CHAPTER- IV
Comparative Study of the Selected Muslim Writers
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The distinguished gentleman of refined taste and manners, Ahmed Ali had a deep interest in Sufis and a passion for Ghalib. His writing voiced concern over the decay of Muslim Culture and the injustice of colonial power. He was Proficient in several languages including French, Chinese, Persian, and Quranic Arabian and captivated audiences by his eloquent Speech and expression, Steeped in tradition but progressive at heart he was equally at home in the East and the west his career Spanned the better part of the 20th century. Ahmed Ali died in Karachi in 1994.

Ahmed Ali wrote three novels in English They are ‘Twilight in Delhi in (1940) ‘Ocean of Night’ and “Rats and Diplomats’.

Twilight in Delhi is set in the great Indian center of Muslim civilization at Delhi, and the plot revolves round a simple love story of boy and a girl of Mughal. And noble Arabic extractions respectively who go through the cyclical joys and difficulties of having their love accepted, and renewed despite Social barriers of death. Around this story is built a whole way of life, customs and ceremonies that sustain a colorful through declining feudal culture including the father ( Mir Nihal ) Pigeon- flying past time.

The Zanana and wedding rituals In the outer Circle round the old house in a bylane of old Delhi, history is seen at work in the Great Durbar held by the king Emperor in 1911 the Public reactions to the First world war,
the influence epidemic of 1919 the Jillian Walla Babh Massacre of 1919 in Amritsar and the political turmoil of 1920 in North India, The excellent Subject matter and innovative style here were enough to interest BonamyDobree, Edwin Muir and E.M Foster, who commended the novel as well as those elements which could barely pass the British censor’s examination of the Mane Script during the second world war. The book was rated a classic in Asia, Its author was recognized as the first novelist of any consequence.

‘Ocean of Night’ deals with the life between two world wars. It was published in 1964. It explores the possibility of the Modern Spirit. The novel is set in the other great Muslim center, Lucknow. The mood is some what subdued, the atmosphere one of repose and contemplation amidst a celebration dance and Muslim ideas of love, Peace and friendship. The Nawabs Mistress is a fine courtesan, and the young lawyer in love with her cannot over come the class barrier to find fulfillment, The intellectual and mystical elements in the Muslim tradition are related to the political degeneration of the Muslim civilization and both ordinary feelings and more delicate emotions are seen as atrophied or sacrificed to the remaining oligarchy’s reckless life style and idle, indiscriminate social pursuits.

Ahmed Ali’s third post colonial novel, Rats and Diplomats (1986) deals with general decay in the world in which representatives of the newly freed fourth world, find analogs of their own decay and depravity prevalent on a universal scale. Before the very end the protagonist wakes-up one morning transformed into a rat with a fail
grown at his back. The ratty business has taken its moral toll, whose evidence is biological and aesthetic. The narrative aspires to the moral status of a fable the historical imagination in the earlier works did not offer to subvert history so as to reorder the moral universe: and such humor had never been at the forefront, as they are in Rats and Diplomats.

Humayun Kabir occupies an important place. Though he is known for writing only one novel Men and Rivers (1945), there are many firsts to his credit. In the preface to Humayun Kabir: A Political Biography, Dipankar Dutta states:

“..... After a resplendent career in India, he went to Oxford to become the first Asian to achieve office in the Union. He was the first Indian, possibly the first Asian, to translate one of Kant’s unpublished texts from German into English....He was the first Indian to be invited to inaugurate the American National Education Conference at San Francisco. He presided over the first Asian History Congress and is the only student of humanities to become President of the Indian Science Congress..... He was the first Asian to deliver the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford where earlier lecturers have included men like Einstein and Bertrand Russell.”

One of the significant aspects of Humayun Kabir’s personality was his direct involvement in political affairs of the country. He was a poet, an essayist, and a novelist as well as an important central minister in Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s ministry.

Kabir was a versatile man, combining intellectual brilliance, literary talent with active political leadership and a secular outlook. Apart from his other
contributions, Kabir is remembered as one of those Muslims who decided to stay behind in India at the time of partition.

Kabir’s given name was Humayun Zahiruddin Amir-I-Kabir. His father, Kabiruddin Ahmad, was a deputy magistrate and a man with a liberal outlook and independent mind. Both Kabir’s father and grandfather were awarded the title of Khan Bahadur by the British government. Kabir was an exceptional talent in many ways. He topped the list of successful candidates in the matriculation examination of 1922 with star marks. He did his Honours and masters in English from Calcutta University and set a new record by standing first class first in both examinations. The most brilliant students of the time were his friends among them was Shanti Devi who later became his wife. Kabir decided not to enter government service. He opted for teaching and went to Exeter College, Oxford in 1928 on a scholarship. There he took Honours in ‘Modern Greats’ that is, philosophy, political science and economics. Here too he stood first lass first in 1931. He also established himself as a student leader and an effective orator.

In 1932, Kabir joined Andhra University as a lecturer in Philosophy at the invitation of Dr. Radhakrishnan. A year later, he joined Calcutta University. From then onwards he began a very active life. Alongside teaching, he devoted himself to literary and political activities and became associated with trade union politics. He joined Ak Fazlul Huq’S Krishak Praja Party and was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly for the period 1937 to 1947.
Although an intellectual of high caliber, he was a strong advocate of the rights of peasants and workers. He was president of three large trade unions. In 1946, Humayun Kabir was the private secretary to the Congress President Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. After partition many Muslims opted for Pakistan, but Kabir stayed behind in India. When Abul Kalam Azad became the Education Minister, Kabir served as joint education advisor, education secretary and chairman of the University Grants Commission. The Moulana dictated to him in Urdu his famous book India Wins Freedom. In 1956, Humayun Kabir was elected as the member of the Rajya Sabha, Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru appointed him state Minister for Civil Aviation and, after the death of Moulana Azad in 1958, made him Minister for Education. Kabir was later appointed Minister for Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs. From 1957 until his death in 1969 he was a member of Lok Sabha from Bashirhat Constituency of West Bengal. He played an active role in 1967 in dislodging the Congress government in West Bengal and forming a united front government in its place.

