

Personal Memory, Partition, and the Decline of Feudal Culture in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

Dr. Sarala Bai Kethavath

Senior Lecturer in English

Government Institute of Chemical Engineering

Visakhapatnam

Abstract

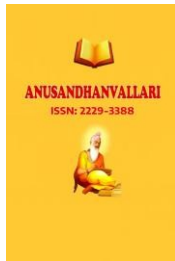
Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is one of the most significant literary representations of late colonial India, the nationalist movement, and the trauma of Partition. This paper examines the novel through the interconnected frameworks of memory studies, feminist historiography, and postcolonial identity. It argues that Hosain transforms personal memory into an alternative mode of historical narration that challenges official political histories. Through the experiences of the narrator-protagonist Laila, the novel records the decline of the Muslim taluqdar class, the fragmentation of composite culture, and the emotional consequences of Partition. Employing the concepts of collective memory and cultural memory, the paper demonstrates how Hosain reconstructs history through individual experience, domestic spaces, and familial relationships. The study further argues that Ashiana, the ancestral house, functions as a symbolic archive of a disappearing social order. Ultimately, the novel emerges as a powerful critique of communal politics and a defence of pluralistic cultural identities in South Asia.

Keywords: Attia Hosain, Partition, Memory Studies, Feminist Historiography, Nationalism, Taluqdar Culture, Postcolonial Identity.

Introduction

Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* occupies a unique position in Indian English literature because it records one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the Indian subcontinent through the perspective of a Muslim woman. Published in 1961, the novel spans approximately two decades, beginning in the late colonial period and culminating in the aftermath of Partition. Unlike conventional nationalist histories that focus on political leaders, constitutional developments, and institutional change, Hosain reconstructs history through memory, domestic life, and personal experience.

The novel is narrated by Laila, an orphaned young woman belonging to an aristocratic Muslim taluqdar family in Lucknow. Through her recollections, readers witness the gradual collapse of feudal culture, the rise of nationalist politics, communal tensions, and the devastating consequences of Partition. Laila functions not merely as a participant in historical events but as a witness whose memories preserve a world that has disappeared.



This paper argues that *Sunlight on a Broken Column* transforms personal memory into a form of alternative historiography. Hosain records historical change through emotional experience rather than official documentation and thereby challenges dominant narratives of nationalism and Partition. The novel demonstrates that history is not simply a sequence of political events but a lived reality experienced through families, relationships, and cultural traditions.

Personal Memory as Historical Witness

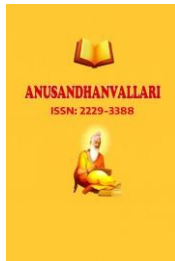
One of the most significant narrative strategies employed by Attia Hosain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is the use of memory as a mode of historical reconstruction. The novel is narrated retrospectively by Laila, who revisits her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood against the backdrop of major political transformations in colonial and postcolonial India. Through this narrative structure, Hosain transforms personal recollection into a form of alternative historiography. Instead of presenting history through official documents, political speeches, or institutional records, she reconstructs the past through individual consciousness, emotional experience, and subjective remembrance.

The significance of memory in the novel may be understood through Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. Halbwachs argues that individual memory is never entirely private; rather, it is shaped by social frameworks and collective experiences. Laila's memories exemplify this process. Although she narrates events from a personal perspective, her recollections simultaneously preserve the experiences of a larger social group—the Muslim taluqdar aristocracy of North India during the final decades of British rule. Her memories become a medium through which the cultural values, social structures, and historical anxieties of an entire class are recorded.

The retrospective structure of the novel allows Hosain to bridge the gap between personal memory and public history. Laila remembers not only family relationships but also political demonstrations, nationalist movements, communal tensions, and Partition violence. The personal and political become inseparable. Historical events enter the narrative not as abstract occurrences but as lived realities affecting everyday life. This approach challenges conventional historical narratives that often privilege political leaders and institutional developments while marginalizing ordinary experiences.

