing the willingness to surrender one's most valuable possession to God. This practice is inspired by the story of Abraham, who demonstrated his devotion to God by being prepared to sacrifice his son. The poor, relatives, and friends receive lamb and sheep meat. The children neglect their small lamb and solely concentrate on their exhilaration and indulgence in food. They hear the sound of drums and music from drunk people on Holi (41). Hosain provides comprehensive accounts of the festivals observed in Indian civilization, fostering a sense of unity among individuals. Because of their impartial thinking, children did not experience remorse when celebrating festivals from other religions. The elders would instruct the younger generation to refrain from

practising others' faith and blending their religion with other religions, even though they could not discern the distinction. Laila claims that on Holi, Bua forbade her from going to the adjoining gate because mud-splattering, color-spraying hooligans could not distinguish between believers and non-believers (41); however, Laila's friend arrived to play with her and a color-water-splashing play broke out in their lawn. A nation does not necessitate eradicating social and religious diversity among its people. Individuals in a nation may possess diverse socioeconomic and political upbringings, yet they set aside their disparities and actively defend their nation's collective identity. Individuals from diverse religious and socioeconomic factions in the subcontinent harbored a collective objective: to resist their colonizers and strive to advance their communities, irrespective of their disparate origins.

Gellner (1983) argues that a nation is a constructed myth. He argues that nations are predetermined systems for classifying people. On the other hand, he suggests that nationalism is an ideology that either absorbs existing cultures or creates new ones to establish a nation. Gellner asserts that nationalism revitalizes dormant languages and reinterprets traditional practices, while also safeguarding and promoting these cultural elements to foster the progress of a nation. Hosain strengthens her national discourse in her work by exploring this nation's Islamic festivals and cultural elements. She presents an elaborate description of the month of Muharram, a period in which Muslims honor and remember the hardships faced by the family of the Prophet Muhammad. Solemn remembrance of their sad deaths, which were crucial to the founding and maintenance of Islam, is observed during this period, especially the first ten days. Hosain narrates the deprivation of water to the Prophet's progeny and the merciless slaughter of Hazrat Husain and his family's children in Karbala by the use of swords and arrows. Annually, Muslims respectfully remember these ten days with deep sorrow. They carry 'tazia,' miniature domed tombs, through the streets (64). Both males and females wear black clothing and sing mournful songs to pay tribute to the unfortunate incident. In addition, sherbet is offered to people as a means of acquiring spiritual benefits (swabs). Laila vividly describes the Muharram march, specifically mentioning the distant chanting of the names Hasan and Husain, accompanied by the sound of people hitting their naked chests. The author depicts the men without shoes and head coverings as they trail behind the tazia (72).

Hosain also elucidates her cultural approach to death and marriage traditions in her novel. The cultural inventory and traditions significantly impact shaping a national narrative and ultimately bolstering the nationalist movement for the nation-state. The novel portrays the death ceremony of Baba Jan, illustrating how Muslim families handle deceased bodies and conduct such rituals inside their households. As Laila tells, women from different villages who belong to her family reached her house at Baba Jan's funeral, and no food could be cooked in the house of mourning for the next three days (84). Baba Jan's room was illuminated throughout the night by a burning light (85). Zahra's marriage serves as an illustration of the marriage ceremony in the indigenous Indian culture. Firstly, girls are often perceived as a financial burden for families, and their marriage is seen as a means of alleviating this burden for parents. Furthermore, Dowry is a fundamental component of a woman's marriage. During Zahra's wedding, her dowry was exhibited in a room under the protection of Hakim Bua. Women meticulously assessed the quantity of gowns, the worth of jewels, and other household items. The practice of dowry is prevalent in both Hindu and Muslim families, and it serves as a means by which the bride's family is evaluated (113).

The novel examines multiple facets of colonized civilization, including cockfighting. Hakim Bua says that in the Mughal Empire, Nawabs wasted their riches on cockfights and kite flying (92). Moreover, in colonial societies, specifically in Muslim households, women were prohibited from using their husbands' names while addressing them (110). Haya, often known as modesty, is a crucial component of Muslim culture. Hosain skillfully integrates this concept into her narrative to reinforce her Islamic national ideology. Zainab informs Laila about a custom in the countryside where males are only allowed to visit their beds in the daytime and wives and husbands are not allowed to access their bedrooms in the presence of others (104). The distinguishing aspects of colonized culture differentiate it from those of the colonizers and contribute to the unification of people in their pursuit of identity and self-governance. Hosain not only describes the native culture and customs but also portrays the influence of colonization on the local culture. According to Laila, the untrained servants at Chachu Hamid's residence were replaced with trained servants, and the dining table was set with forks and

knives. Currently, relatives no longer reside for extended periods; Aunt Abida and Aunty Majida only visit on exceptional occasions. Chachi also began working for the betterment of society (123). Islamic teachings traditionally restricted Muslim women from leaving purdah. However, during the colonization of India, modern Muslim men desired educated and socially engaged wives. This desire arose due to colonization, as men in the sub-continent sought to emulate their colonial masters and adopt a more contemporary lifestyle. Aunty Saira additionally remarks that young men like their wives to possess sufficient education to socialize with and host their friends (110). That was Western culture, and locals were imitating their masters. However, women were restricted from surpassing their boundaries, although they were permitted to have an education to comprehend contemporary ways of living. Nevertheless, they were expected to maintain their cultural customs and values. According to Aunt Saira, Laila is educated, readily adapted to the contemporary world, and keeps Muslim traditions and culture in mind. Modern Muslim households have abandoned the practice of purdah. Subconsciously, western ideologies had produced doubts in natives' minds about their culture and tradition as Aunty Saira's friends informed her about a Muslim girl who eloped with a Hindu boy. The girl was from a family that adhered rigorously to wearing a veil. Indeed, as Mrs. Wadia pointed out, a purdah upbringing does not guarantee protection against immorality.