Kabir made his literary debut in 1928 by publishing his collections of poems Svapnasadh, Sathi (1930) and Astadashi (1938). The poems in these volumes reflect his romanticism in which he has followed the tradition of Ravindranath Tagore. Kabir has published more than twenty books and his novels and poems written in Bengali and English, have attracted attention in India as well as abroad. Some of his works have also been translated into Swedish, German and French.
Kabir was a good short story writer. In the thirties, he published some of his short stories. His novel Nari O Nari was published in 1945. In the same year its English version Men and Rivers was published. The novel, according Dr. Balram Gupta is ‘reminiscent of Hemingway’s Old Man and the Sea.’ Ideological concern of Humayun Kabir Humayun Kabir, like the other Muslim progressive writers, was influenced by social realism, which was then widely practised in Bengali literature. Unlike Abbas, Kabir turns to the pastoral theme and captures the romance and reality of life in the Indian villages in Men and Rivers. For his rustic folk on the banks of the River Padma, human destiny is intervened with the working of nature. The influence of Gandhian principles is seen in the novel of Humayun Kabir. He was influenced by Gandhi’s philosophy that source of ‘India’s strength is its villages. The novel Men and Rivers is in the form of folk art in which a realistic depiction of the life of the peasants is centred around the Padma. Kabir has captured the beauty of Indian villages in picturesque details. As he was an ardent follower of the ideals of Gandhi, he placed the peasants at the centre of his novel. The conflict between man and the nature is the concern of the novelist. Kabir has shown that man has to struggle against the power of nature. Kabir can be classified as a social novelist. He has registered authentically the joy, sorrow, hatred and love of a community at a particular period of time. His novel is a ‘rural novel’ and deals with the tillers of the soil. Here, it is worthwhile to note that among the seven Muslims novelists; only Humayun Kabir has focused his attention on the customs, modes and manners of the rural Muslim community in India in an exhaustive way. His novel not only narrates a
simple tale but also discusses the affinity between man and nature. The river Padma plays a significant role in the lives of the simple peasants and fisherfolks and proves the fact that the lives and fortunes of these innocent people depend on the changing mood of the mighty river. The flood, in fact, disrupts their lives and they start life afresh after the flood in a new place. Hence, the river Padma is looked upon with awe and reverence by the villagers. The novel also highlights the fact that although the thirties and forties proved to be a period of great political turmoil in erstwhile East Bengal, politics and modernization had not reached the villagers; hence the villagers led their lives without being aware of the tremendous political changes taking place in India. Kabir was the novelist with purpose. As he was social realist, he has depicted the life of Muslim community with all its authenticity.

Some of the issues that he has discussed in the novel are superstitious nature of the villagers, child marriages, women’s emancipation, illiteracy of the people, conflict between the men and the nature, communal harmony etc. In other words, the novel is a picturesque and authentic study in Indian tradition. It is a saga about Indian customs, beliefs, urban-rural polarity and the simple life of peasants and fisherfolk of East Bengal (now Bangla Desh). The novel is full of popular beliefs, exposing Indian psychology. The concepts like modernism, science and technology do not find a place of pride in the novel. Most of the characters emerge from peasantry and they are lay people. Thematic Concern of Humayun KabirIn the tradition of Muslim Novelists in Indian English Literature, the place of Humayun Kabir in the literary activities is very significant. As a novelist
he is known for his famous novel Men and Rivers published in the year 1945. It is his only novel but of great importance. Uma Parameshwaran is of the opinion that Men and Rivers is an interesting novel where the author has invested a simple story with deep significance of human values. The story is based on the ancient legends of East Bengal where River Padma is looked on as a merciful mother as well as mother Kali, the destroyer. The East Bengal in the novel is now called as Bangla Desh, The locale of the novel is a village Dhaldi situated on the banks of the river Padma and on the other side of the river there is another village Byanchar. Almost all the characters in the novel are illiterate farmers. Nazu Mia and Asgar Mia are the two major characters in the novel. Humayun Kabir while expressing his point of view regarding the life of farmer writes about Nazu Mia’s love for the river Padma. He says, He loved her with almost physical passion as he remembered the days that he had passed with her. His life was wedded to hers when Rahim Baksh brought him to her banks and selected a plot of land for him. It looked at first sight an unpromising plot. It was a marshy land by the riverside in which grew wild grass and reeds; but Rahim Baksh called him aside and said, ‘don’t be despondent, my lad, the soil is like gold. You can grow paddy here and get crops that are beyond your wildest dreams. In winter you can grow mustard and garlic and other crops..surely Allah will make you prosperous.

Thus, throughout the novel, the river Padma plays a significant role in the lives of the farmers and the fisher folk of rural erstwhile East Bengal. While depicting the struggle between man and the Nature the novelist Humayun Kabir suggests that the Nature in the form of the river is both
protective and fierce, both giver of bounty and destroyer of homes. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes, In Men and Rivers, the river is also a character, a presence and a power both, inspiring a physical passion in the people who live on her bounty or cower before her fury.

The novel, as in accordance with the ideology of the novelist highlights the customs and superstitions then prevalent in the rural Muslim community of East Bengal. The novel, besides being a love story, is a picturesque and authentic study in Indian tradition. It is a saga about Indian customs, beliefs, urban-rural polarity and the simple life of peasants and fisherfolk. For instance, faqeer-episode represents Indian’s innocence and ignorance about the development of science. This is how Humayun Kabir tries to show generation gap. For example, Ayesha represents the old generation while Nazu Mia represents the young. Even Ramazan, Nazu Mia’s friend is in favour of the old generation when he tries to convince Nazu Mia that Faqees could predict future Nazu Mia says, Have I kept you to go about nosing for charlatans and cheats? He regards. Faqeer indeed! As if a real Faqeer has no other business but caters to idiots and rogues like you! Ramzan persisted. Don’t abuse a holy man Panchayat. They know even your unuttered thoughts. They can hear you even if they are not here. Nazu Mia uttered a mighty oath and said—Allah has given you a buffalo’s frame and buffalo’s wits. Will your Faqeer secure me? I he, can, well; I will pay him in silver. If he can’t, what good is he to anybody.6 Humayun Kabir perhaps wants to suggest that in Indian rural society and especially in the lives of the peasants and fisher folk superstitions, blind beliefs and so called God’s men like Faqeer play an important role, and they get a wide
popularity in rural society. Therefore, when Nazu Mia’s mother Amma Jan
listens to Nazu Mia’s quarrel with the Faqeer, she feels that something
unnatural is going to befall upon him. What is more? Nazu Mia, the
protagonist himself believes that fate is unavoidable. Humayun Kabir in
this novel thus points out the helplessness of the poor peasants and fisher
folk in front of these superstitions and blind beliefs. In other words, Kabir
has exposed the psychology of the Indian people in general. The novelist
has also focused on the religious practices of these people. Though
illiterate, these people of Muslim community attach an immense
importance to the recitation of holy Quran. For example, the discussion
between Nazu Mia and a young man as depicted by the novelist is as
following: What are you reading? He asked the young man “Don’t you
know the Quran? He replied “I am an unlettered man my brother,” replied
Nazu Mia ‘and I rarely have the good fortune of listening to’ the holy writ.
Will you please tell me what you are reading?’ But you are listening to
what you are reading,’ returned the young man ‘yes, I can hear what you
are reading, but I cannot understand a word. Will you please tell me the
meaning of the verse you are reading? Said Nazu Mia.