A striking example of this occurs when Laila recalls witnessing nationalist demonstrations as a schoolgirl. The image of satyagrahis being beaten by police lathis leaves a profound impression upon her. The event is not narrated as a political episode alone; it is remembered through feelings of fear, anger, and admiration. Hosain thereby humanizes the nationalist movement and demonstrates how political consciousness emerges through emotional experience. For Laila, the freedom struggle becomes meaningful because it resonates with her own desire for autonomy and self-expression.

Memory in the novel also functions as an act of preservation. Throughout the narrative, Laila repeatedly returns to images of a disappearing world. The customs, rituals, relationships, and social practices associated with Ashiana are preserved through remembrance long after they have ceased to exist. This process corresponds closely to Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory. According to Assmann, societies preserve their identities through narratives, symbols, and cultural representations that transmit memories across generations. In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Laila becomes the custodian of such memories. Her narrative preserves a social world that political change has rendered obsolete.



The role of memory becomes especially significant in the final section of the novel when Laila returns to Ashiana after many years. The physical structure of the house remains, but the social world that once animated it has disappeared. Rooms evoke memories of people who are dead, displaced, or transformed by history. Memory becomes a means of resisting oblivion. Through recollection, Laila reconstructs relationships and experiences that would otherwise vanish from historical consciousness.

Hosain's use of memory also challenges the assumption that history is objective and impersonal. Official histories often emphasize chronology, political developments, and public events. Personal memory, by contrast, foregrounds emotional truth. The significance of an event lies not merely in what happened but in how it was experienced. Through Laila's memories, readers gain access to the emotional dimensions of colonialism, nationalism, and Partition—dimensions frequently overlooked in conventional historiography.

Furthermore, memory enables Hosain to foreground marginalized perspectives. Women's experiences have often been excluded from nationalist histories, which traditionally focus on male political actors. By narrating history through Laila's consciousness, Hosain recovers the experiences of women whose lives were profoundly shaped by historical change. The domestic sphere becomes a legitimate site of historical inquiry. Household relationships, marriage negotiations, educational aspirations, and family conflicts acquire historical significance because they reveal how political transformations affected everyday life.

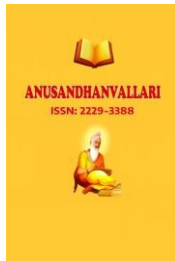
Memory in the novel is therefore neither nostalgic nor merely autobiographical. It functions as a critical tool through which Hosain interrogates the past. Laila's recollections reveal contradictions within feudal culture, expose the limitations of patriarchal structures, and question communal interpretations of history. Her memories are selective, reflective, and interpretive rather than simply descriptive.

Ultimately, Hosain presents memory as an alternative archive. Through Laila's narrative, personal experiences become historical evidence. The novel demonstrates that the past survives not only in official records but also in individual recollections, emotional attachments, and cultural practices. By transforming memory into history, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* challenges conventional historiography and expands our understanding of how historical knowledge is produced and transmitted.

Ashiana and the Memory of Feudal Culture

Among the many symbols employed by Attia Hosain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, none is more significant than Ashiana, the ancestral mansion that serves as the physical and emotional centre of the narrative. More than a family residence, Ashiana functions as a cultural archive preserving the memory of a social order that was rapidly disappearing in the decades preceding Indian Independence. Through the representation of Ashiana, Hosain explores the decline of the Muslim taluqdar class, the transformation of social relations, and the erosion of a composite cultural world that had flourished in North India for generations.

The house occupies a central place in Laila's memory. Her recollections repeatedly return to its rooms, courtyards, verandas, and gardens, suggesting that Ashiana functions not merely as a setting but as a repository of historical consciousness. Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, argues that houses preserve memories and become containers of personal and collective experience. Ashiana performs precisely this function within the novel. Every room contains traces of family history, while every object evokes memories of relationships, rituals, and traditions. The house becomes a living archive through which the past continues to exist within the present.



