

THE DOMESTIC SPHERE IN ATTIA HOSAIN'S *SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN* (1961): THE HOME MIRRORS THE WORLD

Arunima Dey

Universidad de Salamanca

Abstract

By analysing Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), the article attempts to foreground the significance of *home* in Indian partition literature. As its theoretical framework, the article refers to postcolonial scholar Partha Chatterjee who claims that the Indian nationalist agenda during freedom movement turned home into a sacred site that was meant to safeguard the native values from the 'corrupting' Western ideology, which led to the segregation of the public and private sphere. In this context, the article examines how by focussing on the domestic sphere of home as a microcosmic reflexion of the socio-political changes happening in the country, Hosain reveals that both the private and the public are closely interlinked, thereby debunking the notion that private space is outside of history. Furthermore, the article explores the novel's depiction of the *pardah/zenana* culture in order to highlight that though considered a place of refuge, home becomes a regulatory site of assertion of patriarchy-instigated familial, societal and religious codes, which makes it a claustrophobic place for its female inhabitants. In essence, the article argues that Hosain partakes in an alternate, gynocentric narrative of the partition of India.

Keywords: Attia Hosain, Indian partition, domestic fiction, *pardah/zenana* culture, Muslim women, South Asian feminism, Muslim aristocratic home, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

Resumen

El presente estudio analiza el significado del concepto *hogar* en la literatura de la Partición india a través del análisis de la novela *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), de Attia Hosain. El enfoque teórico de este artículo se basa en el estudio del autor postcolonial Partha Chatterjee en el que se establece que el hogar se convierte en espacio sagrado a través del cual el nacionalismo indio es capaz de salvaguardar los valores intrínsecos indios frente a la amenaza de occidente en concordancia con la diferencia de las esferas individuales/familiares y las sociales. Hosain demuestra que el ámbito público y el privado están totalmente relacionados, desmitificando la presuposición de que el ámbito privado está fuera de la historia. La autora lo demuestra en esta novela describiendo el espacio doméstico como un microcosmos a través del cual reflexiona sobre los cambios socio-políticos que tienen lugar en el país en la cronología de la novela. De este modo, la descripción que se ofrece en la novela sobre el velo y el área de reclusión que las mujeres musulmanas tienen reservada

en sus viviendas pretende mostrar el ámbito doméstico como lugar que refleja y regula los valores patriarcales que definen familia, sociedad y religión y que, al mismo tiempo, convierten el ámbito del hogar en un espacio claustrofóbico para las mujeres que lo habitan. Por tanto, este artículo ilustra cómo Hosain refleja la Partición desde una narrativa subversiva y ginocéntrica.

Palabras clave: Attia Hosain, partición de India, ficción doméstica, la cultura de *purdah/zenana*, mujeres musulmanas, feminismo del Sur de Asia, aristocracia del hogar musulmán, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) by Attia Hosain¹ (1913-1998) is the first novel by a Muslim woman author on the partition of India.² Fictional narratives on the Indian partition, specifically by male authors, normally focus on the political aspect of the event. Though partition literature generally tends to foreground the plight of the common man during the ethnic genocide that followed the splitting of the Indian Subcontinent into India and East and West Pakistan on the fateful day of 15 August 1947, most events that are narrated in male-authored novels occur within the public sphere.³ As opposed to this, by analysing Hosain's novel, I will focus on the concept of the domestic sphere as a crucial place of history, which is usually neglected and left out because of the prioritisation of public masculine space over private feminine space within the hierarchy of historical recollections. Women, who are predominantly ascribed the private realm of home by virtue of them being mothers and housewives within the patriarchal scheme of things, find themselves absent from partition history because home was assumed to be lacking of any historical significance, since all partition and independence related incidents were believed to have taken place in the public sphere. Hence, by focussing on Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, I will argue that Hosain uses the motif of home to give voice to

¹ Attia Hosain belonged to the landed aristocracy in undivided colonial India, who subsequently moved to the United Kingdom in 1947 (the same year of India's partition). She is the first Muslim Indian woman from a landowning family to graduate from university (University of Lucknow, 1933).

