CHAPTER-II

SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN: WITNESSING A 'HOUSE' DIVIDED

Not a single soul from my homeland remains my consoler
It's as though I don't have a homeland in this world

-Ghalib

This chapter proposes to study in detail the Partition experiences of Laila in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (*SBC*). It looks at how Laila has been situated as a witness to the events unfolding on the forefront of Lucknow's political scene impacted by India's Partition. She is a witness to the fissures in her traditional family and also in the relationship with friends which are presented as coterminous with the Partition of the country. The tensions between communal and national identity in the backdrop of Partition as witnessed and recorded by her have been investigated in this chapter. It also engages with Laila's encounter with Muslim patriarchy within the space of the ancestral house *Ashiana* and her attempts to negotiate through it because her own transitional turmoil runs parallel to the transition taking place in the Indian political domain. In the process, *Ashiana* assumes significance in her memories so much so that the ultimate loss of this home to Partition becomes an intellectual dislocation and exile she must come to terms with.

There is a marked difference between the Partition experiences of women narrated by the majority of the women writers and the one by Attia Hosain. Hosain's novel looks at other layers that emerged during the times. The narrativisation here is not concerned specifically with violence committed on women's bodies – although Hosain briefly touches upon it in a general manner. Set away from both the eastern and western

borders where the events leading up to and during Partition took on an unprecedented bloodied turn, Lucknow did not witness violence on the same scale as the borders where people suffered a direct impact of Partition. The novel is about divisions of various natures within the private sphere of the family which is echoed in the larger political events unfolding at the regional as well as the national level. The split is evident between Laila's progressive ideals informed by a liberal western education and the orthodox and traditional codes laid down by her upper class *taluqdar* family. It is this clash between her need for autonomy and her family's restrictive ideas that results in her own rift with them. The division at the level of human values between Laila and her cousin Zahra culminate in further divisions caused by political and social differences. The idea of segregation within the spaces of the house as male and female further echo the differences emerging in people's opinions about nation and religion. Within the family her cousins are divided on the issue of Partition which finally causes the house itself to be physically divided and then to be lost forever. These divisions are presented from Laila's perspective providing a glimpse into Lucknow's run up to Partition and the toll it took on her family. The kind of differences which hurtled India into the path of irreversible division are presented as occurring within *Ashiana* at the microcosmic level from a woman's point of view. She also records the way in which politics, which belongs to the public domain, enters into the private space of the home whose foundation is tested until it literally cracks up in the centre. Division singes home, relationships and friendships at the same time that it does the nation. What emerges is the narrativisation of Laila's experience in her upper class *taluqdar* home fraught with patriarchal domination; Laila's refusal to cater to the traditional norms laid down by her family for women; her ability to express agency and choice and

subsequent formation of individual identity; her role as witness to the contemporary wave of nationalism and to India's Partition and finally becoming the carrier of nostalgia and memories left behind by Partition.

Attia Hosain is known as one the earliest Indian writers in English. She is also included sometimes in the list of British women writers. This makes it evident that she had assumed a flexibility of identity with the ability to straddle two cultures and remain an active participant in both. In 1947 when India was partitioned, Attia Hosain was in England where her husband was posted at the High Commission in London. However, the Partition affected her so deeply that she decided to stay back rather than choosing either of the two nations. As Khan (5 February 1998) remarks in an obituary to the writer who died in 1998, "…the sense of damaged cultural roots never fully died away". The fact that Hosain could never reconcile to this permanent displacement is reflected in her own words "Here I am, I have chosen to live in this country which has given me so much; but I cannot get out of my blood the fact that I had the blood of my ancestors for 800 years in another country" (as cited in Khan, 5 February 1998). This painful feeling of Partition in her real life is poignantly reflected in the autobiographical overtones in *SBC*. As a narrative it tells the story of Laila, who is fashioned to a large extent on Hosain herself. The novel is an interesting blend of autobiography, fiction and history. Many similarities can be discerned in the lives of Hosain and Laila. Both belong to privileged family of *taluqdars*, both earn a liberal English education, both speak up for less privileged women and both undergo the pain of witnessing their families and their land of birth divided. By fictionalising her own experiences, the autobiographical narrative that emerges engages with her past and retells the story of identity formation.

Written in 1961, Hosain's *SBC* raises questions of gender and identity that are still relevant in today's India. However, the woman's experience in the novel is not confined to interrogating patriarchy and gender stereotypes. There are other concerns narrativised by Laila which tempts us to draw a parallel between Doris Lessing and Attia Hosain. Chakravarty (2008) points out Lessing's "refusal to confine herself to gender issues" (p. 49) and adds, "The perception of humanism, as it evolves through Lessing's work, reflects a utopian desire that the human race should advance towards a stage where inclusiveness, and equality based on acceptance of difference, become the defining principles" (p. 49). Attia Hosain's novel also exhibits an all-encompassing humanism as it sets out to delineate how feudalism worked to affect the lives of peasants, tenants and other dependents of Laila's *taluqdar* family. Her observations are a documentation of the power and authority that the feudal masters wielded over their dependents. Desai (1988), in her Introduction to *SBC*, very rightly suggests that Hosain was:

> ...capable of including not only men and women of immense power and privilege but, to an *equal* extent, the poor who laboured as their servants. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of her writing is the tenderness she shows for those who served her family, an empathy for a class not her own.

The novel also bears witness to the tensions that lead up to India's Partition, both in the private sphere and the public sphere. Simultaneously the narrator is able to capture the transition that Lucknow's elite experienced when the centre of power shifted from the British to the Indians. Hosain weaves these various threads together from a place she knows and can clearly see.