Ashiana also symbolizes the authority of the taluqdar class. The household operates according to a carefully maintained hierarchy governed by age, gender, and status. Baba Jan presides as the patriarch whose authority appears unquestionable. The structure of the house itself reflects this social order. Separate spaces are assigned to men and women, elders and younger members, masters and servants. Domestic architecture thus mirrors broader social relations.

Yet Hosain does not romanticize this world. While Ashiana embodies cultural refinement and social cohesion, it also reveals the limitations of feudal society. Women are subject to restrictions, individual desires are subordinated to family honour, and social mobility remains limited. Laila's growing dissatisfaction with these constraints exposes the contradictions within the aristocratic order. The house becomes both a site of belonging and a space of confinement.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Ashiana is its representation of composite culture. Hindu and Muslim traditions coexist within its social environment. Festivals, customs, and everyday interactions reflect a syncretic cultural ethos characteristic of pre-Partition North India. This coexistence challenges contemporary narratives that portray communities as historically separate and antagonistic. Through Ashiana, Hosain preserves the memory of a pluralistic society founded upon cultural interaction rather than exclusion.

The decline of Ashiana parallels the decline of the taluqdar class itself. Political reforms, changing economic conditions, and nationalist movements gradually undermine the foundations of aristocratic privilege. The authority once exercised by Baba Jan loses its effectiveness in a rapidly changing world. Younger generations pursue different aspirations, while traditional relationships become increasingly fragile.

Following Baba Jan's death, the symbolic disintegration of Ashiana accelerates. Family members disperse, property disputes emerge, and the sense of unity that once characterized the household begins to disappear. The fragmentation of the house mirrors the fragmentation of the social order it represents. What appears initially as a personal tragedy ultimately acquires broader historical significance.

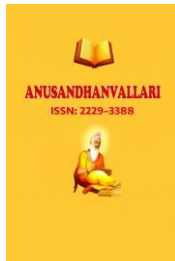
The final image of Ashiana as a decaying structure is particularly powerful. Its deterioration reflects not only the collapse of feudal culture but also the disruption of historical continuity caused by colonialism, nationalism, and Partition. Through Laila's memories, however, the house survives as a site of remembrance. Memory transforms Ashiana into a cultural monument that preserves the values, contradictions, and experiences of a vanished world.

Thus, Ashiana functions simultaneously as a domestic space, a symbol of aristocratic culture, and a repository of collective memory. Through its rise and decline, Hosain narrates the transformation of an entire social order and demonstrates how historical change is experienced through intimate and familiar spaces.

Nationalism, Gender, and Women's Agency

One of the most important contributions of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* lies in its exploration of the relationship between nationalism and gender. While many historical narratives focus on political leaders and public movements, Hosain examines how nationalist transformations affected women's lives and opportunities. Through Laila's experiences, the novel reveals the complex interaction between political liberation and personal freedom.

Laila's development occurs against the backdrop of the Indian nationalist movement. As debates concerning independence intensify, she becomes increasingly aware of questions of freedom and self-determination. Yet her



experiences reveal that political emancipation and social emancipation do not necessarily progress together. While nationalist leaders advocate freedom from colonial rule, patriarchal structures continue to restrict women's choices.

Education plays a crucial role in Laila's awakening. Access to education exposes her to new ideas and enables her to question traditional assumptions. Her intellectual growth represents a challenge to the gender norms that define women primarily through marriage and domesticity. Education provides not only knowledge but also the possibility of imagining alternative futures.

The conflict between individual aspiration and family expectation emerges repeatedly throughout the novel. Laila's desire for autonomy places her in opposition to relatives who prioritize social convention and family honour. These tensions reveal how patriarchal authority operates within everyday life. Decisions concerning marriage, education, and mobility are often controlled by male family members, limiting women's agency.