² The partition of India accompanied the independence of the country after nearly two hundred years of British colonisation. The partition occurred based on growing religious tensions between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The north-western state of Punjab and the eastern state of Bengal were divided to create West and East Pakistan respectively for the Muslim community, while Hindus and Sikhs were allocated India. Once the national borders were declared, many found themselves on the wrong side of the border and were forced to leave their homes behind for an unknown land, which claimed to be their new country based on the sole factor of their religious identity. As the Hindus in now Islamic Pakistan and Muslims in majoritarian Hindu India attempted to cross borders to reach their newly assigned country, many lost their lives in violent religious massacres that spread like wildfire across the states that were divided. It is believed that over ten million people migrated across borders and around two million lost their lives. The riots also bore witness to abduction and rape of women, genital mutilation and castration among other inhumane acts of horror.

³ This aspect is evident in popular male-authored partition novels such as *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, *Azadi* (Freedom, 1975) by Chaman Nahal and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1965) by Manohar Malgonkar.

personal, alternative histories of partition, thereby highlighting the significance of personal space where one can locate the effects of national history specifically on the lives of women.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the novel, a brief critical evaluation of the historical situation (in which Hosain's novel is located) with respect to the nation's perception of home during the partition period is crucial. For this purpose, I must refer to Partha Chatterjee's insightful essay "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" (1989). Chatterjee begins the essay by asserting that the purpose of the British colonising mission to India was to make the 'barbaric' natives believe in "the unworthiness of their traditional customs and embrace the new forms of a civilized and rational social order" (Chatterjee 623). When the nationalist struggle for independence started to gain momentum in the first half of the twentieth century, the colonised Indians were acutely aware of their inferiority in terms of economic and technological development as compared to the British. Having admitted the fact that they must follow Western models of statecraft and science to advance their material lifestyle, the nationalists simply could not let Western ideologies seep into their cultural matrix because they strongly believed that "the spiritual domain of the East was superior to the West," thereby underscoring the importance of protecting their tradition from the corrupting influences of the West (Chatterjee 623). Furthermore, nationalism strongly functioned on the ideology that the spiritual was more important than the material, and this encouraged the notion that as long as India safeguarded its tradition, "it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity" (Chatterjee 624). This ideology operated by segregating the material and the spiritual into two separate categories, which resulted in an "analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner" (Chatterjee 623). This inner sphere that captured the true essence of India was unsurprisingly found in the physical embodiment of home. Hence, within the nationalist discourse, home gained tremendous significance in terms of nation-building ideology where it became the site that protected, nurtured and upheld the real values of India. Lastly, the nationalist rhetoric of protecting the purity of home from Western depravity ultimately led to the segregation of home from the public realm.

Now, keeping Chatterjee's arguments in mind, I return to Hosain's novel. A specific focus on partition fiction by women authors allows for unravelling of varied experiences of women during this tumultuous time in South Asian history. For this purpose, women novelists use certain tropes to exclusively focus on women's issues and their lives during the partition period. One of these is the exploration of the ideological standpoints attached to the private sphere, which is traditionally the space allocated to women. The significance of home lies not just in its physical embodiment, but also in its ideological underpinnings that stem from various cultural understandings of the word.

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. Furthermore, as the chief occupants of the domestic sphere, the responsibility of preserving one's cultural values fall on the shoulders of women. In other words, women are victims of a "double colonisation" where "women are twice colonised – by *colonialist* realities and representations, and by *patriarchal* ones too" (McLeod 175). Therefore, in a conscious effort to debunk this double colonisation, women must redefine the private sphere that has so far been conventionally segregated from the masculine outside world in order to create a notion of self that is moulded by both the private and the political. For this purpose, Hosain's novel reveals

women's lives in the domestic sphere . . . to make visible the relational construction of false binaries such as the public and private, Western and Eastern, and tradition and modernity that continue to inform nationalist discourse in South Asia today. (Didur 124)

Hosain deploys the motif of home to argue that the personal is indeed connected to the political. Hosain's novel becomes a microcosm for the nation where the changes in the country regarding its freedom struggle followed by partition are mirrored in the changing familial structure and relationships at home. As the story progresses, home becomes a politically charged space as characters voice and act out their political affiliations, thereby asserting that the private and the public are no longer separate.

