

Displacement and Identity Crisis in *ASunlight on a Broken Column*

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People are very much attached and deeply bound to their name, faith, family, social and religious customs, and also their place of birth. They develop oneness with the culture, the climate and topography of that area. However, people move out of that area on various considerations, for example, for job, for education, for trade etc. This kind of shifting still keeps them bound to their roots. There is another type of displacement beyond the control of people, which compels them to move away from their roots and the place to which they belong. This dislocation may be due to natural calamities, famine, revolutions, communal tensions, racist attacks, war, partition of nations or riots, to cite examples. The first type of displacement cannot be called *displacement per se*. It may help people to reach financially better positions, through a successful trade or a well paid job. But the second type of displacement is cruel and affects the inner being, because it makes the displaced people helpless and feel like 'fish out of water'. They take a long time to get acceptance, acquaintances and recognition before taking root in an alien soil or in an alien culture.

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is a study of the disintegration of a Muslim Taluqdar family of Lucknow, set against the social and political changes in the pre-Partition and post-Partition India and depicts the second type of displacement. Using the first person of Laila, this covers about two turbulent decades in the life of the narrator-heroine. It records the different stages in Laila's life, from adolescence to maturity during the years of political achievements and upheavals. The novel explores Laila's search for order and identity and her defiance of the patriarchal system realizing that she is in a disintegrating feudal system in a country shattered by Partition.

People who are disturbed and displaced feel estranged from their roots and are lodged as strangers and outsiders in an alien land. They perpetually search nostalgically for their lost roots causing untold emotional problems including identity crisis in the growth of children of future generation. During calamities, riots and violence, running away from their place for safety is the only option, and there comes the most cruel part of displacement. People are forced to take the decision to move out leaving behind all their belongings, livelihood, friends and dear ones considering only the safety of the life of family members. When there is need for displacement, the people to be displaced find it difficult to decide and are tormented by questions like where to move out?, when to move out? and above all whether to move out at all?

Partition of India proved to be a base from where the identity crisis originated. All the dreams about safety in one's land and leading a life with dignity and pride were shattered in no time since violence broke out as an aftermath of Partition. The worst

consequence of Partition was identity crisis experienced both by the Muslims and the Hindus. When people themselves did not understand the reason for the repercussions of Partition that made the people who were friendly till then rave for each other's blood, the fact dawned on the political and religious leaders and writers that the first phase of identity crisis was religion which became the parameter of one's identity. With the displacement of the masses from their roots, identity crisis surfaced in the lives of the people for the second time. Earlier, religion had been the basis of identity and people had fought upon religious lines for the sake of communal pride, but with the uprooting of masses the concept of identity acquired a new and different meaning. Now the people, who had lost their roots and had crossed over to their desired lands, were identified as 'outsiders', while fighting for the sake of communal identity. Shockingly enough, the people of their own community had deprived them of their identity. Their own community had considered them as 'outsiders.' The stigma of being an outsider became a permanent sign of their lives and even the subsequent generations could not get rid of it. "In India these uprooted people living in the camps were called 'Refugees' while those who arrived in Pakistan were called Muhajirs" (Chopra 104). Therefore, this very concept of identity crisis came under the scrutiny of many Muslim writers in order to make the masses aware of its realistic form.

Hosain nostalgically paints the image of Lucknow and highlights the loss of Muslim taluqdar family's identity bit by bit in social, political and cultural contexts. The past glory and privileges they had mentioned, are also examined in detail with certain

incidents after Partition. The process of development is defined in terms of the individual's quest for identity and meaningful existence in the social set up. The process of maturity, and the quest are colossal and slow and consist of many clashes between the individual's aspirations, needs, desires and the value system entailed by the social order in which the individual lives. Finally the protagonist is accommodated in society, displaying the spirit and values of the social order.

As home is the central location where gendered identities are moulded in terms of one's culture and religion, the same place becomes the site where challenging of such identities takes place. Laila says, "Ashiana, the home of my childhood and adolescence"(SBC 270). Laila says more about Ashiana. It symbolizes 'nest' and their identity and when that was scattered all on a sudden, it could not be accepted. The relationship she had with her aunts, cousins, uncles, servants and the arguments they had, the togetherness as a family maintained the feudal pride and honour of a Taluqdari lineage. When Laila visited her ancestral house after a long period she was very much depressed to see the gradual disintegration after Partition and she expressed her views of nostalgia as,

My eyes saw with the complex vision of nostalgia and sadness the loves arches and domes and finials, the curve of the river, the branching of the roads, the unfamiliar names and changed lettering of the road signs, the ruined Residency on its green elevation without its flag, the proud club that had been a palace and was now a Research Institute the pedestal without its marble Empress and with a

vagrant lying across it in deep sleep , the faded feudal mansions, the Mall with new shops and restaurants and cinemas, pavement booths as in a bazaar cluttered with tawdry signs, old buildings with neglected frontages, the church with a new annexe to its school where children no longer sang ‘God Save the King’ the Government House flagstaff carrying the tricolor, the quite, deep-shadowed trees lining the road. Furthermore, as the chief occupants of the domestic sphere, the responsibility of preserving one’s cultural values fall on the shoulders of women.

(SBC 270)

The realistic painting of Hosain about Laila’s nostalgic past showshow much she is not getting separated emotionally from her house and surroundings. The poetic utterance is an indication of how they are still a part of her identity. “The sun was breaking through scattered clouds, and its warmth flickered over goose-fleshed skin as I drove towards Ashiana....Tattered settlements for refugees had erupted on once open spaces. Ugly buildings had sprung up, conceived by ill-digested modernity and the hasty needs of a growing city” (SBC 270). She felt lonely in personal, political and cultural levels. The pride, honour and dignity were lost and the division of the subcontinent creates a painful separation in the society.