The Indian Muslim society of the days during India's independence was far from gender neutral. It is the Muslim male who has been vocal and has appropriated the voice of Muslim women. Kazi in her well researched report published in 1999, talks about the situation of Muslim women in India down the ages – from the time of the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughal rule and then to British India and post Independence. In this context, Kazi (1999) pertinently observes, "The Islamist order placed women strictly within the home, endorsed *purdah* and idealized domesticity; the only training women were deemed fit for was to facilitate their predestined role as good housekeepers and mothers" (p. 8). Kazi's findings about Muslim women during the Mughal and British rule in relation to *purdah* and education proves that public debate around both issues was very much present during both periods. She remarks of the Mughal times:

> *Purdah* was a distinct feature of Muslim women's lives during this time – particularly of Muslim elites, even as it was totally absent from the working class. The ideology of *purdah* (female seclusion) derived from the idea as *fitna* (potential disorder). The 'disorderly' effects of women upon men's lives could be relegated to the private, walled-off regions of the household. *Purdah* was transformed into a marker of female 'respectability' among upper-class women. The practice of *purdah*, combined with social ideas of women as primarily wives and mothers, prevented female education. Muslim women's education, consequently, was restricted to religious knowledge. (Kazi, 1999, p. 5)

Kazi (1999) further states that during colonial times when the reformist movement was going on, the issues regarding *purdah* and education for Muslim women were much debated. However, the views were riddled with contradictions. She writes, "Rokeya

Shekhawat Hossain from Bengal (b.1880) – an advocate of social reform – spoke out against the 'excessive absurdities' of female seclusion" (Kazi, 1999, p. 7). She also states that Syed Ahmed Khan's "vision of modern education for Muslims did not include women" (Kazi, 1999, p. 7) and "Mohammed Iqbal, the renowned poet and philosopher, was also quite averse to the idea of female education" (p. 7). Commenting on the views of the *ulema* she writes:

> The *ulema's* position on women was based on the orthodox Islamic tradition symbolised by the notion of women as *fitna* (potential disorder). Accordingly, women's social interaction with men had to be regulated, which in effect translated into a control over female sexuality, and female seclusion from public space. (Kazi, 1999, p. 7)

The *ulema* was in favour of women's education "but only insofar as it centred on religion (i.e. the Qur'an), family values and the moral virtue of women" (Kazi, 1999, p. 7).

The temporal setting of *SBC* spans a period from around the 1930's to immediately after Partition. Laila's home *Ashiana* is not gender neutral. *Ashiana* means refuge or shelter. Laila has been left orphaned after her parents' death and she is taken into *Ashiana* by her relatives. It becomes a place which is both sheltering and alienating at the same time. The home is segregated into male and female domains. The private gendered space is the *zenana* and strictly off limits for the men. The presence of the *zenana* would also suggest the inevitable practice of *purdah* or veiling. Laila comes under the influence of aunts who observe *purdah*, a restrictive practice limiting women's mobility and visibility. Deutsch (1998) says that in North India during

colonial times men and women lived in segregation from each other and their "spheres of existence were separated both spatially within the household and in terms of any interaction between them. This meant that women had considerable power within the *zenana*, or women's quarters, which was considered to be their domain" (p. 23). Both *Ashiana* and the house in the village of Hasanpur have their *zenana* segregations. There is close monitoring by the elder women of Laila and Zahra's rooms situated in the *zenana* quarters. Their cousins – Asad and Zahid – have restricted access to this area and are reprimanded when they overstay for any kind of cousinly chit chats. The house runs on the commands of Aunt Abida who not only supervises all arrangements related to the nursing of the old and ailing Baba Jan, but also takes charge of the proper supervision of the two girls. The *zenana* is also the epicentre during family events – be it of mourning or celebration. It is this space that allows the cloistered women to express their sorrows or joys without restriction on certain occasions and their sense of sisterhood is displayed. It becomes a very private space with no intervention of the outside world. It is here that Baba Jan's death brings the women together. The *zenana* at the house at Hasanpur also becomes the centre of collective feminine celebration during Zahra's marriage:

> Once again the house at Hasanpur was crowded, but keyed to a brighter note. The zenana stirred and vibrated with movement and noise as guests and maid-servants and children and groups of village women milled around, their voices raised and shrill with excitement. For every woman and girl, there was an excuse to wear the richest of clothes and jewels, and the whole house spilled gem-set colours and throbbed with the rhythm of the *mirasins'* gay marriage songs, and the insistent beat of their drums. (Hosain, 1988, p. 113)

The customary practice of *purdah* in North India was linked to preserving women's honour or *sharam.* Laila sees "Life within the household ordained, enclosed, cushioning the mind and heart against the outside world..." (Hosain, 1988, p. 59). And the sense of enclosure is carried forward even when there is the necessity to step outside the house. When the family travels by car for Baba Jan's funeral in Hasanpur, "Zahra and I sat near the curtained windows of the car on either side of Hakiman Bua, screened off from the driver. She did not object if we moved the curtains just enough to look out" (Hosain, 1988, p. 88). Observing such *purdah* dictated by the idea of *sharam* made them maintain social distance from unrelated men. Even the act of shopping entailed limited movement. Shopping being a public exercise, ways were found to indulge in it while maintaining the practice of *purdah*. The journey to Hasanpur was almost an adventure:

> It was exciting looking at shop windows, at posters announcing films even from a distance. We were seldom allowed to go in, but had to shop from the car, asking for things to be brought out to us. Once an English store had been kept open during a sale so that my aunts and the Rani of Amirpur could shop when no one else was allowed in. (Hosain, 1988, p. 90)

Unlike most of the other women, Aunt Saira has denounced *purdah* for a more liberal lifestyle. Just as quite a few Muslim women were coming out into public life actively advocating reforms for other women of their community, there were the likes of Aunt Saira and her friends whose "hollowness of the ideas of progress and benevolence" hardens Laila's intolerance. Zahra also becomes a symbol of "Western gloss" (Hosain, 1988, p.140). Deutsch (1998) remarks that there was "condemnation of overly westernised behaviour by Muslim women…who blindly imitated their western

counterparts" (p. 95) by prominent Muslims of the time in a "gathering of Muslim women held in Agra in 1932" (p. 94).