The young man looked with astonishment at the meaning of the verses? ’
But we don’t know the meaning. Aren’t they the words of Allah? That is
enough for us; we are committing the verses to memory.’ Nazu Mia was
about to answer when the inner door opened again.8

Thus Humayun Kabir’s concern in the novel is to project the social,
religious habits and customs prevalent in the rural Muslim community.
The title of the novel Men and Rivers is quite explicit to clear out the theme of the novel. The River* Padma in the novel is personified. It is rather like an important character in the novel.

Humayun Kabir observes, The Padma lay still in the haze of light. She had lost her autumnal splendor and looked emaciated and hungry. Sandbanks showed here and there. The banks in the distance gleamed in the sunlight. The brilliance on the river was dazzling. A steel sky looked down upon the steel surface of the water, Padma is always hungry and Padma in the rains is angry, and Padma in the autumn is treacherous—must men keep indoors all the year? Have men stopped sailing on the Padma for such childish fears. It is a clear day, and it is quite early. Even if the wind rises, storms never start before the evening. We shall be safely across the River before then. It shouldn’t take us more than a couple of hours to row across, if we go with the current.

The river Padma is full of hopes for Asgar Mia and Nazu Mia, while it is a mine of new life for chacha. It is a life force for the Bengalees as much as it is a valley of death for people like Nazu Mia and Amma Jan. In one of the situations Nazu Mia tries to convince his mother that the river Padma has lost her fury. In return Amma Jan says,

“One can never trust Padma. She is a witch, a witch that has swallowed hundreds of villages and men. She puts an appearance of calm only to lure unwary boats”.

The river Padma is not just an imaginary creation. It is a real river flowing near Faridpur, which is Humayun Kabir’s birth place. Kabir has spent
much of his life in the vicinity of the river Padma who has influenced him in many ways. Her ever chanting shape and upheavals have influenced his poetry also. In the novel Men and Rivers, the river Padma is rather like a character. For instance, Humayun Kabir observes, The Padma lay still in the haze of light. She had lost her autumnal splendor and looked emaciated and hungry. Sandbanks showed here and there. The banks in the distance gleamed in the sunlight. The brilliance on the river was dazzling. A still sky looked down upon the still surface of the river. Padma is always hungry and Padma in the rains is angry, and Padma in the autumn is treacherous’—must men keep indoors all the year? Have men stopped sailing on the Padma for such childish fears? It is a clear day, and it is yet quite early. Even if the wind rises, storms never start before the evening. We shall be safely across the river before then. It shouldn’t take us more than a couple of hours to row across, if we go with the current.11

The character of Amma Jan Ayesha stands for the typical Muslim woman of old generation. For instance, she believes in religion and loves her grandson Malik more than anything else in the world. She respects Faqees and Maulwees and expects her grandson follow her. Once when Nazu Mia calls a faqeer, a pretender, Ayesha gets angry and retorts, “Can’t you show proper respect where it is due? you should have at least a respect for your mother”12 Sometimes the character of Ayesha outshadows even the male characters in the novel. In fact, much of the novel is about her.

According to S.A.Altetakar, “The character of Ayesha lives through one third’ of the novel, but the impact it makes on the lives of other characters is tremendous”13
The characters in Men and Rivers are farmers who were as ignorant of letters as Adam before he ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree. Whether they understand the Quran or not, they recite it. Interestingly, a youngman states: “But we don’t know the meaning’ Aren’t they the words of Allah? That is enough for us; we are committing the verses to memory”14

Ayesha thinks of getting her grandson, ‘who will soon be ten,’ married because she has known men married at that age, 15 Kabir here refers to the child. Marriage which was prevalent in rural India and particularly in the Muslim community, while depicting the characters in the novel Humyun Kabir has focused on the women’s problems and highlighted the conflict between tradition and modernity. For instance, Kulsum who becomes a widow within one year of her marriage at the age of fifteen, and who is ‘a little over twenty’ now is to be married to Aziz, who is about thirty-five and has lost his wife. When she is reluctant to marry, she is forced to marry him. This example tells of the practice where the girls are never consulted regarding their marriage.

In the history of Indian English literature there is a great tradition of women writers. The contribution of women novelists to Indian English fiction is very significant, for instance, the following works of the Indian women novelists is sufficient enough to justify this argument.