Sunlight can be seen as "the literary equivalent of a photograph album made up of snapshots" that attempts to write "women's experience back into history" by creating a unique kind of partition narrative, which "contest[s] exclusionary, national and imperial histories" (Joannou155). Antoinette Burton in her book *Dwelling in the Archive* (2003) rightly claims that

[a]s an alternative archive of partition, *Sunlight* reshapes the landscape of the historical imagination, offering a modest corrective to local and in turn to national history. That it does so by obscuring the actual violence of partition and focusing instead on its architectural ravages speaks so much to the unnarratability of 1947 as it does to Hosain's determination to bring the pressure of family history to bear on the stories the nation tells itself about its origins. (134)

Hosain creates this "alternative archive of partition" by using the first person narrative technique. The narrator is unsurprisingly female; she is the orphaned protagonist Laila, who belongs to a feudal Muslim family. The novel is a bildungsroman and opens when Laila is fifteen. Hence, by choosing a young female narrator belonging to an orthodox Muslim household, Hosain makes a deliberate choice of giving the interior domestic realm the importance it deserves. Moreover, it can be said that

[t]he domestic arrangements recounted in [Hosain's novel] articulate specific social and cultural milieux, the changing structure of domesticity, and the boundaries – spatial, cultural and psychological –

that define an individual's sense of self and her relationship to family, community, and society. (Khan 118)

By focussing on female characters situated in the domestic sphere, Hosain's novel reveals the partition "experience behind the curtains" and makes one privy to "the closed women's quarters to expose the joy, sorrows, and experiences of the unsung Muslim woman" (Begum 206). Moreover, *Sunlight* must not be mistaken for an "oppositional" narrative "that completely dismantles the preferred narrative of the Indian nation. Rather, what [Hosain] offers is a (potentially) alternative account of this nation in the act of making itself" (Needham 99). In fact, Hosain challenges the concept that one dominant (male) voice can speak on behalf of the entire nation and how the country was affected by partition. To borrow literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's term,⁴ Hosain's novel ascribes to 'heteroglossia' by presenting the reader with multiple voices and various points of view through a plethora of characters, including unmarried Aunt Abida, who is responsible for Laila's upbringing, widowed Aunt Majida and her daughter Zahra, Hindu maidservant Nandi, the staunch patriarch grandfather Baba Jan, his Westernised son Uncle Hamid and his wife Aunt Saira.

The structure of the novel is such that the first two sections elaborate on the lifestyle of Muslim aristocratic women, while from the third section, the consequences of the growing Hindu-Muslim divide as the struggle for independence gains impetus in colonial India are shown to infiltrate the house and affect its inhabitants. The novel, therefore, can be seen as "a historical argument" that reveals "the impossibility of dwelling comfortably at home in the wake of the unspeakable violence" of partition (Burton 106). To stress this point, the final section is set fourteen years later in the aftermath of partition that narrates Laila's visit to her childhood home. In this section, Hosain foregrounds through Laila's perspective, the effects of partition on the house and its family members. As Sarla Palkar in her essay "Beyond Purdah" (1995) notes:

One cannot neatly compartmentalize the personal history of Laila from the social or national history – what makes *Sunlight on a Broken Column* a three dimensional novel is the manner in which the personal, social and national issues keep interacting and reflecting on one another. (115)

This interaction of various issues is made possible by locating Laila's home at the centre where through the means of its inhabitants, the personal, social and national dynamics play out within its walls. For women, home becomes a crucial aspect with respect to self-definition because through "the memories of home," women can "claim a place in history at the intersection of the public and private, the personal and political, the national and the postcolonial" (Burton 4). This informs Laila's return to *Ashiana*⁵ in the end of the novel. Furthermore, Laila's

⁴ Bakhtin introduced the concept of 'heteroglossia' in his essay "Discourse in the Novel," which was originally in Russian and was published in 1934.

