



## FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN IN ATTIA HOSAIN'S SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

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### Abstract

The “*Buildungsroman*” is a term borrowed from German literary criticism, means “novel of formation”. Basically it traces the youthful “development of the protagonist mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences...into maturity and the recognition of his/her identity and role in the world (Abrams 255). Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the young girl Laila, and the narrator of the novel. The development of Laila’s growth from youth to adulthood is clearly visualized by the author through first person narration. Laila fights against her family members for her own freedom. Hosain is very successful in showing the modern purdah community and breaks the regular archetype of the communal patterns. Most of her thoughts resembles in her protagonist Laila. The feminist bildungsroman is clearly seen in Hosain’s “Laila”. She seems to be very different from other characters and she marks her own identity in the society by achieving her education, love, marriage and family life. The female bildungsroman is embedded in the image of Laila’s ‘selfhood’ that she gains through her self-education, self-respect, self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation. Thus Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* perfectly fits the genre of coming of age or Female Bildungsroman.

**Key Words:** *Female Bildungsroman, Self-Identity, Self-Education.*

### Female Bildungsroman in Attia Hosain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column

The “*Buildungsroman*” is a term borrowed from German literary criticism, means “novel of formation”. Basically it traces the youthful “development of the protagonist mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences...into maturity and the recognition of his/her identity and role in the world (Abrams 255). Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the young girl Laila, and the narrator of the novel. The development of Laila’s growth from youth to adulthood is clearly visualized by the author through first person narration. Laila fights against her family members for her own freedom. Hosain is very successful in showing the modern purdah community and breaks the regular archetype of the communal patterns. Most of her thoughts resembles in her protagonist Laila. The feminist bildungsroman is clearly seen in Hosain’s “Laila”. She seems to be very different from other characters and she marks her own identity in the society by achieving her education, love, marriage and family life. The female bildungsroman is embedded in the image of Laila’s ‘selfhood’ that she gains through her self-education, self-respect, self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation. Thus Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* perfectly fits the genre of coming of age or Female Bildungsroman.

Attia Hosain was born in Lucknow in 1913. Her father was a taluqdar of Oudh, a state in north India. She is the first woman from a taluqdar’s family to graduate in 1933 from the University of Lucknow. As a young woman, she wrote for *The Pioneer* and *The Statesman*, the leading English language newspaper in Calcutta. In 1930 she joins in the nationalist movement and the Progressive Writers’ Group in India, later she became a journalist, broadcaster and a writer. She wrote a collection of short stories, *Phoenix Fled* (1953) and a novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*(1961). In 1957 she went to England with her husband and two children.

Attia Hosain is a Muslim woman writer and feminist. Her *Sunlight on the Broken Column* is an autobiographical novel which takes place in Lucknow. The text mainly focuses on India’s struggle for independence-freedom and Partition. The novel finely frames Laila’s quest for identity and freedom from her family members. Laila reads a lot and most of the time she engages herself in reading. She wants to be different from her own background such as community, tradition and rituals. Though she belongs to purdah system as a girl she faces many problems and tackles the situation in better perspective. She creates herself as the model for the female bildungsroman.

In Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, the young girl Laila appears to be the protagonist and narrator of the novel. The development of Laila’s growth from youth to adulthood is clearly visualized by the author through first person narration. Laila fights for her own freedom from the family members. Hosain is very successful in showing the modern purdah community and breaks the regular archetype of the communal patterns. Most of Laila’s thoughts resemble as Hosain. As postulated by Pratt’s, “the quest of the youthful self for identity, an adventure often formalized in a ritual initiation into the mysteries of adulthood... to learn his or her own identity and, in literature the plot structure in which the young hero sets forth



into the world to seek his or her fortune”(13). The novel of development is completely seen in Attia Hosain’s protagonist, Laila.

As the novel begins Laila is fifteen years old and she lost her parents. She lives with her grandfather Baba Jan and Aunt Abida. Being a young girl Laila is very intelligent and bold enough to present her before others. Though she belongs to the Muslim community she never believes in the purdah system but she listens and gives respect to the elders. Instead of reading Quran she is completely moved by other books which were given by her grandfather. She not only learns Arabic and Persian tradition but also learns the western tradition which she follows in her adulthood stage. This unique practice creates her own individuality in her early stage in the family. She breaks out the regular communal patterns and starts to emerge as a new bird in the old nest. The quest for education creates awareness in the protagonist as a part of *Bildungs*.