The coming of Uncle Hamid and Aunt Saira after her grandfather's death to manage the affairs at *Ashiana* is significant in that they represent colonial Britain's influence. Uncle Hamid's westernised attitude marks a change in the cultural system within *Ashiana* but for Laila, it is merely a replication of one set of patriarchal authority with another. This leads her to think:

> I used to forget that the world was in reality very different and the voices that controlled it had once been those of Baba Jan, Aunt Abida, Ustanji and now belonged to Uncle Hamid, Aunt Saira, and her friends. Always I lived in two worlds, and grew to resent the 'real' world. (Hosain, 1988, p. 128)

Chakravarty (2008) also states something similar in her idea of how some narratives "attempt to bridge the gap between 'real' and 'possible' worlds, balancing a dystopian awareness of current social realities against a visionary or utopian impulse and a strong ethical sense" (p. 17). She also adds that, "The ethical/visionary codes embedded in these narratives, however, often do not conform to conventional social norms and moral laws; rather they interrogate the rigidity of such norms and the power hierarchies implicit in them" (2008, p. 17). Laila seems to inhabit a kind of dystopia – the unpleasant outside world – at *Ashiana* for her mind which is highly sensitive to any kind of oppression always detects the "voice of authority" (Hosain, 1988, p. 111) and is compelled to question, "Why must power always be used to humiliate?" (Hosain, 1988, p.111). If Laila's one world is the 'real' dystopian world, the other is the more desirable 'unreal' utopia which continually contests the 'real' and at the same time strives for a

more inclusive humanitarian social structure. The young fifteen-year-old Laila as the narrator reveals a personality that is striving to make sense of the change of situation in her life. The sudden death of parents who subscribed to liberal views about women has transported her to the care of more conventional and orthodox relatives. That is why, Laila has been continuously harping upon her own duality. This has enabled her to maintain a distance from the issues and at the same time, remaining in the thick of what was taking place around her. However, at the same time, it is also to be kept in mind that her distancing is not indifference.

That Laila's deceased father was progressive in his thinking about women's education is evident from the answer that Aunt Majida gives to a comment made by Uncle Mohsin:

> Mohsin Bhai, Laila was educated as her father would have wished. Abida carried out a beloved brother's wishes as not even the child's own mother could have done had she been spared to see her grow up. Even Abba respected his son's beliefs and set aside his own, so, God knows, you have no right to criticise. (Hosain, 1988, p. 23)

Uncle Mohsin's views coincide with traditional thinking in which a liberal education for women such as Laila had access to, was akin to "temptation" for as he says, "I do not want my nieces put in the way of temptation. After all, Zahra was brought up differently, correctly, sensibly" (Hosain, 1988, p. 23). Attention is drawn to the 'difference' between the cousins – Laila and Zahra – by Laila's nurse, Hakiman Bua also:

> Your books will eat you. They will dim the light of your lovely eyes, my moon princess, and then who will marry you, owl-eyed, peering through glasses? Why are you not like Zahra, your father's – God rest his soul – own sister's child, yet so different from you? Pull your head out of your books and look at the world, my child. Read the Holy Book, remember Allah and his Prophet, then women will fight to choose you for their sons. (Hosain, 1988, p. 14)

Uncle Mohsin and Hakiman Bua have fixed gender roles for women and Zahra wins their appreciation for submitting to those roles, "Zahra said her prayers five times a day, read the Quran for an hour every morning, sewed and knitted and wrote the accounts..." (Hosain, 1988, p. 14). Uncle Mohsin's disapproval of Laila once again finds expression in the repetition of the picture of contrast that Laila and Zahra present, "I am sure Zahra will do as her elders decide. She has not had the benefit of a mem-sahib's education..." (Hosain, 1988, p. 23). Here the resentment to Laila's western education is clearly indicative of the apprehension that the traditional old culture of the elite which is steeped in patriarchy would be challenged by western liberal education.

Laila is conscious of her dominated state and even her *taluqdar* background is no defence against it. Her empathy for Nandi stems out of a realisation of this consciousness. Nandi's position as a servant makes her vulnerable to both sexual and physical assault from Uncle Mohsin who belongs to the dominant class. Easily branded as promiscuous, Nandi has been objectified by Mohsin for he would have used her sexually had she allowed him to. In a position to dominate, Laila, however, unlike Zahra, is able to see power relations for what they are. Hartsock (1990) describes Foucault as one who "understands the world from the perspective of the ruling group" (p. 167) and the same could be said of Zahra. Laila's concern for Nandi's condition is

an echo of Attia Hosian's own engagement with social reform issues. She had also attended the All India Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1933. Laila, with her notions of gender and class justice, voices her disgust aloud at the manner in which Uncle Mohsin humiliates a cowering Nandi. The incident ironically exposes Uncle Mohsin's own double standards when the still defiant Nandi proclaims, "A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?" (Hosian,1988, p. 28) Upper class feudalistic prejudice speaks through Zahra who considers servants as base and menial and is totally unsupportive of Laila's interference. Laila remains the only one to protest in Nandi's case. Difference in education has instilled different definitions of 'shame' in Zahra and Laila. For Zahra it refers to woman's modesty and propriety and Nandi has crossed those patriarchy induced boundaries and hence she "will get the beating she deserves" for her "wickedness" and "insolence" (Hosain, 1988, p. 29). Laila's idea of shame is humanistic. For her an act of shame is in not recognising the dignity and individuality of another, be it a servant girl. The two hold deeply polarised views on marriage too. Zahra's cultural conditioning makes her believe that marriage is a girl's primary gender role which makes Laila say contemptuously to her, "Do you think of anything but getting married quickly?" (Hosain, 1988, p. 29). Zahra will submit to a marriage arranged by her family or relations from within their social sphere. But the very idea of being married to someone she has not chosen herself is dreadful to Laila.