⁵ *Ashiana* is Urdu for nest or shelter. The name is taken from Hosain's actual ancestral home in Lucknow (a city in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) especially known for its

physical presence/absence at home is instigated by the event of partition: Laila's romance and her subsequent departure from home with Ameer happen when the freedom struggle is marked by growing political upheaval. In this manner, Hosain succeeds in debunking the myth that nationalism/partition is essentially a public phenomenon.

Sunlight can be read as "domestic fiction," which becomes "the vehicle for tales of life" for women (Gopal 140). Furthermore, in the novel, home emerges as "the space where modernity and tradition seek power over women's lives" (Nayar 130). To explicate, Hosain's novel covers a time span of twenty years starting from the early 1930s till the early 1950s. Unsurprisingly, the novel begins at Laila's home and the reader is told that the elderly patriarch grandfather Baba Jan is on his deathbed. In the character of Baba Jan, Hosain "gives a symbolic representation of the unquestioned authority of patriarchal domestic norms" (Hasan 71). The household under Baba Jan is characterised by a "tightly controlled balance between a life within the household, ordained, enclosed, warm and secure but restricted by demands of modesty, and a life outside, free but insecure and confusing" (Amin 119). Under Baba Jan's command, Ashiana is represented as a stern feudal household where women of the house observe strict purdah to protect aristocratic demands of honour and etiquette and are surrounded by "a thousand taboos fiercer than the most fiery dragons" (Hosain 191). The atmosphere in the house is claustrophobic. As Laila claims, "Zahra and I felt our girlhood a heavy burden" (Hosain 14). However, the first line of the novel itself is indicative of the impending changes to come within the family, and as an extension, in the country:

The day my aunt Abida moved from the *zenana* into the guest room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within call of her father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live. (Hosain 14)

Instigated by Baba Jan's illness, Aunt Abida's moving out of the women's quarters marks a huge change within the familial structure of the house, and this foretells not just the changes about to occur in the family but also in the nation. Furthermore, Baba Jan's dictatorial regime over Ashiana, though creates a highly oppressive space for its female inhabitants, can be read as a nostalgic reminiscence of the *talugdari*⁶ world in colonial India (to which Hosain belonged) where Hindus and Muslims were still united against a common colonial oppressor. However, one cannot neglect the fact that though Baba Jan's household represents "family as a source of strength," it also orchestrates "the near-total loss of individual freedom" for its female members who observe purdah and seldom are allowed to give their opinions (Nabar 128). After Baba Jan's death, the reigns of the household shift to his England-returned son Uncle

highbrow Muslim aristocratic culture). The name has an ironic significance because even though the name implies a safe haven, it fails to be so during the turmoil of partition.

⁶ This is an Urdu term for aristocratic landowners.

Hamid, who is said to be “more a Sahib⁷ than the English,” and is “culturally identified with the Raj”⁸ (Hosain 22, Jaonnou 156). With his return, one witnesses the “march of Anglicization” of the household (Shamsie 144). Uncle Hamid’s return affects the lives of the inhabitants of Ashiana, especially the women of the household. For instance, Aunt Abida is quickly married off to an old man, widowed Aunt Majida and distant poor cousins, who were previously under the tutelage of Baba Jan, are sent away from the city of Lucknow to the ancestral home in the village of Hasanpur.