Hosain's portrayal of women extends beyond Laila alone. Characters such as Abida, Zahra, and Aunt Majida represent different responses to patriarchal structures. Some accept traditional roles, while others attempt to negotiate greater autonomy. Through these varied experiences, the novel demonstrates that women's lives cannot be reduced to a single narrative.

The relationship between nationalism and gender becomes particularly evident in Laila's marriage to Ameer. By choosing her own partner, she challenges conventions that prioritize family arrangements over individual choice. The marriage symbolizes her assertion of personal agency and reflects broader social transformations occurring within Indian society.

Feminist scholars have frequently argued that nationalist movements often idealize women as symbols of cultural purity while limiting their actual participation in public life. Hosain exposes this contradiction. Women are expected to embody national values, yet they are denied many of the freedoms associated with citizenship and self-determination.

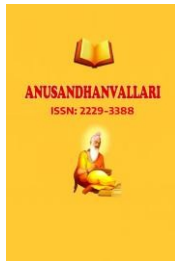
Laila's experiences reveal that genuine liberation requires more than political independence. It also demands the transformation of social relations and gender hierarchies. The novel therefore expands the meaning of freedom beyond nationalist discourse and emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy.

Through its representation of women's experiences, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* contributes to feminist historiography by recovering perspectives often excluded from historical narratives. Hosain demonstrates that the history of nationalism cannot be understood without examining its impact on women's lives.

Partition and the Fragmentation of Belonging

Partition constitutes the emotional and historical climax of the novel. For Hosain, Partition is not merely a political event resulting in the creation of two nation-states; it is a profound rupture affecting memory, identity, and belonging. The novel examines how political borders transform personal relationships and disrupt long-established cultural continuities.

The family itself becomes a site where larger political conflicts are enacted. Saleem's support for the Muslim League contrasts sharply with Kemal's commitment to secular nationalism. Their disagreement reflects broader debates concerning the future of Muslims in South Asia. Rather than presenting either position as entirely correct, Hosain emphasizes the complexity of the choices facing individuals during this period.



Partition fragments families as well as nations. Relatives who once shared a common home find themselves separated by newly created borders. Friendships are disrupted, communities are divided, and familiar landscapes acquire unfamiliar meanings. The emotional consequences of these divisions form one of the central concerns of the novel.

The concept of belonging becomes increasingly unstable. Characters who have lived in a particular place for generations suddenly confront questions regarding loyalty, citizenship, and identity. The assumption that identity can be neatly aligned with political boundaries is repeatedly challenged.

Hosain's treatment of Partition differs from narratives that focus primarily on violence. While acknowledging violence, she directs greater attention to emotional loss and cultural dislocation. The tragedy lies not only in physical displacement but also in the destruction of relationships and shared histories.

Partition also disrupts collective memory. Communities that had participated in common cultural traditions are encouraged to adopt separate historical narratives. The shared past becomes contested terrain. Through Laila's reflections, Hosain mourns the erosion of a composite culture that had enabled coexistence across religious boundaries.

Kemal's decision to remain in India embodies an alternative conception of belonging. His attachment to place is rooted not in religious identity alone but in memory, history, and cultural experience. He refuses to accept the idea that citizenship must be determined exclusively by religious affiliation.

The novel ultimately presents Partition as a crisis of memory. Political divisions seek to separate communities, yet memories continue to reveal connections that transcend national boundaries. Through these memories, Hosain preserves a vision of South Asian history founded upon interaction and coexistence rather than separation.

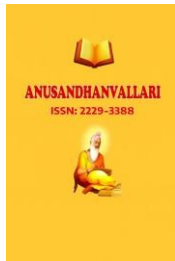
Nationalist Muslims and Alternative Histories

One of the most original features of Hosain's novel is its representation of nationalist Muslims. Public discussions of Partition often create the impression that Muslim political opinion uniformly supported the creation of Pakistan. Hosain challenges this assumption by portraying a diverse range of Muslim political perspectives.