The people of the subcontinent began to mimic their rulers and developed a reduced regard for their own culture and values. The presence of hybridity is also evident in the novel. Western culture gained popularity in the subcontinent when upper-class people organized mixed-gender get-togethers. The Raja of Amirpur also organized similar gatherings for his friends. Due to the rigorous adherence to purdah in his house, he is compelled to organize all these events outside. Men pursuing modernity embraced Western culture, but their women were relegated to preserving their traditional values. These men imitate their masters, but the true spirit of their own culture still exists in them. My aunt would typically react, as Laila describes, by coughing violently and covering her face with a handkerchief, just like the people in the West do. The Raja of Amirpur left the scene of a passionate love scene because he found it inappropriate to watch such a display of shamelessness in the presence of respectable women (202). These examples illustrate the concept of hybridity within the novel. The novel is about the problems between Hindus and Muslims, which happened against the painful background of India's split in 1947. Even though Hindus and Muslims had coexisted in the same nation, shared many cultural values, celebrated one other's festivals, and developed comparable friendships, the country was divided into two states during this time. Yet in the end, other factors—most notably religion—divided them. Hindu-Muslim relations were greatly impacted by the pursuit of political domination. In Awadh, where the majority of the nobility and landlords were Muslims, there was fear that Hindus would take over after the elections. As a result, a large number of Muslims believed that the creation of an independent state was necessary to protect their religious freedom. Moreover, the novel portrays the British as the main agents to divide people of the sub-continent. They used religion as a means to separate people. Joan in Laila's college called Muslims foreigners due to their historical migration to India and subsequent domination over the region. According to her, they lack the rightful claim to this territory. Nadira as a Muslim was outraged by this statement. The British implementation of the divide-and-rule strategy led to a violent partition in the subcontinent. Hosain's narrative also serves as a critique of the British colonial role, which resulted in the dispersal of people in the subcontinent.

Hosain's female characters responded to the partition movement in diverse ways. Some women were not fully aware of campaigns due to their focus on domestic affairs, while others actively engaged in politics. Nita actively engaged in the freedom struggle, whereas Joan supported the British Empire due to their perceived contributions to peace, justice, and unity in India (127). The old ladies, anxious about the safety of their loved ones, were confused and unable to comprehend the whole political situation. "What has happened to young people nowadays?" Aunt Abida asked (162). Hakima Bua replied, "The reason behind the frenetic activities, is that they have cats tied to their feet, which prevents them from sitting still." (162) Aunt Saira had a preference for British governance over Hindu domination, expressing her belief that it would be more favorable for the British to continue their power rather than the Hindus dominating. Although Laila was in favour of partition, she wondered how the country could coexist if the differences between its numerous communities were constantly emphasized (245). Most female characters possess their own opinions, yet they often adhere to the ideals of their elders or male counterparts. Zahra opposed civil disobedience due to her husband's

occupation as a civil official, and she mirrored his ideas. The women in Husain's novel responded in diverse ways to the liberation and partition movement, but they were fortunate enough to have the ability to express their viewpoints.

Hosain has depicted through her female characters that women of the subcontinent were active in the freedom movement but they were not completely independent. Women are usually associated with culture and traditions, which pose challenges in their lives. Hosain portrays that women were forbidden from selecting their spouses. They were dissuaded from pursuing a formal education but were only permitted to receive religious education. Laila had a strong affinity for reading books, but, Bua dissuaded her from exploring more literary works by warning, 'these books will consume you'(14). She recommended Laila to read the Holy Quran, as a result of which ladies would compete to have her as a potential match for their sons (14). During the colonial era, Muslim men were acquiring advanced Western education to get ready to fight their oppressors, and Muslim women were compelled to sustain their religious obligations and transmit their customs to the next generation. Although Aunt Majida, Aunt Abida, and Chachu Hamid were siblings, Laila's aunts adhered to traditional Muslim customs, Chacha Hamid embraced a Western education and lifestyle. Her aunts were living their lives by Islamic doctrine. They knew that their mission in life was to be good Muslim women who rigorously adhere to Islamic rules and pass these norms on to their children. Thus, they dared not question their Baba Jan, who had permitted their brother to tour the world and receive a Western education but not them. Typically, in Muslim families during colonial times, women were not allowed to select their husbands. They were excluded from participating in decision-making for their own lives. Women who attempted to express their opinions or made decisions about their own lives were often labeled as shameless and immoral. Hosain portrays an identical image in the story. Aunt Abida desired to include Zahra in the discussion over her marriage proposal, however, this caused distress to Uncle Mohsin. He angrily asks Aunt Abida if the girl is to pass judgment on her elders. Do you harbor any reservations regarding the competence of her elders in making decisions? Do you harbor any concerns or doubts over their decision? (20). Aunt Abida was unable to counter his arguments.

5. Conclusion

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* offers an important feminine viewpoint on the historical and cultural context of the Indian subcontinent, specifically during the partition. Hosain's emphasis on female experiences and perspectives questions the male-dominated approach to writing history. Hosain's work exemplifies the ability of literature to recover and reinterpret cultural narratives. By depicting women's lives and their involvement in socio-political shifts, she presents a different version of history that acknowledges women's important contributions to the nation's history. Hosain's narrative revives forgotten cultural aspects and customs, making a valuable contribution to national restoration and promoting nationalist ideology. This study emphasizes the significance of incorporating female viewpoints in historical analyses to attain a more equitable comprehension of the past. Hosain's work demonstrates the influential role of literature in molding shared memory and cultural identity while emphasizing the importance of women's contributions to the national discourse.

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