Eventually, the close-knit family starts to break down as various family members begin to support conflicting political ideologies, which creates ruptures and destabilises the family and subsequently results in its disintegration. Laila notes: “No one seemed to talk anymore; everyone argued,” and “[e]very meal at home had become an ordeal as peaceful as a volcanic eruption” (Hosain 230). As Muneeza Shamsie in her essay “Sunlight and Salt” (2009) claims: “[P]olitical opinions do not sit too heavily on the text, but are nevertheless expressed” (146). For example, while cousin Saleem believes in partition as a viable solution to the Hindu/Muslim issue, his brother Kemal and cousin Asad stand for an undivided India. Divided opinions among the members of this feudal Muslim family about the future of landowners, whether or not to stay back in India, and which political party to support become the reasons for many heated arguments at home. This situation at Laila’s home becomes reflexive of the political unrest brewing in the wake of rising Hindu/Muslim tensions in the so far united colonial India. The end of the third part of the novel shows Laila leaving Ashiana due to her choice to marry Ameer. Her marriage to Ameer leads to her ostracism by her family because her marriage is socially unacceptable due to Ameer’s lower class status. To elaborate, Ameer is a junior lecturer at Aligarh Muslim University, which means that he belongs to the working class as opposed to Laila’s aristocratic heritage. Hence, Laila’s estrangement from her family based on her marriage to Ameer not only reveals class prejudices prevalent in pre and post partition (and also current) India, but also shows how a woman cannot make autonomous decisions without antagonising her family.

Post partition, Laila returns to Ashiana as a widow.⁹ Laila’s return becomes indicative of how “history is individually experienced through the form of personal life story” (Joannou 157). Ashiana, in the final section, emerges as “a stranded object on the landscape of domestic memory” (Burton 131). Laila observes the derelict condition of her childhood home and remembers a past that can never be redeemed. Laila experiences “a rush of emotions that leaves her

⁷ Sahib can be translated to Sir or Master. It was a term usually used by Indians for the British rulers in colonial India; a telling example of the colonised native’s acceptance of the coloniser’s superiority.

⁸ Raj is an adopted English word from Hindi that specifically refers to the British rule over India.

⁹ During partition riots, Laila is rescued by her Hindu friends. Hosain deliberately does not give a firsthand account of partition violence and sets the final section a few years after the event to focus exclusively on home and the concept of individual history.

nauseated. The sheer evocative power of spaces, the memory of them, transforms the house into an animistic landscape, a stage just abandoned” (Khan 123). Laila observes about the silent house: “It was not the peaceful silence of emptiness, but as if sounds lurked everywhere, waiting for the physical presence of those who had made them audible” (Hosain 275). This can be interpreted as the house echoing the remains of the lives of people who were so suddenly and violently uprooted and dislocated by partition. The disintegration of Laila’s family occurs due to several reasons that are all instigated in some way or another by partition. For instance, several family members, by virtue of their religion, leave for the newly created Islamic Pakistan (Zahra, Saleem and his wife Nadira), some characters die; Uncle Hamid due to illness prompted by depression as he gradually fails in his political endeavours, and cousin Zahid becomes a victim of mass murder on a train to Pakistan, while Laila is estranged from her family due to ideological differences. To elaborate, the assertion of her choice of husband as opposed to agreeing to a traditional arranged marriage is incited by her exposure to changing social/cultural values that informed the partition period.

In effect, all these familial events mirror “the complex events that shaped the nationalist struggle” (Nabar 131). Post partition, Ashiana is entirely destroyed, which becomes symbolic of the now divided country ravaged by ethnic genocide. The house comes to represent a lost world that can never be recovered. For instance, the current occupants of Ashiana are now labelled “refugees,” while its rightful owner, late Uncle Hamid’s son Saleem, who had left for Pakistan, is termed as an “evacuee,” and the house itself becomes a mere real estate fact (Hosain 272). Through Laila’s sorrow when she hears such terms used to refer to people on her visit to Ashiana, Hosain deploys not just the physical disarray of home to show the broken country, but also highlights how people were reduced to basic facts and numbers, thereby erasing the pain of uprootedness suffered by many caused by partition. In the final section, one notices that “the house that formed [Laila], where her subjectivity had come into own cognizance” is now bereft of her family and is instead filled with “the weight of memory and the weathering of history” (Khan 123).