Characters such as Asad, Hamid, and Kemal represent traditions of secular nationalism that are frequently marginalized in dominant historical narratives. Their commitment to a pluralistic India demonstrates that Muslim political identities were far more complex than communal interpretations suggest.

Asad serves as the clearest embodiment of nationalist ideals. Influenced by Gandhian principles, he advocates inter-communal harmony and non-violence. His political vision rejects both colonial domination and communal separatism. Through Asad, Hosain preserves the memory of Muslims who actively participated in the nationalist movement while maintaining faith in a shared future.

Hamid represents a more critical form of nationalism. Although dissatisfied with certain aspects of Congress politics, he remains committed to secular principles. His position illustrates the diversity of opinion within nationalist circles and challenges simplistic binary oppositions.



Kemal's refusal to migrate to Pakistan constitutes a particularly significant political statement. His decision reflects a conception of identity rooted in historical attachment and cultural memory rather than communal affiliation. Through Kemal, Hosain emphasizes the importance of pluralistic belonging.

By foregrounding these characters, the novel functions as a corrective to dominant historical narratives. It recovers political traditions that have often been overshadowed by communal interpretations of Partition. In doing so, Hosain expands our understanding of Muslim political thought during the final years of colonial rule.

The representation of nationalist Muslims also contributes to broader debates concerning citizenship and identity. The novel suggests that belonging cannot be reduced to religious affiliation alone. Cultural memory, historical experience, and emotional attachment play equally important roles in shaping identity.

Conclusion

Sunlight on a Broken Column remains one of the most compelling literary explorations of memory, identity, nationalism, and Partition in South Asian literature. Through the narrative voice of Laila, Attia Hosain transforms personal recollection into a form of historical testimony that challenges official accounts of the past.

The novel preserves the memory of a disappearing world represented by Ashiana and the Muslim taluqdar class. At the same time, it critiques the limitations of that world by exposing its patriarchal structures and social hierarchies. Through Laila's journey, Hosain demonstrates that historical change is experienced not only through political events but also through intimate relationships, domestic spaces, and personal aspirations.

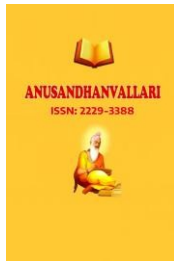
The exploration of nationalism and gender reveals the complex relationship between political liberation and social emancipation. While independence promises freedom at the national level, women continue to confront restrictions within their own communities. Hosain therefore expands the meaning of freedom beyond political sovereignty to include personal autonomy and gender equality.

Partition emerges as both a political and cultural catastrophe. By emphasizing emotional loss, disrupted relationships, and fractured memories, the novel moves beyond conventional historical narratives. It reveals the human consequences of decisions that reshaped the subcontinent.

Perhaps the novel's most significant contribution lies in its recovery of alternative histories. Through characters such as Asad, Hamid, and Kemal, Hosain preserves memories of nationalist Muslims whose political commitments complicate dominant accounts of Partition. Their presence challenges reductive interpretations of Muslim identity and highlights the diversity of political thought within colonial India.

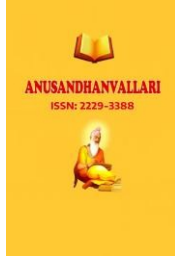
Viewed through the lenses of memory studies and feminist historiography, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* emerges as an alternative archive of South Asian history. It records experiences, emotions, and perspectives frequently excluded from official historical discourse. By transforming memory into narrative, Hosain preserves cultural traditions while simultaneously questioning their limitations.

The novel's continuing relevance is evident in contemporary debates concerning nationalism, citizenship, secularism, and historical memory. In an era when competing interpretations of the past continue to influence political discourse, Hosain's work reminds readers of the importance of pluralism, coexistence, and historical complexity. Its enduring power lies in its ability to humanize history and to demonstrate that the past survives not only in archives and monuments but also in memory, culture, and lived experience.



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