Laila faces the double burden of ensuring her personal honour as well as her family's. For the North Indian elite of the times, gender practices were deeply connected to their identity as aristocrats. To ensure this, women were made to realise that they owed responsibility and loyalty to their family and hence any aberration or

deviation from what constituted women's propriety would put the family honour and reputation, built over centuries, at stake. Aunt Abida's perception of gender roles is traditional. Her giving credence to "good breeding", "behaviour" and "traditions" of family above all else – even social justice – further alienates Laila from her family. Aunt Abida's insistence that she apologise to Uncle Mohsin leaves Laila struggling to comprehend "what wrong have I done?" (Hosain, 1988, p. 38). From Aunt Abida's point of view Uncle Mohsin is not to be judged. A sense of betrayal overtakes Laila at her aunt's rigidity in the face of an obviously inhuman act. At such times, when the reputation of a class conscious family is about to be compromised, it is the category of women who are easily controlled and disciplined. Aunt Abida stresses upon the duties Laila is to be mindful of:

> My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed. I have been responsible for you since the God willed you to be without a father and mother. I do not wish anyone to point a finger at you, because it will be assign of my failure. Never forget the family into which you were born. That is all I wanted to say to you. Now go and say your prayers. (Hosain, 1988, p. 38)

Aunt Abida's observation about "outside influences" is obviously a reference to the modern ideas that Laila must have inculcated through her education. Laila tries to make sense of the duality that exists in Aunt Abida. Laila has been encouraged towards acquiring a liberal education but at the same time must bow down to age-old social sanctions and obligations. There is an acceptance of as well as opposition to the

western mode of education at one and the same time. Her immediate priority should be honour and reputation of her family rather than any notion of social progress. Fifteen year old Laila's position is complicated by the uncomfortable suggestion that she must "follow the rules of conduct" "without question." Therefore a pertinent question she would like to ask her aunt is, "Why did you not bring me up like Zahra?" (Hosain, 1988, p. 38). Very clearly, Laila's education is not for its empowering potential but merely to fulfil a dead brother's wish. Laila's introduction of humanistic and democratic ideas into their way of life would simply be a threat to the established feudalistic class structure and challenge patriarchy. Education for Laila becomes a major force which enables her to define her sense of self and resist blind acceptance. Although Laila never participates in the public sphere and remains ruled by conservatism within the four walls of *Ashiana*, yet her books and education make her socially aware. Never forgetting her *taluqdar* elitist breeding, Zahra is not averse to being "offensive" to the sweeper woman. And at Laila's protest justifies her attitude with a remark, "She's used to it" (Hosain, 1988, p. 45). Laila admits it is the "books which had taught me to think of human dignity" (Hosain, 1988, p. 45). Thus, though empowerment is not the intended goal of her education, yet it shapes Laila's mind into taking conscious decisions and acquire "a sense of responsibility towards the position of privilege that she occupied by virtue of birth" (Jalil, 2011). Hosain herself "went to the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, then the foremost college for women in India, and won scholarships. She persuaded her mother that she would not be kept at home with her sisters and was the first woman from a *taluqdar*'s family to graduate – in 1933 – from the University of Lucknow" (Desai, 1988). Laila's education, her humanity and her ability to fashion her own future are all acts of trespass and also of

liberation. The agency she has wrested is born out of a power conferred on her through education, not class.

Laila's journey of personal development and freedom from constrictions is educative and empowers her with the sensitivity and understanding to be able to formulate her own ideas and opinions about political matters taking place at the public level. It enables her to question separatist ideologies and support secular views of inclusiveness. Her experience of Partition involves delineating the manner in which the ideology of Muslim separatism unfolds before her, both within her family and in the public sphere which for her is largely made up of her friends and her family's social circle. Her accounts of the political developments she sees around her during the time of India's transition include the manner in which the youth responds to India's Partition and independence. Saleem's choice of the Muslim League and his support to the idea of Muslim representation and later to Pakistan is based on political considerations, while Zahid makes a religious choice as a believer of Islam. At the other end of the pole, there are Kemal and Asad who display a secular bent of mind reposing faith in Indian nationalism to which Laila also subscribes. Through Laila, Hosain presents the division that had occurred within the Muslim community on the issue of Partition, destabilising the myth that all Muslims were in favour of Pakistan. Laila observes the widening rift within the family which is an impact of political conflicts emerging in the public sphere. The reader is made to discern that the Muslim response to the idea of Partition was in no way homogeneous. Within *Ashiana* itself, as Laila records, there is polyphony of voices, which conflict with each other on issues of nationalism and Partition. Laila's own stance becomes obvious as she observes with pain the many effects of Partition on her own family and on the people around her. These glimpses

that Laila provides, although a kind of fictional historiography, form part of the alternative history of Partition which was left untold in history books that were unable to engage with the subtle nuances and complexities embedded in the human thought process which Hosain's narrativisation has captured. Laila bears testimony to the suffering, displacement and violence that people including women were subjected to at the time of India's Partition. Laila's privileged background may not have exposed her to the many horrors that women faced when their bodies were used to inscribe communal hegemony, but she did not remain unaffected by such horrible scenes that she was a witness to. Her own plurality of consciousness born out of a conviction in human values is apparent in her interrogation of communalism and separatism.

To produce an effect of balance and justness regarding inter-religious issues Attia Hosain has also brought in intra-religious concerns. She therefore presents not only Hindu-Muslim issues but also those relating to Shias and Sunnis. One issue that often resulted in violence between the Shias and Sunnis was that of Moharram. The Sunnis decried Moharram as unIslamic. In Zahid's words, "It is idolatrous and sinful" (Hosain, 1988, p. 55). Zahid is accused of being influenced by the British policy of divide-and-rule as he harps on the Shia-Sunni conflictuality and not on the Muslims as a community. In Asad's view, this conflictuality is engineered by the British whenever there have been any communal riots so that the British presence could be justified, "Something must be done to prove that the British are here to enforce law and order and stop us killing each other" (Hosain,1988, p. 56). The Shia-Sunni divide is further revealed through the antagonistic views of Zahid and Laila towards Moharram. The occasion is used by Zahid to plead for the unity of the Muslims, "They distort historical facts thirteen-hundred years old, and divide us when Muslims need to be united against

great dangers" (Hosain, 1988, p. 69). Zahid's divisive ideas are evident even to the young Laila who sees in Zahid's reaction a disgusting hatred which verges on fanaticism as it encompasses even Muslims who may be divergent in their practices.