‘Torn Dutt’s Bianca (1878) Raj Lakshmi Devi’s The Hindu Wife or The Enchanted Fruit (1876), Mrs. Krupabai Satthianadhan’s Kamala, A story of Hindu Life (1894), and Saguna, A story of Native Christian Life (1894), Mrs. Ghoshal’s (Swarnkumari Debi) An Unfinished Song (1913) and The
Fatal Garland (1915), Cornelia Sorabji’s Love and Life Behind the Purdah (1901) and Between The Twilights 90S), Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in Sieve (1954) Some Inner Fury (1957), A Silence of Desire (1961), Possession (1963), and A Handful of Rice (1966), Mrs. Ruth Prawer Jhabvalla’s To Whom She Will (1955), The Nature of Passion (1956), Esmond In India (1958), The Householder (1960), Get Ready for Battle (1962) and A Backward Place (1965), In the same tradition of women novelists of the early and later twentieth century the Muslim women novelists have also contributed significantly to enrich Indian English Fiction. These Muslim Women novelists are Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Zeenuth Futehally and Attia Hosain. These women novelists gave a largely authentic representation of the life of Muslim women in Purdah. Various factors like western education, modernity and the impact of western culture brought about a sudden awareness among the womenfolk in the “Purdah-bound World.” This resulted in the depiction of the mental trauma and predicament of the Muslim women in the conservative world by the Indian Muslim women novelists in their works. The fact that the plight of the women in Purdah is revealed to the readers by the Indian Muslim women novelists themselves adds to the authenticity of the novels. Meena Shirwadkar states: Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s Purdah and Polygamy (1944), Zeenuth Futehally’s Zohra (1951) and Attia Hosain’s Sunlight On a Broken Column (1961) show the new woman, just becoming aware of her Purdah-bound world and suffering due to polygamy, then gradually, through the chinks in the Purdah becoming aware of the changing times, the flux of East-West ideas and the freedom struggle. A significant point
that has been noted while analysing the novels of the Muslim writers is the
difference in the themes. While the men novelists have concentrated on the
depiction of the Muslim life and society in India, the women writers have
shown more concern for the traumatic experience of the Indian Muslim
women in a conventional community, bound by religious codes and
customs.

Thus Purdah and Polygamy is a novel with distinct social purpose, the
amelioration of the life of the Muslim woman. Unlike Attia Hosain and
Zeenuth Futehally whose heroines rebel against the perpetrators of their
oppression, Iqbalunnisa Hussain merely gives an account of the stifling
social scenario that deprives the woman of even her right to happiness.
Kabeer, the protagonist in the novel, disregards the individual identity of
women and indulges in polygamous relationship with many women. The
very title of the novel exposes the two of the detrimental practices that
suppress women, purdah and polygamy. It is also remarkable that the
author’s approach to the issue is unconventional. The practice of polygamy
is not, as is usually explained away, the result of the sexual promiscuity of
the Muslim male; it is presented as the result of many inter-related
domestic issues. Women are also a party to the perpetuation of such
practices. It is Maqbool, the novelist’s spokesperson who voices the views
of the New woman. It is she, Kabir’s third wife, who alone retaliates,
whereas the rest of the wives are silent sufferers. There are signs of a
social change at the end of the novel when Akram, Kabir’s son, comes
forward to accept his father’s fourth wife as his stepmother.
The practice of the Purdah, despite the controversial opinions regarding its origin and purpose, has come to be a powerful symbol of Muslim womanhood. Though popular myths regarding the Purdah in India trace its origin to the Muslim conquest, critics like Jasbir Jain deny its association with the advent of Islam. Purdah is a Persian word that means “curtain” and connotes the concealment of women as well as the separation of men and women. It is a patriarchal invasion of women’s space, an attempt to exclude them from their legitimate rights Jasbir Jain says, “Purdah is based on the principle of inequality (not necessarily difference), and establishes itself on the dual strategy of control and exclusion”40. There are two different meanings of the word Purdah: in the physical sense of a veil worn by women to cover their faces from public view and the other which reflects an altitudinal stand that forces women to live in seclusion. Anuradha Roy corroborates the twin implications of Purdah when she states:....the imposed definition of the space available to women, confirming the dichotomy between the public and the private worlds, and the enslavement of women to the idea of dutifulness—to tradition, to custom, to elders, to males — above all calls towards individual fulfillment, even to the point of effacement of the individual to the greater good and honor of the family.41

Thus, Purdah and Polygamy occupies a place of importance among the women’s literature produced in India, as a novel written with the specific purpose of the amelioration of the conditions of Muslim women. The novelist makes a categorical attack on two of the practices designed to inhibit the freedom and happiness of women. The irony of the voice of the
narrator as she disparages the women who observe Purdah in the presence of the dead body of Kabir reflects her aversion towards the practice,

“After all a man is a man, even (though) dead and Purdah before him is essential.42

It seems that Iqbalunnisa’s purpose behind writing the novel is not only to depict the existing condition of society, but also to suggest some measures to solve these social problems, and try to uplift the position of Muslim women. Polygamy, though an Oriental institution confined to a particular religion or area, has in the course of time come to be identified with the Muslim community.

Polygamy does not merely lead to an inferior status of women, but deforms their minds causing great suffering to themselves and also to others. There is an urgency in the voice of Iqbalunnisa Hussain as she exhorts her readers to abolish such practices that inhibit the lives of women, in her only novel. If Pardah, Zenana and Polygamy are dominant symbols of the subjugation of Muslim women, there are also many widely circulated stereotypes that confirm their state of suppression. These symbols and stereotypes are often manipulated by the patriarchs to make them correspond with their perception of communal identity. Very often women internalize these patriarchal constructs about themselves and become a party to the propagation of such derogatory images of their own class. Stereotypes play a powerful role in reaffirming images of women, as this is a way of asking women to live up to these images of themselves.
The stereotype indirectly” exhort women to be women, remain women, become women.”.

The mid-twentieth century marked the emergence of a set of Indian Muslim women novelists namely Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Zeenuth Futehally and Attia Hosain, who gave an authentic representation of the life of Muslim women in Purdah. In a conventional Muslim household, the women are rarely seen by the outsiders except when they attend some functions and even then they are in Purdah. Moreover, the bifurcation of a Muslim household into two Maradana, the men’s part of the house and Zenana, the women’s part of the house-is another way of secluding the womenfolk. Thus the only link which the women of the Zenana have with the outside world is through the other women like the sweepers or singers who had access to the Zenana. Hence, it is (or, atleast, was) impossible for men to see the women at close quarters, “for there were many rigid customs that did not allow an outsider to have closer glimpses of the Indian woman hidden in her home or behind the Purdah.44. Thus, the women novelists who had access to the Zenana focused their attention on women: and all the three women novelists have women as central characters in the novel. Zeenuth Futehally is one more significant woman novelist belonging to this phase of Indian Muslim novelists writing in English. While Iqbalunnisa’s novel portrays women as wives in polygamous situation, Zeenuth Futehelly’s heroine Zohra finds herself a victim of unfulfilled love. Laila, the heroine of Attia Hosain’s novel becomes alienated from her family because of her education. Life and Works of Zeenuth Futehally Not much is known about the life and career
of Zeenuth Futehally. Born on Oct.5, 1903 she hails from Hyderabad and her mother tongue is Urdu. Her only English novel Zohra was published in 1951. She is said to have resided at 61-B, ‘Sahil’ Pali Hill, Bombay-20. In her Preface to Zohra, Zeenuth Futehally relates how she started writing her novel, Zohra, in a foreign land. She further talks of her association with E.M. Forster and K.P.S Menon. The ‘Foreword’ to the novel has been written by E.M.Forster and K.P.S. Menon has written an ‘Introduction’ to it.