After the death of Baba Jan, uncle Hamid asks Laila’s future plan. She informs him that she wants to continue her studies because she thinks that by achieving education she could create her ‘selfhood’ in the society. Later she joins her post graduate degree with the help of Hamid. In others view like uncle Hamid, education changes a person as a responsible citizen and aunt Saira states it seems to be prop for the wives to please their friends and to entertain them. Each one has their own explanation for the single term called ‘education’.

Laila witnesses the male dominance through her uncle Mohsin, who accuses Nandi and beats her for her mischievous deeds . On seeing this she steps forward and shouts, “I hate you, I hate you”(SBC28). This incident creates a bad opinion on the dominating ridiculous man. The major terms of female Bildungsroman, she protests against the dominating male society. The other incident, at the age of seventeen she learns that her aunt’s friends discuss about the ‘love’ of a Muslim girl with a Hindu boy. When they were talking, Laila interrupts and answers that it is not a sin to fall in love with a Hindu boy and marry him. In both the incident she witnessed the gender dominance in the society but she never wants to accept that instead of accepting the regular pattern, she wants to change it. The editors of *The Voyage In: Fiction of Female Development*, the text from which virtually all other feminist readings of the Bildungsroman take their lead says,

While emphasizing gender of difference, our definition shares common ground with the presuppositions and generic features of the traditional Bildungsroman; belief in a coherent self[...] faith in the possibility of development occurs[...] insistence on a time span in which development occurs[...]and] emphasis on social context. Continuity as well as significant difference links our picture of development fiction to the conventions of the classic Bildungsroman. (The Voyage 14)

So she starts to record her own thought to the elder. Thus she protests against the society.

Laila is also interested to involve in the freedom struggle. The freedom struggle between Britishers and Indians results in communal conflicts by Hindu and Muslim. She strongly talks about political issues, believes in Gandian Principles and follows it. She is also familiar with the political agitations because most of her family members are involved in it. But the society gives less importance to girls to participate in it. Laila feels that she lives in two worlds. The first is to do and think differently in her way. The second is what her family wants her to do. She is very familiar with few college friends like Nita, a self-confident girl, Nadira, the daughter of Begum Waheed, Romana, relative of Nadira and Joan Davis, an Anglo-Indian girl. Nita explains about Laila that “The trouble with you is you walk round and round in circles because you have no sense of direction. You sway and bend backwards thinking you are flexible and being fair, but you really are unsure”( SBC124).

While uncle Hamid asks her about ‘the freedom of thought’. She replies that she is having freedom of thought and reminds him that she is not having freedom of action in her life. Uncle Hamid immediately replies her that “I respect an independent mind, but while you are in my charge and until I consider you are fit, you will be guided by me. I will not allow any action of which I disapprove”(161). Laila clearly learns her responsibility in her family. As a part of self-assertion she compares Zahra with her and asks certain question to herself that “ Why was I different from Zahra? What was wrong with me?”(SBC161). The growth and change in her proves that she is completely different from Zahra.

At the age of nineteenth Laila falls in love with Ameer and they both start to love mutually. Ameer tries to understand her and decides to lead his life with her. She leaves the decision to Ameer regarding their marriage. She violates the family custom, tradition and marries Ameer. This creates and gives her the confidence to hold the hands of Ameer in her life. The supreme goal of the novel of development is to attain success in the love and marriage. She enjoys freedom in her marriage life and creates her self-identity in the society.

The positive perspective makes Laila to reach her adulthood and it helps her to experience things with intelligence. At the age of thirty-five, after the death of Ameer, Laila visits Ashiana and thinks about the past. As a part of alienation she is really alienated from her relations after her unique decision. She is completely isolated from her family through her marriage.



Though Asad has soft corner for Laila she never wants to let out the feeling to him. She creates her 'self' individuality and thinks "I could not tell him that I did not wish to deceive him with my mind's acquiescence while each cell of my body remembered Ameer" (SBC319).

Laila decides to live a model life to her daughter so that she may shine as a wonderful individual in the modern society like her. She never tells her feelings and emotions to her daughter. She always thinks about the beautiful life which she spent with her husband Ameer who died in the army during the partition of India and Pakistan. She marks her own identity in the society by achieving her education, love, marriage and family life. The female bildungsroman is embedded in the image of Laila's 'selfhood' that she gains through self-education, self-respect, self-discovery, self-definition and self-affirmation.

In the beginning of the novel she starts to grow as an innocent girl and at the end of the novel she reaches her own individuality in her experienced womanhood. Her own maturation and sense of self therefore is intersected by her gender, class, community, and nationality thereby providing a political and social vision as well. Attia Hosain creates a female protagonist, Laila who reaches her empowerment and development, in an attempt to challenge and face her traditional paradigm of genre. Through this novel Hossain makes the reader to create a change in the mind set of individual women.

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