Corresponding to the Shia-Sunni relation is the greater issue of the Hindu-Muslim relation vis-a-vis the English. Referring to the 1857 rising against the British it is pointed out that a group of Hindus and Muslims combined together to fight against the British while there were others who helped the British. The *taluqdars* are grouped into two classes- the nationalist *taluqdars* who wear Gandhi cap and white *khaddar achkan* and the *taluqdars* who stand for feudal unity to retain their power in as much as they feel threatened by the nationalist movement. The point that emerges is that the Hindu-Muslim relationship was sometimes grounded in communality of religion and sometimes in the personality of the friends. For example, Muslim Kemal felt himself to be closer to Hindu Ranjit than to any friend in England. He claims that his friendship to Ranjit was rooted in the past and could not be erased by a few years of stay in an alien land. By contrast, the relationship of Kemal and Sita flounders on religious considerations. They love each other and Kemal wants to marry her, "But for all her sophistication, scratch her and you will find an orthodox Hindu full of prejudices against Muslims" (Hosain, 1988, p. 196). Saleem finds fault with Sita that she refused to marry Kemal on religious grounds. But when Saleem is asked whether he could justify the marriage of a Muslim girl to a Hindu boy, he holds the view that prohibition of a Muslim girl marrying a Hindu boy is necessary "under certain circumstances of self-preservation" (Hosain, 1988, p. 196). In his view, the Hindu-Muslim gulf is unbridgeable. Saleem also justifies his stand that Hindus discriminate against Muslims, "What can you expect from a religion which forbids people to eat and drink together?

When even a man's shadow can defile another? How is real friendship or understanding possible?" (Hosain, 1988, p. 197) In her conversation with Asad, Laila gives vent to her thoughts and feelings of disillusionment with the contemporary mood of religious distrust and antagonism, "Such hatreds are being stirred up. How can we live together as a nation if all the time only the differences between the different communities are being preached? I can't understand why Saleem can't see the danger" (Hosain, 1988, p. 245). Laila critiques Saleem's divisive ideology which pits him against moderate forces like Uncle Hamid. She sees Saleem's decision to support the League because he believes that "the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it against which the Muslims must organise" (Hosain, 1988, p. 233) as merely an "appeal to the lowest instincts – to fear and fanaticism" (Hosain, 1988, p. 245). Deriding such emphasis on religious identity, she is also sceptical about the religious devoutness of her aunt and her uncle's friend, the Raja of Amirpur, "...they who condemned idolaters for making gods to serve their spiritual needs themselves turned God into many shapes with each twist of their minds" (Hosain,1988, pp. 262-263).

Laila affiliates herself to democratic ideals, a thinking that emerges even before Partition conflicts begin. Resistance to imperialist domination comes in the form of acts such as the refusal to sing the alien National Anthem while in school; the freedom movement and Gandhi's Satyagrah unleashes in Laila a burning desire "to fight for our country's freedom as the Satyagrahis did, to lie on the spit-stained pavements in front of the treacherous shops that sold foreign cloth, to march in peaceful protest, to defy the might of the arrogant whites" (Hosain, 1988, p. 51). Such spontaneous nationalistic sentiments coupled with her belief in India's cultural syncretism already serve to establish which way Laila's loyalties lay. Although Laila sides with secularism, yet she

cannot but observe the ugly communalism that was gripping the city. Pandey's (2010) definition of communalism is applicable to this situation:

> Communalism in the peculiar colonial usage that we adopted in South Asia referred to political movements and activities based on the proclaimed common interests (economic, cultural, political) of members of a religious community, in opposition to the politics and activities of members of another religious community (or communities), and to the real or imagined threat from these. Of necessity, it referred also to the condition of suspicion, fear, and hostility between people belonging to different religious denominations that commonly accompanies or follows from these politics. (p. 187)

In the run up to Partition Laila witnesses the way Saleem's divisive ideas and his full fledged support for Pakistan breeds further division and hostility. She finds a shift in the kind of people who begin to visit Saleem at *Ashiana*, people who are at odds with the kind of visitors that his father receives, "A new type of person now frequented the house. Fanatic, bearded men and young zealots would come to see Saleem" (Hosain, 1988, p. 230). Distrusting Indian nationalism, he thinks the League will usher in changes. Pandey (2010) makes an interesting observation that, "...communalism sought to approximate nationalism" (p. 188) as "...communalism to some was nationalism to others" (p. 189). Saleem, Nadira and Zahra camouflage communalism in the guise of nationalism. Jinnah and the Muslim League too would be apt to argue, "...it was the nationalist claim, rather than a communalist one, that the establishment of the independent state of Pakistan in 1947 seemed to uphold" (Pandey, 2010, p. 189). It is under the banner of the Muslim League that Saleem articulates his dissatisfaction with the Indian national identity. The need to assert a Muslim identity was based on the

premise that Muslims would not experience belonging in India at both the personal and the political levels. The attempt to override the dominance of the national is born out of the consciousness of being 'different' as a community and who require a 'different' space to call their own. Naive to the complexities of partisan politics and to the rising spectre of communalism Laila, however very soon gets schooled through her keen sense of observation and her interactions with Saleem, Asad, Kemal and Zahid, as also the heated arguments between Uncle Hamid and Saleem. Begum Waheed's obsession with Islam she reads as "Islamic crusade". She learns about Saleem's hatred for "orthodox Hindus full of prejudices against Muslims" (Hosain, 1988, p. 196). His disgust for the Hindus suggests an unbridgeable gulf. Laila's ideas can be termed progressive for she aligns with nationalism and in the words of Pandey (2010), "Nationalism was declared as modern and progressive, reflecting the spirit of the age. Communalism was its opposite – reactionary and backward-looking..." (p. 189).