In one of India’s National newspapers The Hindu’ of Oct. 03, 2004, the ‘Literary Review’ of the new edition of the novel was published. According to the review writer Visalakshi Menon, the novel Zohra is the story of a gentle rebel. It is calm soothing and flows easily.

Ideological concern of Zeenuth Futehally Zohra was first published in 1951. The setting of the novel is erstwhile princely state of Hyderabad, which had then just been incorporated into the Indian Union. The circumstances in which that integration took place were turbulent and violent. It was also shortly after partition Zeenuth Futehally writes that she was keen to record the Hyderabadi way of life, which was fast disappearing. Visalakshi Menon writes, “though mildly feminist, this novel does not have the anger and defiance that lired the imaginations of other Muslim women writers of this period such as Ismat Chughtai, Rasheed Jahan and Attia Hosain, though some of the concerns are common.”45
The Muslim women writers have more vociferously championed the liberation of women from the Purdah than their male counterparts. The woman has been the focus for the women writers discussed, without an exception. Patriarchal subjugation and its impact on women’s predicament have been powerfully portrayed in all these works.

The discontent that seethes within the heart of the Indian woman, finds an outlet in the works of Zeenuth Futehally as she defies and attacks the patriarchal social codes. Zohra belongs to an affluent family, that of the Nawabs of Hyderabad, where female modesty and obedience are treasured as the hallmark of culture. Unlike Laila of Sunlight On a Broken Column, Zohra’s realization of self-hood comes from her experiences in the life chosen for her by her parents. The novel offers a penetrating insight into her troubled mind, as she becomes aware of her incompatibility with her husband. Considering her social milieu and upbringing the extramarital alliance that she establishes with Hameed, her brother-in-law, is a rebellion against her society that denies a woman even the right to control her life. Zeenuth Futehally also questions the Muslim law that permits the father a greater right over the child than the mother. Zohra tells Bashir “Men have made the laws to suit their own purposes. There is more slavery in this than in anything I can think of ”46 Daya Patwardhan and Savita L.Bhat pay tribute to Zeenuth Futehally for questioning patriarchal subjugation. It is a gallant stride which must be greatly appreciated because it is written by one who comes from a set of people where fiction, and especially romantic fiction, is deprecated. A brave effort for a woman from a secluded society, a rare gift of a hidden talent behind a Purdah, which
Purdah could not suppress. In the novel, Futehally has also presented the secular Muslim point of view and the Muslim League’s point of view through the contradictory opinions held by Bashir and Hamid: “Only the land of the Buddha could have produced the Mahatma... Non-violence is not the creed for the weak, it is a creed for the bravest.”

“We fight in the open battlefield” said Bashir with cold finality, ‘This method is certainly not suited to our Muslim genius.” Hamid, losing all self-control, burst out: “Why do we have to talk of the Muslim genius and the Hindu genius? After all, the majority of us come from the same stock.”

Thematic Concern of Zeenuth Futehally

The Indian freedom struggle, gave rise to a national experience which had its impact on the social, cultural and religious aspects of the Indian society. Thus, the struggle for freedom changed the entire scenario. As Pramila Garg observes,

“Since novel’s subject is man in society, its subject matter must be closely related to the upheavals and tribulations of the society. Hence, no Indian writer writing in those decades or writing about them could avoid reflecting this national upsurge in his novels.”

It is to be noted that while some of the novelists made this struggle the central core of their theme, the others used it merely as a background to narrate the social life of their characters. Thus, the politics of the day became an important theme in all novels and the actions, beliefs and experiences of the people involved in the freedom struggle became the subject matter. Since the first half of the twentieth century was a period of
political turmoil in India, the Indian novelists in English also tried to portray the social and cultural changes that took place in India as an impact of the political upheaval. Zeenuth Futehally’s Zohra (1951) is actually a social novel but it also refers to the Satyagraha Movement and Gandhian ideals.

Zohra falls in love with her husband’s younger brother Hamid, but he is not able to reciprocate her love because it is against tradition. Thus, he turns to the Satyagraha Movement and keeps himself involved in politics while Zohra turns to social work. The novel also gives an insight into the political movements that shook India during the days of the Raj and also speaks of Gandhi’s influence on the Indian masses.

The novel gives a rich description of the Muslim social life in Hyderabad. P.P. Mehta states:

“It is a touching story of Muslim life almost next to Ahmed Ali’s Twilight in Delhi 51 Zohra grows up in the Zenana of the aristocratic Muslim family.

“Zohra is shown as a romantic school girl when she is forced into marriage, her head full of ideas about love picked up from sentimental novels and poetry...”52

She is disappointed in her marriage and falls in love with her husband’s younger brother, Hamid. But tradition prevents them from getting married. Zohra’s life ends in death and Zeenuth Futehally states:
“After that final meeting with Hamid, Zohra, though she retained full consciousness to the end, spoke little; on the third day, in the presence of her family, including Hamid, her restless soul found peace”

The novel, however, ends on a sentimental note:

“If there is but one last picture on earth that the soul can carry along on its flight, for Zohra it could only have been of the tortured man she loved, stooping with his arms round her sobbing daughter-slender and tall for years. It appeared as if he was comforting her, and yet was strangely leaning on her for comfort himself. It is often said that people look lovelier in death! for Zohra this was incredibly true! for it was a face that had been filtered through sorrow and suffering.”

Thus, the novel depicts the conflict between modernity and tradition. At the same time, the novel also focuses on important issues like the position of women in Indian Muslim households and the impact of westernization on the traditional Muslim community.

