

## Representation of Gender politics in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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Gender is one of the basic categories in our social life. Popenoe (1983: 170) states 'gender is the social and psychological trait associated with masculinity and femininity, whereas sex is the biological trait of males and females'. In short, as a biological trait, 'sex is constant for all members of population' (Popenoe, 1983: 170). Then, in broad sense, gender is socially and culturally determined so it is subject to variation.

Talking about gender, it automatically corresponds to male and female. The distinction between male and female is a universally organized principle in social life. As adults, men and women typically assume distinctive gender-linked roles as husbands or wives and as fathers or mothers.

My paper will discuss how the women characters suffer in the novel because of gender politics.

The title *sunlight on a Broken Column*, incidentally, is borrowed from *The Hollow Men* of T.S. Eliot - unfolds, the orphaned Laila is a girl of fifteen. She lives with her two aunts, Majida and Abida, in the 'Ashiana' of her grandfather, Baba Jan, who is lying on his death-bed. Dependent on the elders, Laila and her cousin, Zahra, feel their girlhood a heavy burden. Hakiman Bua, the old nurse, constantly asks Laila to pull her head out of her books and look at the surrounding world. But the broad outer world of the books fascinates her more than the narrow inner world of her society. The immediate question of paramount importance is what would happen after the death of Baba Jan. At fifteen, for Laila, the years are endless corridors of time stretching before and after. Aunt Abida understands her strange urges, and encourages them by sending her to an English convent school. But the dark clouds of the disciplines of a tradition-bound social order are ominously hovering over the horizon. When the matter of Zahra's marriage comes up for discussion in the family conclave, and Abida mentions the necessity of asking the girl's opinion on that issue, Uncle Mohsin is shocked and angrily shouts, "Is the girl to pass judgement on her elders? Doubt their capacity to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?"<sup>1</sup>

The elder generation believes in the wisdom of their seniors, and that is a good enough system for them. But the youth question the time-worn norms. As the author bitterly comments, looking for suitable young men for the daughters of the family is like choosing a new horse for the carriage of the *Taluqdar*. In the opinion of Uncle Mohsin, Zahra has read the Quran, she knows her religious duties, she can sew and cook, and at the *maktab* she has picked up a little English, which is what young men want in a bride. We are told that this very 'pious' uncle Mohsin would have liked to outrage the modesty of the servant girl, Nandi, had she let him do it. Such is the ironic diversity of the double social standards. Oppressed by her rebellious thoughts, Laila boldly declares to Zahra, "I won't be paired off like an animal."<sup>2</sup>

Aware of the state of mind of her niece, Aunt Abida cautions Laila,

My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in his world without question. I do not wish anyone to point a finger at you, because it will be a sign of my failure. Never forget the family into which you were born.<sup>3</sup>

Laila wants to ask her why she was sent to school among those other girls, who were not torn apart by doubts, why she was not brought up like Zahra, who meekly accepts the man selected by the family to marry her. Asad, a poor relation and distant cousin of the two girls, loves Zahra, and writes Urdu poems in celebration of his love. When Zahra smiles at Asad, his pale lips twitch and his eyes shine like his poems. But, unlike Laila, Zahra cares more for a successful marriage in the traditional sense of material gains and comfort than marrying for love.

The elderly ladies of the *taludqar's* household sunned their age-corroded cold bones, mouthed soundless prayers, turned the beads of their *tasbhis*, and stared at the movement in the courtyard from the distance of their years.<sup>4</sup>

As for the young, the life within the household encloses and cushions the mind and heart against the outside world, and again moves back to its patterned smoothness. When the mujra girls come to sing on a festive occasion, the critical eyes of Laila notice: "The naked eyes of young men and old, in silk and brocaded and

embroidered *achkans* and rakish caps, were more aware of the conscious womanhood of the singers than of their artistry.”<sup>5</sup>

All the time, her heart aches for Asad, whose genuine love for Zahra is changed into a sin by conventions. Night after night, Laila lies on the common bed with her back to Zahra, “struggling with [her] confused thoughts, pity for Asad, anger at Zahra, impatience with her mother, wonder at the meaning of love and truth and duty.”<sup>6</sup>