Laila's arguments in favour of Indian nationalism are blunted by the vociferous Zahra and Nadira. To borrow Hasan's (2001) words, the latter speak up in support of "political separatism and an independent Muslim personality, divorced from its history, culture, and traditions" (p.119). The painful reality for those not affluent enough like Nadira, Zahra and Saleem or who chose to be rooted to their original homes and homeland, and stayed behind in India, was that the new nation of Pakistan would cause the disintegration of the socio-cultural fabric of India which was not created overnight but took centuries to evolve. But, Laila's cousins are blinded by the imagined haven that Pakistan was supposed to be and their brand of Muslim nationalism did not include an understanding of the appalling misery that many innocent Muslims who were victims of riots faced. Laila's cousins form part of the group which came to be known

as *muhajirs* in Pakistan but who were luckier than most for they could safely ensconce themselves in the social life of Pakistan, the kind of life they were accustomed to in India. Hasan (2001) documents the fate of the *muhajirs* thus:

> It is no doubt true that tangible material benefits accrued to some of the migrants, chiefly from among the 2 million Urdu-speaking refugees (still categorised as *muhajirs*) from UP and Bihar, many of whom monopolised the army, civil service and the professions. (p. 120)

Laila is a witness to the real motives of some who decide to migrate. In Kemal's view, it is more likely opportunism that drives Saleem to opt for Pakistan as the company he works for assures him a promotion with bright prospects. Zahra's husband Naseer, an ambitious Indian Civil Service officer, too opts for Pakistan as the position of a Secretary will be his for the asking once he lands. Laila's own loyalties are with India and she supports Kemal's views that Pakistan can never be their country. Even with the prospect of a civil war looming large Kemal is willing to take his chances and stay back because he does not want the family to split up. His warning to Saleem proves prophetic, "Don't you see, we will belong to different countries, have different nationalities? Can you imagine every time we want to see each other we'll have to cross national frontiers? Maybe even have to get visas" (Hosain, 1988, pp. 286-287). Laila's narrative is able to capture the almost complete severing from the homeland that occurred for the Muslim migrants to Pakistan for she notes, "Less than two months later Saleem and Nadira left for Pakistan and it was easier for them thereafter to visit the whole wide world than the home which had once been theirs" (Hosain,1988, p. 289). In a similar context Hasan (2001) mentions, "Jameel Jalibi, a former vice-chancellor of Karachi University, lamented how the Indo-Muslim cultural heritage, the

pride of the *muhajirin*, had ended at the Wagah border and how access to it was controlled by passports and visas" (p. 131). The new and alien land knows Saleem "as an individual without a background" (Hosain, 1988, p. 299) and his roots are unacknowledged. Whether successful or not the *muhajirs* in Pakistan have always been looked upon as usurpers and aliens by the original settlers, the former also being Muslims notwithstanding. By the time Saleem is able to visit India after a gap of five years, the scars of loss and separation have run so deep in the family as to be, in Laila's perception, "hurtful to the human spirit" (Hosain, 1988, p.299). Laila likens the reunion at Hasanpur as an occasion when each of the family members experienced their roots "like the pain felt in the extremities of amputated limbs" (Hosain, 1988, p. 299). The amputation metaphor conveys a sense of unbearable physical pain and the idea of roots involves one's country of birth, home, relationships and a past, all of which lie in fragments.

Partition sent migrants across the borders and in exchange brought refugees whose presence took away a lot from the "humane, poetic soul of the city" (Hosain,1988, p. 299). Known for its sophisticated and refined culture which evolved from sixteenth century onwards, Lucknow's tryst with Partition made it lose some of this. Laila notices the cultural profile of Lucknow changing from the time that differences first started seeping in. Inhabitants replaced the fine art of conversation that Lucknow was known for–in which even verbal battles were carried out with delightful refinement–with aggressive arguments. Religious and political differences caused the "desire to inflict wounds" (Hosian, 1988, p.230). Laila is mindful of the way in which opportunistic businessmen like Agarwal brought about a marked change in the physical landscape of the city by building "rows of cheap houses, cashing in on the needs of

refugees who had swarmed into the city after partition" (Hosain, 1988, p. 294). The refugees themselves stand out like sore thumbs, never having been part of Lucknow's unique culture leading Ranjit to complain to Saleem who visits the city after two years, "Saleem, you went away, and these others have replaced you...but you took our language and our manners, and we were brought a cacophony of sounds that grate the ears, and manners that sear the soul" (Hosain, 1988, p.301). The disappearing Lucknow culture is a testimony to the reality that many cities and towns were shaped by the refugees who settled there. Refugee discontent adding to the already pervasive atmosphere of hate, suspicion and anger, is seen in the hostility of those like the young Sikh towards Saleem.

Laila presents a critique of those like Nadira and Zahra who find it comparatively easy to move over to Pakistan and make their mark as social activists there, while not sparing a single thought for those Muslims who for various reasons were unable to migrate or did not migrate, thereby exposing themselves to violence and humiliation from other communities. It is with great pain that Laila perceives the change that has come in the minds of the educated Muslim youth who "pinned their hopes not on secular nationalism but on the evolution of a specifically Muslim nationhood" (Hasan, 2001, pp.112-113). While an intellectual and emotional rift has always existed between Laila and her cousin Zahra, it is Partition that deepens this rift further. Zahra's break with India is so total that on a visit back, she questions Laila's indifference to her "Muslim culture" (Hosain, 1988, p. 303) and proudly proclaims her own involvement with refugee work in Pakistan. Stung into retaliation Laila attempts to expose the superficial nature of Zahra's involvement in social work. Recounting her own experiences when the arson and violence had reached the hills where she lived as a

widow alone with her child, Laila reveals the “fear of violence, murder, rape and mutilation” (Hosain, 1988, p.304) that she had known. It was her Hindu friends who had saved her and her daughter, at risk to their own lives. She launches a scathing attack on the Muslim leaders to whom Pakistan meant everything and who abandoned the Muslims left behind, Muslims who were mostly saved by the much hated Hindus. But Laila’s sense of disappointment is great when Zahra having reached the point of no return, cannot be made to understand the plight of people affected on the Indian side of the border. These differences between Laila and Zahra serve to highlight not only cleavages that have emerged at the religious and personal levels but also at the social and political ones. Laila’s is an all inclusive nationalism which recognises larger affiliations not bound by religious loyalties. Her affiliation is to her land and to the people of the land. She is willing to not only accommodate differences, but also cherish, foster and celebrate them.