It must be noted that Ashiana as a microcosmic symbol of the country remains constant throughout the novel. For instance, it begins with a close-knit family that resembles the undivided colonial India, where the family patriarch (Baba Jan followed by Uncle Hamid) and his dominance over the household can be equated to the control of British colonisers over India. Next, the growing tensions between family members reflect the growing disparity between Hindus and Muslims. The raising political tensions go hand in hand with the disintegration of the family. This is followed by Laila’s freedom from the repressive patriarchal regime of Ashiana that reflects the freedom of the country from colonial powers. Finally, it can be claimed that through the trope of home, Hosain narrates the story of what Laila calls “the home of my childhood and adolescence” (Hosain 272). Laila’s narrative is one among many stories about people who stayed behind, representing those who did not face the brutality that followed the division of the Indian Subcontinent in the form of migration and

violence, but were nonetheless left to witness the gradual crumbling of the country as a consequence of partition.

Next, I proceed to discuss the physical structure of the house and its ideological implications. In the novel, the house is divided into *zenana* and *mardana* (men's area). To elaborate, architecturally, *zenana* literally means "the interior of the house" – the rooms are in the inner courtyard, away from the public and the male domain of the house," and the term comes from the Persian word *zan*, which means woman and "refers to the apartments of the house in which women of the family are secluded" in order to maintain the family's *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) (Khan 122). The *zenana/purdah* culture is deliberately made all pervasive in Hosain's novel to highlight the segregation caused by this tradition that imposes not just limited mobility in terms of physical space assigned to women but also restricts women's intellectual growth, since they are essentially barred from the world outside.¹⁰

In *Sunlight*, which depicts the world of Muslim aristocracy during 1930s colonial India, the concept of purdah is deeply engrained in the lives of Muslim women. Here, it is important to clarify that the word 'purdah' literally means a curtain or a veil, but in the cultural context, "purdah indexes a gendered sociospatial formation, a code of conduct, and a specific spatial regime for women (Khan 127). This leads to the creation of "many homes within the home, separated by ideological boundaries" (Hasan 70). Moreover, purdah culture can be seen as a consequence of the patriarchal insistence on viewing female bodies as sexed objects that need to be covered and controlled. At home, purdah becomes a tool for organised isolation and repression of women by ensuring their confinement not just within the house but in a separate section of the house altogether. In fact, purdah may be interpreted as the "shorthand for Indian women's imprisonment" (Burton qtd. in Bahuguna 54). Moreover, the purdah culture in Hosain's novel "emphasizes the unequal status of women with regard to men and denies them the freedom of shaping their lives according to their own wishes" (Palkar 108). Furthermore, it must be noted that unlike the *zenana*, which is a physical space, the concept of purdah is mobile. This aspect is noted in the scene where Laila and Zahra are walking down the alleyway to visit a relative and are preceded by a servant shouting "Purdah! Purdah!" in order to warn the passersby to look away (Hosain 98). With respect to this episode, an alternate and somewhat tolerant reading of purdah can be that "[t]he concept of seclusion . . . can be and is purposefully mobilized . . . to afford women control over their movements and the terms of their sociability" (Burton 119). Similarly, *zenana* may be interpreted as a separate world in itself: "[A] mini-culture (and not necessarily a counter-culture)" (Bahuguna 64). *Zenana* strives on the bonds of female companionship, and this exclusively feminine space, though "an autonomous unit in itself, the life within *zenana* is based upon a great level of

¹⁰ While women are confined at home, men are allowed to visit courtesans and engage in amorous activities regardless of their marital status. This is exemplified in the character of Uncle Mohsin who despite having a wife and teenage children is said to have several mistresses around the city.

social interaction” (Bahuguna 56). However, such readings are based on the acceptance of the concept of seclusion, which may be seen as problematic because they do not challenge the isolation of women based on their gender.

Locating the issue of nationalism within the purdah context, Jasbir Jain in her essay “Purdah, Patriarchy and the Tropical Sun” (2008) comments on the domestic space and claims that

nationalists’ defence of women as custodians of culture . . . led to a division into public and private space, the former being the outside world of political life and the latter of domesticity and women. Purdah as segregation began to appear as the last bastion of culture against both modernization and Westernization. (237)