On a visit to the ancestral house in the village, Laila comes to know that the brides of the household were kept in the rooms behind a terrace. Their husbands crept up the stairs at night, and left as stealthily before anyone was awake. Bewildered by such unreasonable behaviour, Laila asks, “if it is such a shameful business being married and having children, why talk of nothing but marriage from the moment the girl is born?”<sup>7</sup>

No wonder, she rebels and decides early in her life to go away from such an irrational world. At Zahra’s wedding, she notices the elder women are more anxious about the girl’s dowry than about the man she is marrying. Laila, who thinks on a different plane from these tradition-bound women, asks of herself, “Why was I allowed to become different?”<sup>8</sup>

What is she to believe in? Why is she different from Zahra? What is wrong with her? And, most important of all, what is to become of her? Tortured by doubt and dismay, she lives in two worlds, an observer in an outside world and solitary in her own. A privileged Muslim girl, studying English literature at the University, she reflects:

Our world was bounded by our books, and the voices that spoke to us through them were of great men, profound thinkers and philosophers and poets.

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, Ustaniji and now belonged to Uncle Hamid, Aunt Saira, and their friends. Always I lived in two worlds, and I grew to resent the ‘real’ world.<sup>9</sup>

For Zahra, marriage is an escape from the *purdah* culture and rigid discipline if imposed on unmarried girls. Marriage grants her freedom to socialize. She is happy with that kind of freedom. She thinks marriage as a solution. In the newly changing ethos, marriage becomes an escape for young girls yet the patriarchal foundations do not change. Laila’s reaction to marriage becomes symptomatic of the keen scrutiny of the institution of marriage.

Laila’s friend Sita, who is in love with Kemal, decides to marry following parents wishes. She gives a shock to Laila. She says,

Do you think I am submitting to an arranged marriage, this is my own choice, I cannot ever marry for love and I do not want a masquerade. My parents are the best judges of the man with the best qualifications for being a husband. They have a wider choice.<sup>10</sup>

To asks Sita,

What has love to do with marriage? It is like mixing oil and water. Love is antisocial while matrimony preserves the world and its respectability. I married with my kind unblurred by sentiments and everybody is happy.<sup>11</sup>

Even uncle Hamid, whom Laila considers emancipated due to his English education and liberal outlook, forbids Laila to marry against the wishes of the family. But love for Ameer gives her courage and strengthens her resolve to defy all-the time-worn social taboos, shackling social norms, family ties and physical barriers. For her it is a deliberate and consciously made break from the past and its traditions. It is a long leap towards modernity and freedom. The sacrifice that she makes does not come easily. Her greatest regret is separation from Aunt Abida, who is the nearest to a mother she has known in the years of her conscious girlhood and after. Laila’s friend from school days, Sita, gives her a lesson in worldly wisdom: “You are a child dreaming romantic dreams of love. What has love to do with marriage?”<sup>12</sup>

Laila does not listen to Sita, but goes ahead and marries Ameer without the blessings of the elders of her family.

Based on the analysis of *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by AttiaHosain I can conclude that there is social convention in which more power and prestige are awarded to men than women. It has conferred greater authority on men than on women. In the global descriptions, women are always regarded as submissive, emotional, dependent, conforming, nurturing and affectionate and powerless people. On the other hand, men are portrayed as dominating, ambitious, independent, aggressive, competitive, self-confident and powerful. Those images are created gender inequalities at that time, mostly in the marriage relationship. Men are regarded as more powerful and they have more authority in the family than women. The condition places women in position of victims so that it creates male-dominant and female-subordinate situations.

#### END NOTES

[1]. Hosain, Attia. *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, (New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1961.) p.20

[2]. *Ibid.*, p.29.

- [3]. Ibid., p.38
- [4]. Ibid., p.49
- [5]. Ibid., p.65
- [6]. Ibid., p.81
- [7]. Ibid., p.105
- [8]. Ibid., p.115
- [9]. Ibid., p.128
- [10]. Ibid., p.296
- [11]. Ibid., p.216
- [12]. Ibid., p.296