The final section of the novel can be read as a tribute that Hosain pays to the land she owes cultural allegiance to – the land of her birth and her ancestors – and hence the memories. Partition had left Hosain bereft of her own country but embedded within the memory of her homeland is also the memory of her ancestors who had come to India eight centuries ago. Chedgzoy (2010) makes an interesting observation that there is a lack of importance given to “women’s contributions to cultural memory” (p. 216) and she remarks that, “In many societies, women’s voices are harder to hear than men’s and are listened to with less respect: consequently, women’s accounts of their memories may be undervalued or distrusted” (p. 217). Chedgzoy (2010) has observed that in “Western culture, Memory traditionally has a female form – that of the Greek goddess Mnemosyne” (p. 216). According to Reading (2010), “In elements of Hindu

culture memory is also feminine" (p. 220) and she goes on to cite from the *Bhagavadgita*. The reality, however, is reverse. Female memory as testimony is not significantly valued and it is female silence which is more acceptable. Therefore, Laila's revisiting the city of Lucknow and her old home *Ashiana* and her act of retrieval of memories post independence and Partition, may be construed as a subversion in some respects.

Laila's memories are not only an integral part of her experiences as a woman but are also articulated as testimony to certain aspects of the Partition experience. Inherent within Laila's individual memory is also cultural memory. Hirsch and Smith (2010) explain that cultural memory "is most forcefully transmitted through the individual voice and body – through the testimony of a witness" (p. 225) and that it involves, "…a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears and desires" (pp. 224-225). Elaborating on this, they observe:

> Cultural memory […] can best be understood at the juncture where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called on to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity. The individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony or performance, also serves as a challenge and a counter memory to official hegemonic history. (p. 225)

Laila's memories serve to recall a life that has been moulded by the influence of patriarchal domination and her own defiance of it to exercise her choices on the one

hand, and on the other by the historical tragedy of Partition. This visit after fourteen years provides not only a trajectory of the significant physical changes that have appeared both in the city's landscape and the house, but also provides a critique of government rules regarding evacuee property of those Muslims who had elected to move to Pakistan, and of the manner in which the landowning classes like her own family, grappled with abolished privileges and how "their world cracked apart" (Hosain, 1988, p. 277).

The house post-Partition is no longer intact with Saleem's portion being 'evacuee property' taken over by a Custodian, and once private, the portion now houses offices of refugees from the other side of the border. They are strangers living in rooms once "private and guarded" (Hosain, 1988, p. 272) and therefore a sort of violation of Laila's home has taken place. Traces of trauma can be discerned in this encounter between the narrator and the "disintegrating reality" of the house which leaves her "as still as a stone in unstirred waters" (Hosain, 1988, p. 272). Laila refers to as "death blow" (Hosain, 1988, p. 278) the new Act on evacuees and their property introduced in 1950, which radically changed the lives of Laila's family who faced enforced displacement. Commenting on this law Daiya (2008) says:

> An important dimension of the production of Partition migrants as refugees through the technology of citizenship was its imbrications with the state production of "evacuee property". Migrants' property and assets were appropriated not only by local thieves, incoming refugees, neighbours and others, but also by the postcolonial state apparatus, which cited the urgent demands of refugee rehabilitation to justify the appropriation. (p. 135)

According to this law, the government announced Saleem's portion of the house to be evacuee property with the family left with the only course i.e. to sell the house. This is in no way a voluntary decision but one forced on them by the state initiated act. In the context of an almost similar situation portrayed in the film *Garam Hawa*, based on Ismat Chughtai's story, Daiya (2008) remarks: "...how institutions targeted Indian Muslims living in homes whose legal title happened to be held by a family member who had migrated to Pakistan, to acquire property" (p.139). Laila's "most private emotions were contained by this house" (Hosain,1988, p.272) and she does not experience the disintegration of *Ashiana* in terms of a simple loss but more as violent dismemberment and critiques the Act which brought it about, a critique which finds no articulation in historical records:

> There were strangers living in the rooms once so private and guarded, strangers who were names in Government files balancing Saleem's name against theirs – he labelled 'evacuee', they 'refugees'. Their presence here, and Saleem's in their erstwhile homeland, was part of a statistical calculation in the bargaining of bureaucrats and politicians, in which millions of uprooted human beings became just numerical figures. The official words describing them had no meaning in terms of human heartache. (Hosain, 1988, p. 272)

Such evacuee laws, according to Daiya, entailed a process of "minoritization" (p. 140). That this Act, introduced in 1950, had to be amended in 1960, speaks for the fact that it was discriminatory for it sought to seize "Muslim-owned and Muslim-inhabited properties" (Daiya,2008, p.143). Laila's reading of the Act "signals a silenced history of the forced acquisition of properties and the displacement of Indian Muslims" (Daiya, 2008, p.144).