The Muslim men novelists like Ahmed Ali, Aamir Ali, K.A.Abbas, Humayun Kabir and others wrote about several contemporary burning issues such as freedom struggle, East-West encounter, imperialism, conflict between tradition and modernity and partition whereas, the Muslim women novelists did not deal with as varied themes as their men counterparts. They depicted with progressive views the conditions of Muslim women in family and society.
Attia Hosain in her novel Sunlight On a Broken Column depicts the conflict between modernity and tradition. At the same time she focuses on important issues like the position of women in Indian Muslim households, the role of education, the impact of westernization on the traditional Muslim community and the fear of danger to their culture under British rule and, more importantly, the impact of partition on Indian society.

A distinguished writer and a dauntless Journalist, Attia Hosain was born in Lucknow, India in 1913, into a prominent feudal or taluqdari family of the Awadh province of Lucknow. Her father was educated at Christ college, Cambridge, and was the contemporary of well known politicians of the time. Her mother’s family was fluent in the language traditions of classical Persian, Arabic and Urdu. As a result, Hosain spent her childhood in the company of the country’s leading political intelligentsia and she was taught Persian, Arabic and Urdu at an early age. She studied at the La Martiniere School for Girls and later went on to the Isabella Thoburn College, a leading college for women affiliated to the Lucknow University. In 1933 at the age of 20, she became the first woman in her family to graduate from the University of Lucknow.

In her 30’s, Hosain began writing for newspapers such as The Pioneer and The Statesman which were both leading newspapers in Calcutta. She was also affiliated with the progressive writers’ movement, a group of socialist writers and artists such as Ahmad Ali, Mulk Raj Anand, Dr.Rashid Jahan, Mehmood Jafar and others. She was much influenced by the ethos of the organization and attended the first
progressive writers’ conference. In 1947, during the partition of India, Attia Hosain moved with her husband and two children to England, where she began to write professionally and became actively involved in broadcast journalism.

She worked for the BBC Eastern service in 1949 and presented a variety of shows for the regional services in Pakistan in Urdu, the Indian services in Hindi and the English regional service which was broadcast to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. She presented and participated in popular shows such as “Brains Trust,” “Radio Roundabout” for women and children, a series called “Asian Club” and also read for numerous plays. Her radio shows dealt with various topics such as literature, health, arts and culture and history, and include “A dialogue with Loneliness” (1962), women in the World Today (1960), English writing-Caesar and Cleopatra (1959) and London Calling Asia (1963). She continued to work for the BBC until the early 70’s. In the 1950’s and 60’s Hosain published Phoenix Fled, a collection of short stories, was published by Chatto and Windus in 1953. Her stories draw from her own knowledge of the social structure she grew up in and explore with great insight themes such as poverty, power, exploitation, pride, socialism, westernization and tradition. Her novel Sunlight On a Broken Column is evocative of her own life experiences. Published in 1961 by Chatto and Windus, it traces the life of the main character, Laila, who grows up in a feudal, taluqdari family. Although Attia Hosain is best known for her literary achievements, she was also an actress and appeared in television and theatre productions. For example,
she acted as the character “Mrs. Sharma”, in the West end production’s The Bird of Time. She died on 25th Jan. 1998.

Ideological concern of Attia Hosain Like Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain too had followed the activities of the Progressive Writers’ Association with keen interest and its ideals had a profound impact upon her thinking. Her novel Sunlight On a Broken Column centers on the conflict between the woman as an individual and as the protector of familial status. At the same time a nostalgia for the fast fading cultural richness of Oundh is also explicit in the work. It is not a wish to revive the world of a past that has vanished forever, but it is an effort to reconcile with the present. Novy Kapadia reflects thus on Laila’s stance in the novel, “there is the human impulse of nostalgia but she does not wish for the old order to return.”60

An encounter with and two hundred years of forced bondage to the West are the most cataclysmic experiences in the history of India. Every sphere of Indian life has been affected not only by the administrative policies of the colonial rulers but also by their culture and colonial outlook Obviously, the East-West encounter finds a prominent place in the works of Attia Hosain. Her novel Sunlight on a Broken Column written at a later stage of British imperialism depicts another phase of the interaction between the East and the West. Laila’s rebellion against the inequality and injustice meted out to women in the patriarchal society of the Taluqdars and her romantic quest are also inspired by the thinking that she had imbibed from her Western education.
Besides, the novel gives an unimpassioned account of many of the national events that rocked the nation. But Laila, the protagonist is confined within the walls of the Zenana and is a mere spectator who stands on the periphery of the movement. She joins the movement at a personal level and rebels against the outmoded Taluqdari conventions that curb the freedom of its women. The partition is the worst holocaust in the history of the nation. The wisdom of the Partition is questioned even today, half a century after the event and the contradictions concerning it have not yet been resolved. In the novel the Partition figures as a major issue. Madhusudan Prasad compliments Attia Hosain, “Attia Hosain is the only woman novelist (and a Muslim at that) who makes a good effort to evoke Partition though, in a nostalgic mood, in her only novel”61

Though the horrifying scenes of inhumanity are evaded by her, she has convincingly conveyed the intensity of the suffering involved in the Partition. The fragments of Laila’s disintegrated family that was once a close-knit unit, now scattered across the cities lying on either side of the border, reflect in a small way the great disorientation that the Partition had caused. Meenakshi Mukherjee acclaims the achievement of Attia Hosain, “the Portrayal of the Partition that she has attempted is difficult as the intensity of the suffering is indirectly brought in through the scattered fragments of life that once had its wholeness.”62 Attia Hosain wrote at a still later stage of the freedom movement Nevertheless, she shares with Ahmed Ali a delight in sketching the traditional way of life among the Indian Muslims. As G.S.Amur reflects, “In fact, Attia Hosain takes up the
story from where Ahmed Ali had left it, and in some areas the narratives are continuous.”63

A detailed account of the household activities of “Ashiana” is given with much care and attention to minute details. The opulence and grandeur of the life of the Taluqdari feudal lords of Lucknow are vividly portrayed in the novel. But unlike Ahmed Ali, Attia Hosain’s nostalgia for the aristocratic Muslim past of India has no tinge of pathos. In the words of G.S.Amur, “Laila accepts the disintegration of her feudal and aristocratic heritage and looks to the future with hope and courage”.64