The individual’s sense of self differs according to one’s ideology and the identities of individuals in a family differ from one another. Uncle Hamid’s opinion of safeguarding ancient rights and privileges is not acceptable to the younger generation like Saleem who supports Muslim League and works for its growth. The conflicting political

and social ideologies among family members show the effect of political trauma in younger generation: “everyday there was an explosion of anger to some point” (*SBC* 234). Uncle Hamid on seeing the crumbling of identity says, “I am a part of feudalism, and proud to be. I shall fight for it. It is my heritage –and yours. Let me remind you of that” (*SBC* 234). Family structure determines the psychological adjustment of the family members. The shattering of identity becomes visible in a family which is the smallest unit of a society. There is a tension between the adults’ attempt to obtain autonomy and the elders’ attempt to reinforce their power.

Hosain makes a deliberate choice of giving the interior domestic realm the importance it deserves. *In Indian Writings in English: New Critical Perspectives*, it is said that “the novel concentrates around love, marriage and traditional practices although the place, people and situation change with the passage of time. Still there is a gripping cord between social stigmas, political disturbances and emotional longings.”(Sinha 267). The gradual movement of the family members one by one leaves their ancestral house in Hasanpur desolate. The valuable things from the room were shifted from Ashiyana to store room and Hasanpur. The furniture and objects which remained for long years were replaced with new ones. Laila felt hard hearted and found it difficult to see the new cook Khansamah in the place of Karam Ali. The world seemed new to her as she missed all the relatives and the relationship bonds. Seeing the ugliness and strangeness of the present reminds her of her relationship with the family members and friends in the past in the same house. Her memories take her to the unconditional love and protection of aunt Abida. “There were strangers living in the rooms where I had once searched for my lost

father and mother, where I had found refuge in the love of my aunt Abida and Hakiman Bua” (*SBC 277*).

As Saleem had gone to Pakistan, his share in all the property was taken away. With scrupulous honesty Kemel declared his share, to the last pot and pan and stool and chair. Part of Ashiana was taken over by the Custodian, and later the Hasanpur house was threatened. Kemel asked his mother to let him sell Ashiana and buy Saleem’s share in Hasanpur with the money so as to save the ancestral house.

At first she refused ... She made herself ill with anger against the way of the world, the Government, her son and his wife. “What right have they to steal what is ours? Will they never be content with how much they rob? Is there no justice? Is this a war with Custodians for enemy property? Did they not consent to the partition themselves? Why treat those people like enemies who went over? Were they not given a free choice? Were they warned they would lose their property, and have their families harassed? If they want to drive out Muslims why not say it like honest men? Sheltering behind the false slogans of secular state! Hypocrites! Cowards! It is good Saleem has gone away. They will destroy you and all fools like you who have trusted them. The Baniyas! (*SBC 280*)

Kemel likes to stay in India as he has a deep sense of patriotism and he doesn’t think of going to Pakistan. “I was born here, and generation of my ancestors before me. I am content to die here and be buried with them”(*SBC 288*). Saleem in contrast opts to go to Pakistan and warns by telling Kemel that people will soon discriminate with their

religious identity. Later Saleem realizes his loss of sense of belonging in Pakistan and feels happy to visit Hasanpur during holidays. Laila travels with her faded memory of past and remembers all the prestige and honour of her family. The days she spent with Ameer and the dream of future with Ameer are only memory now. While moving along the rooms of Ashiana, she comes near a mirror and begins to stare at her own self and feels her own differences. In the loss of self in a lonely land without her loving aunt Abida, she searches for her own identity. She is not interested to live in both the countries which have deep religious crisis. She urges unity among all the religions and the memory of the past gives her a sweet melody. What we understand is that during the time of partition and mass evacuation as consequence, people are torn between the land where they lived and the land to which they have to go. It is not mere patriotism or attachment to the soil to which they belonged, but it is the identity crisis leading to indecisiveness that is dominant.

The hopes and dreams of all the members are shattered after Partition. Before the Partition many people thought the creation of a new country would solve the problem of religious animosity. Laila's memory takes her back to the lost memory of their last meeting on discussing their future after Partition. The dual identity of Laila has been revealed beautifully in the end of the chapter by Hosain through the reflection of mirror, "she was so different from me, that girl whose yesterdays and todays looked always towards her tomorrow, while my tomorrows were always yesterdays"(SBC 319). Hosain focuses on how the taluqdar family faces the struggles against Partition in personal and

political aspects. The change of identity in the personal, religious and political aspects is explicitly designed. Each character in his or her own way bears the brunt of Partition, feeling that uprooting from the place and culture to which they belong has become the cause of an unexplainable agony resulting in identity crisis. Most of the characters fit into the new political and social background but get a feeling that they are planted in a new environment with which they are not able to identify.

Accepting new identity with complacency and getting ready to live in a society without attaching any importance to identity is more easily said than done. Hosain very clearly presents the trauma undergone by the characters because of Partition on the basis of religion. When an individual tries to get adjusted to the life in a new environment, the shattered and bruised identity stands as a roadblock to build a harmonious and peaceful society. But one cannot make such a sweeping statement as the experience of the characters is different and the disturbance to peace and commotion and injury caused to identity did not always have a negative impact on the individual. As one who has made an exhaustive and meticulous study, Erikson says, "... what the child acquires at a given stage is a certain ratio between the positive and negative, which if the balance is toward the positive, will help him to meet later crises with a better chance for unimpaired total development...." (122). The disturbed identity can find solace through love and also by accepting the new faith. Though the novel presents the hardship borne by people who become conscious of the loss of identity, the novelist seems to obliquely suggest that only

those who succeed in winning over the turbulence caused by loss of identity, survive their new environment and identify themselves with humanity.

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