It is not only her private memories that Laila is confronting but also those of her community's people for she says, "I felt their remembered pain as my own" (Hosain, 1988, p.279). Laila's memories are the forgotten stories of Partition that no official history recorded. This looking back to the past uncovers layers of memories. Laila's one last tour of the house and all its rooms trigger recollections of the Partition debate that had raged between her cousins Kemal and Saleem, with Saleem choosing to migrate to Pakistan. The upheaval that the country had gone through with all its associated issues of communal violence, extreme polarisation, creation of Pakistan and the future of Muslims as a community in both India and Pakistan is recalled with clarity. One also has the strong feeling that Laila's remembering here is in reality the autobiographical memory of the author for it is significant that Laila comes to revisit *Ashiana* fourteen years after Partition which fixes the year at 1961, the same year the novel was written. *Ashiana* has assumed the character of a memorial housing the memories of the past, which has been lost forever. The novel transmits them in the attempt to preserve them. Laila's leaving *Ashiana* fourteen years ago was a result of her asserting her choice to marry Ameer against the wishes of her family. This separation from "the home of my childhood and adolescence" (Hosain, 1988, p. 270) is akin to the separation that Hosain herself had to undergo when she chose to remain in England post Partition. Laila's revisiting the old home could also be read as Hosain's own personal journey to relive the days before Partition but always haunted by the realisation that "There were ghosts that could not be laid by the passing of the years" (Hosain, 1988, p.310). A certain duality is at play here – one senses the presence of both longing and belonging. The narrative here also shifts back and forth between the past and the present. Laila broods over memories of the house and its occupants. Her

memories are able to capture the hypocrisy, materialism and fragmentation played out by not only members of her family but also neighbours and friends. This she sees as the effect of post-Partition opportunism and pseudo nationalism.

The element of mourning is inherent in the imagery used to describe the present condition of the house. Unkempt, disfigured, rubbish dump, empty, decay, gloomy are the epithets which are used to not only denote the lost beauty and grandeur of *Ashiana* but also serves to mourn the passing away of the feudal way of life, her own childhood, the warmth and community to be found in a joint family, the division of the country and the division of the family. Mohanram's (2016) comment is relevant here, "…there is an intricate relationship between mourning and memory in that mourning is a result of memory and the act and process of mourning, in a loop and in turn, evokes memory" (p. 5).Even before embarking on this final visit to the house which is to be sold, Laila was filled with the foreboding that she "would break down" (Hosain, 1988, p. 272) and enters the house "with every nerve alive and quivering" (Hosain,1988, p.273). As this final section of the novel moves back and forth between past and present, it foregrounds the ruptures and the shifts in relationships that had taken place fourteen years ago. What haunts her most is her ruptured relationship with her beloved Aunt Abida whose rejection of her marriage to Ameer she perceived as cruel. Her marriage to Ameer began "with the blessings of not one of my elders" (Hosain, 1988, p.312). These are the ghosts of the past that require a closure and the house becomes a medium for that. For Laila it is not just the past which has left its wounds behind but also the present which is traumatic.

Wandering alone through the house she encounters her own reflection in the mirror "longing for release from the ghosts that kept me from acceptance of the

present" (Hosain, 1988, p.313). This is suggestive of Foucault's idea of the mirror as heterotopia. Foucault (1984) sees heterotopias as "counter-sites" (p. 3) and as places "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (p. 4). Laila's reflection in the mirror is seen by her as an "intrusion" (Hosain, 1988, p.313) for her present image is erased to be replaced by "the girl who haunted me and made me a stranger to those who did not see her through the mask of time" (Hosain, 1988, p.313). She calls this her "other self" that would release her from the memories that haunt her in the present. The memories are also of her dead husband Ameer. The mirror as the heteroptopia is seen with possibilities that would "reconstitute" (Foucault, 1984, p.4) Laila's self. To borrow an interpretation from Chakravarty (2008), for Laila this heterotopia of the mirror is an "'elsewhere' that promises emancipatory possibilities" (p. 17) of "healing, growth and empowerment" (p. 18). The mirror enables Laila to perceive the duality of her own self – one trapped in the past and the other wanting to break free from it and renew her links with the present. It becomes her temporary heterotopia which reveals the paradox that "she was so different from me, that girl whose yesterdays and todays looked always towards her tomorrow, while my tomorrows were always yesterdays" (Hosain,1988, p.319) and this revelation offers her the release she desires for she now knows "I was my own prisoner and could release myself" (p. 319). At this moment she undergoes a catharsis and liberation from the past enabling her to realise a renewal of agency and a changed attitude of the future. The home assumes a significance which compels us to reread the history of Partition. The fissures occurring at the political and public level creep into the private space of the home, the old way of life that disappears, and the final division of the house and its members echoing the division of the country– are all fraught with

evidences that go into adding up to our understanding of the history of Partition. Laila's home undergoes a change which is construed as traumatic and represents a world that is lost forever. The world made up of familiar faces and familiar customs now exists only in memory and forever becomes a mirage, never to be attained.

Laila's final visit to *Ashiana* after a gap of fourteen years has given her ample time to mull over memories–of the house and its members, of her relationships within the house, of the divisions which existed and began to exist at various levels amongst the members and finally the division brought by Partition. Her visit triggers the process of viewing and reviewing through her memories all that had transpired between the members of *Ashiana* and all that was experienced by her and the others during the traumatic Partition. The much more rebellious Laila had not been able to process what she had heard and witnessed earlier and therefore a coming to terms with the past and also the present had still not been properly effected. Deeper understanding of the narratives of separation and loss is acquired through a clearer perspective brought along with a more evolved personality which is finally able to come out of its illusory haze. The final confrontation with her own self and the ghost of past memories removes many a blinker, giving her a more mature insight into the complexities of human relationships and life's realities.

The analysis of Laila's experience of Partition reveals the connections that frame it. Challenging and subverting the acceptable ideas of nation, religion, class and gender, Laila's narrativisation can be considered a minor alternative history of Partition. While the official narratives recount the political fragmentation of India, it is novels like *SBC* that record the minor narratives of fragmentation of house and family. Giving no credence to memory and nostalgia, national historiography therefore, fails in

providing the accounts of even a trace of the psychological consequences of Partition. This chapter has attempted to make visible the divisions that Partition brought about at the levels of family, house and nation and the psychological scars it left behind.

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