Almost all the Muslim novelists invariably responded to Gandhi’s thought, philosophy and personality. The overall response of these writers to Gandhi has been complimentary. The impact that Gandhi had on Attia Hosain is explicit in the delineation of characters in the novel. For instance, Asad, is devoted to the cause of secular nationalism. He is presented as, “a young ascetic, heightened by the thinness of his body in its coarse, hand-spun clothes and the fine bones of his sensitive face and the depth of his dreaming eyes.”65 Even in sketching the physical characteristics, there is the unmistakable stamp of Gandhian influence. Devotion to the Gandhian ideals of non-violence and tolerance has imparted to him something of the sobriety and saintliness of the Mahatma himself. A remarkable instance of his commitment to the ideologies that he preaches is his reaction to the killing of Zahid, his own brother incommunal riots:
‘The manner of Zahid’s death had been a terrible test for Asad’s faith in non-violence. He had accepted it as such, believing that bitterness and retaliation could only breed violence and start a never-ending cycle which was a negation of life; but he was human and it needed a conscious effort of will to restrain his bitterness.’

Attia Hosain’s “Ashiana” is a microcosm of India that was in a state of turmoil during the years which preceded the Partition. R.K. Mathur says,

“Attia Hosain presents the political crises from a Muslim perspective, but the Muslims she portrays have no unanimity of views.”

The novel presents a world that is predominantly Muslim. Yet it is Attia Hosain’s success that she has impartially presented the views held by different sections of Indian Muslims accurately. Sunlight On a Broken Column has a place of distinction among the Indo Anglian Partition novels. It is probably the only Indian novel in English on the theme of Partition written by a woman writer having a Muslim perspective. Through the portrayal of the disintegration of the majestic and regal “Ashiana”, the home of an affluent Taluqdar family of Lucknow, into a forsaken and neglected asylum for the refugees, Attia Hosain leaves a lasting impact on the readers of the tragic intensity of the event. At a personal level, the novel depicts Laila’s struggle to break away from the claustrophobic conventions of her patriarchal Taluqdar family. However, the novel does not focus on the tragic plight of those who were forced out of their homes in the Punjab, instead it projects the consequences of the Partition as felt by a Muslim family in Lucknow. The fears and anxieties that demoralized
the Indian Muslims who lived through the Partition are brought out realistically in the novel. Aunt Sira’s outburst echoes the feeling of fear and distrust that the Muslims had, “Oh dear, there is no question, it would be better to have the British stay on than the Hindus ruling,” 68 Saleem’s fear of suspicion, prejudice and hatred in a Hindu dominated India is explicit in his words, “On the other hand... everything might settle down peacefully. That is where leadership counts. Even so, I maintain, there will be discrimination against those Muslims who stay in India.” 69 But there were also millions of Indian Muslims who did not lose their faith in the nation and their fellowmen even amidst the worst communal calamities. The faith of those who placed their nation above all sectarian forces is evident in Kemal’s reply to Saleem, “but I believe in my country. I have to fight for what I believe in. You forget I never shared your views. I cannot condone something I believe is wrong.” 70

Part four of the novel shows the impact of the Partition on the dismembered and dislocated family of Laila. Laila’s return to “Ashiana” is an event full of tragic intensity. The strangers who occupied the house were labelled “refugees” while the legitimate owner of the house, Saleem was called “evacuee.” In the midst of the abandoned rooms with their few dusty tables and chairs, Laila struggled to come to terms with the tremendous change that the Partition had brought about. Attia Hosain picturises the society of Lucknow in the aftermath of the Partition. It was
in many ways a heterogeneous society. There were those who wreaked vengeance on other communities, since they were deprived of all that they had, during the communal riots. At the time of the get-together in Ranjit’s club, there is the blue turbaned refugee who speaks in a voice that is thick with hate and anger, “they are all bloody traitors—every bloody Muslim—deep in their bloody hearts.”71 Saleem and Nadira, who has opted for Pakistan, feel alienated on listening to such remarks. But to those who have accepted India as their nation, such incidents are a challenge and a test of their loyalty. Though the novel does not have detailed descriptions of the inhuman acts of violence, it does not fail in conveying the pathos that the event aroused., Zahid is killed in a violence that breaks out in a train that he has boarded for Pakistan.

The news of the tragedy is reported through Laila’s recollections. However, it implies the tragic loss that hundreds of families had suffered in the course of dividing the subcontinent on religious lines. Thematic Concern of Attia Hosain Anita Desai says, Attia Hosain’s novel and collections of short stories are the movements of the past. To read them is as if one has parted a curtain or opened a door and strayed into the past. To read them is like wrapping oneself up in one’s mother’s wedding sari, lifting the family jewels out of a faded box and admiring their glitter, inhaling the musky perfume of old silks in a camphor chest. Sunlight On a Broken Column probes into different aspects of Muslim community and feminine psychology. Simultaneously it is a study of Indian communalism and politics. The story centers around the feudal Muslim society of Lucknow. Feudalism was a result of aristocracy and class system in
medieval India. Though progressive movements were in swing, the emancipation of women was a forlorn dream. Fifteen-year-old orphan girl called Laila is the central character of the novel. She represents the rational generation of the 1940’s and 1950’s. She lost her parents when she was young and her aunt Abida brought her up. The girl questions the outdated traditions and customs of her community. Jaya Baliga Says, In the course of development we not only get glimpses of Muslim social world in which Laila grows, but also a picture of the political development that takes place, not from the point of view of political scientists but from the point of view of ordinary human beings- both Muslims and Hindus- who took part in the freedom struggle and who saw the dismemberment of the country.73