This demand to uphold one’s culture is reflected in the severity with which the importance of tradition is stressed by older female characters on the younger ones. For instance, one can easily identify loving bonds between Laila and Aunt Abida and her nurse Hakimani Bua. However, these bonds are quick to snap as soon as Laila steps out of the traditional folds that define the ideological framework of these older women. Moreover, as opposed to Laila’s Western education, her cousin Zahra¹¹ is a product of traditional education taught within zenana. Laila is shown to be critical of Zahra’s behaviour (such as her unchallenging acceptance of the groom decided for her by male family members, her absolute lack of interest regarding the freedom movement and so on), but one may claim that “Zahra’s limited outlook” is a product of “the damaging effects of purdah culture on a woman’s psyche and personality” (Palkar 113). Here, it is important to note that in the novel, zenana is also portrayed as a protective space for women, which shields them from unwanted male attention. This view of zenana as a secure space not only reveals the awareness of predatory tendencies associated with male sexuality, but also reflects a class privilege because it is only aristocratic women who get the security of zenana. For instance, maidservant Nandi is quick to point out: “We poor people get bad name because we cannot stay locked up” (Hosain 97). Nonetheless, Hosain’s focus on the daily activities in zenana in the first half of the novel shows the domestic sphere in vibrant colours where she describes the preparation and serving of elaborate meals, celebration of festivals (Hindu and Muslim alike), sights and sounds of street vendors, dyeing of *dupattas*¹² and so on in intricate detail. This can be read as a conscious effort on Hosain’s part to not just highlight the seclusion of women from the outside political world, but also to bring out the beauty of (albeit a small section of) everyday Indian quotidian life. The novel is unapologetic about its primary interest in women, and therefore, paints a realistic picture of women’s lives in 1930s India.¹³

¹¹ Zahra is two years older than Laila.

¹² *Dupatta* is Hindi for a long scarf worn across the shoulders by women.

¹³ Specifically, Hosain depicts the lives of feudal Muslim women; a minority in itself that seldom got any attention in mainstream Indian history.

Lastly, it is crucial to discuss Laila's marital home in contrast to Ashiana. Laila views Ashiana as a place where she has "never been allowed to make decisions" (Hosain 265). Hence, she makes a "utopian home" with Ameer where she claims to have "realised her personal fulfilment" (Hasan 75). In effect, for Laila, her childhood home is "not necessarily where one belongs but the place where one starts from" (Nasta qtd. in Joannou 160). Taking the motif of home further, after Ameer's death, Laila then creates an all-female space where she lives with her daughter and her childhood playmate and maidservant Nandi. This home becomes an antithesis to the patriarchal controlling codes that operated in Ashiana. Furthermore, Laila's marital home also becomes a unique space within the partition context. To explicate, during the ethnic genocide that followed partition, many women who were abducted and later 'rescued' by the governments of India and Pakistan were not given a choice to choose where they wanted to live. The opposite is true for Laila because she makes the choice of her residence. Laila selects Ameer's home over Ashiana on a personal level and India over Pakistan after partition on a national level. Laila not only refuses to leave for Pakistan as a Muslim, but with respect to her marital home, she succeeds in creating a space untouched by religion's, family's and the nation state's rampant male-dominated ideals. In this manner, yet again, the novel challenges the dichotomy between the private and the public, where the private is seen as devoid of history.

To conclude on the relevance of centrality of home in *Sunlight*, one may turn to Anuradha Dingwaney Needham's essay "Multiple Forms Of (National) Belonging" (1993) who claims that "[i]n the interests of creating and preserving homogeneous values and experience, nations include as much as they exclude – certain ideas, certain experiences, certain identities, even certain peoples," and these "inclusions and exclusions [that the nations] enact are not simply or naturally given; rather, they are products of deliberate selection designed to preserve certain interests or agendas and not others" (96). In the case of postcolonial India, the ones who found themselves excluded from nation-building terminology were women and minority religions. Hence, by locating the domestic sphere "as the site of a specific, cataclysmic history," Hosain challenges the nationalist hegemonic discourse founded on patriarchal ideology (Burton 117). In other words, a narration of the personal life of a Muslim woman who remains back in India after partition can be read as bringing forth the excluded voices from the margins by the process of retelling the event of partition of India through the private sphere of home; a space that much like women, is usually neglected in narratives of nation-building allegory.

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