When great socio-political upheavals take place outside, the Laila is kept within the walls of “Ashiana” of an orthodox Muslim family. However, she is intelligent, candid, and a passive observer of the happenings. She is a witnessing agent. Her personal feelings and individuality are suppressed. Her other cousins taunt her that she reads books and talks like them. Her family is secular and has very good friendly relations with non-Muslims. For instance, Ranjit is a close friend of Laila’s grandfather Babajan. Even Laila’s ancestors had good rapport with Englishmen. An Englishman Mr. Free Mantle requested that he should be buried near the tomb of his friend Sayed Mohammed Husan. Laila’s aunt Abida stands for orthodox traditions of Muslim life style. She represents an older generation, whereas, Laila stands for the generation of transitional period. Whenever, Laila questions her aunt, the latter says, “My child, there are certain rules
of conduct that must be observed in this world without questions. You have a great responsibility you must never forget the traditions of your family, no matter to what outside influence you must be exposed.” Abida, of course, pleads for Laila’s higher education opposing an early proposal of marriage. Abida is Laila’s guardian, friend and philosopher. She is progressive in outlook. Laila also criticizes government’s anti-social moves. Laila’s life is full of struggle. When she was a student of Aligarh University, she fell in love with Ameer, a History Lecturer. Still she could not marry him as there existed class difference. She belonged to an aristocratic class, while he belonged to a middle class. At one place Ameer said, “I have nothing to offer you, nothing but my love. What more do I want? I am poor; I am nobody, nothing. Your people would never approve of me.” Laila’s kith and kin ask her to honour the tradition. Still Laila being a progressive girl, thinks that elders should adjust to the changing needs. However, Laila is not anti-Islamic. She believes in the Quran, thinking that it is a holy book. It appears throughout the novel that the character of Laila is more independent, intelligent and candid. She has her own ideas of love, family, society, politics and religion. She is a woman of independent thinking and doesn’t follow others blindly. In a way, hers is a multi-faceted and complex character. She is a rebel too. D.R.More observes, The narrator-heroine Laila serves as a mouthpiece to the novelist. She is shown as an unprejudiced and objective person throughout the novel. She is portrayed as more of an inquisitive observer than an active participant in the partition politics. She observes everything from a third person point of view with a
remarkable detachment. She watches the quarrels between father and son across the dining table, sees her ‘Ashiana’ disintegrated, surveys her deserted house, remembers her early days, becomes nostalgic and faces the changes brought about by the political event. She also sees the scenes of abduction, rape, arson, mass violence, mutilation and several other atrocities that take place during the hectic days of partition. And it is after this observation that she criticizes Muslim leaders for their act of causing hatred and anger among Indians and then running away to Pakistan by betraying their millions of Muslim brothers. The character of Hamid is also progressive in the novel. He is a foreignreturned and is advanced in outlook. He arranges Zahra’s marriage with a senior civil officer and gives full liberty to Laila to think freely. Saros Cowasjee points out that the novel Sunlight On a Broken Column is:“the story of the division of the national movement into the secular nationalists under the Congress banner and the communal nationalists under the Muslim League banner.”

The difference of opinions widens when the secular Muslim nationalists remain in Congress, while some of the Muslims oppose it thinking that it is a non-secular organization. For instance, the difference between the father Hamid and Son Saleem cause a rift. Saleem who represents younger generation Muslims observes “I believe the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it, against which the Muslims must organize.”

The drama of Partition creates a situation in Laila’s family, as it offers an opportunity for Indian Muslims to migrate to a new land, where they can
rule themselves. Several boys and girls like Saleem represent modern Indian Muslim generation.

The novel gives a comprehensive picture of communal relations between Hindus and Muslims. Attia Hosain presents the picture of communal activities before and after Independence. She observes: “What was however true was that the communalists among both the Muslims and Hindus had got an upper hand over the secularists.”

The novel presents identity-crisis. There are two characters in search of their identity. For instance, Laila, the heroine fights for her existence as she feels that she has lost her identity in the Muslim orthodoxy. She wants to live her own life setting herself a model for the new generation. Likewise Saleem, who supports the concept of Pakistan, is in search of an answer for his problems. Laila’s lover is a rationalist and intellectual still he is not able to identify himself with India as his motherland. The theme of identity-crisis and rootlessness occurs in the novel. The similar theme has been explored by V.S.Naipaul in his novel A House for Mr. Biswas. In fact, both the works were published in the same year 1961. The question of identity, search for socialorder and cultural issues are some of the things that are common between the two. The protagonists of both the novels face social unrest and cultural conflict. Novy Kapadia observes,

The main character Laila and her cousins Asad and Saleem, like the Indians of Trinidad in Naipaul’s novels, are alienated, in a rapidly changing world. They are in quest of a new identity, a new social role amidst the tensions and violence of the times. The novel chronicles the
stages in Laila’s life from adolescence to maturity in the midst of political upheavals. Similarly Mohan Biswas and his family shift from country to town, from Hindi to English and from a sprawling joint family system to a nuclear family and independence. Hence, both the novels deal not just with the history of Mr. Mohan Biswas or Laila but the movement of cultures. The search for order, identity amidst social change is what both Attia Hosain and V.S.Naipaul set out to explore. According to Mulk Raj Anand, Sunlight On a Broken Column is one of the major novels by a minor woman novelist of the period. It is a saga about two generations depicting the typical nature of Indian Muslims, which after all conveys the message of unity and co-existence opposing feudalism and colonialism. It is more than a domestic story of Laila. The home ‘Ashiana’ represents the whole India.

The rift in the home is a symbolic treatment given to the division of the country as India and Pakistan. So the novel is a social document as well as a domestic saga. Amina Amin points out,

Attia Hosain is preoccupied with the forces that lead to the disintegration of a typical Taluqdar family. I will go one step further from Meenakshi Mukherjee and say that Attia Hosain is not merely giving us a picture of men and manners in a particular period of Indian history, but also observing how these men and manners have affected the edifice of Babajan’s family and brought its solid structure crumbling down. Moreover, it is not as if it is merely the outside forces that have led to this disintegration. Forces within the family have also been instrumental in breaking it up finally.
Regarding Attia Hosain’s style of writing the novel Mulk Raj Anand says,

“I do not think Attia Hosain had any particular English or American novel before her as a model. But unconsciously her novel parallels such a narrative as Elizabeth Bowen’s Bowen’s Court.”

Evaluating the worth of the novel Sarla Palkar observes, “Attia Hosain’s novel is a case in point which not only heralds the spirit of the women’s movement but also anticipates some of the issues and problems that were to figure prominently in the discourses of the later day feminists.”

Unlike Muslim society in Men and Rivers and Twilight in Delhi, the Muslim society in Sunlight On a Broken Column is not only exposed to the West but has undergone a serious transformation under its influence. Thus, the novel heralds an era of social change.
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