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Motherlands of the Mind: A Study of the Women Characters of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Motherlands of the Mind: A Study of the Women Characters
of Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column and Salman
Rushdie's Midnight's Children

(TITLE)

BY

Umme Sadat Nazmun Nahar Al-wazedi

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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2003

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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To my loving mother Khaleda Parvin Banu
and my darling daughter Ila Parveen
Mostafa whose patience made it possible for
me to complete this work.

Abstract

In my thesis I examine the portrayal of women characters by two post-colonial Indian writers, Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie, respectively in Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) and Midnight's Children (1980). I show how Hosain's and Rushdie's ideas of identity, nation and nationality influence their depiction of these women characters.

In the section analyzing Sunlight on a Broken Column, I argue that there is a spatial veil separating the feudal world of "Ashiana" from the outside world with its political disturbances, the life of a woman as an individual from the life of a woman as a part of a community. Through her narrator-protagonist Laila, Hosain depicts a feudal Muslim society with its restrictions and purdah system. Witnessing the political upheavals and partition of India into India and Pakistan, Hosain's women characters go through a transition from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period.

In the discussion of Midnight's Children, I show that Rushdie's women characters also go through a similar transition. But they do not belong to the feudal class, but rather to middle-class mercantile society. Moreover, Rushdie's women characters function on two narrative levels—they are characters as well as metaphors. In society they perform the roles of mothers, wives and grandmothers, and on the metaphorical level they represent India.

Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column expresses a yearning for the India of the colonial period with feudalism as the basis of social structure and hierarchy. This nostalgia imbues the depiction of her women characters. Rushdie, "a midnight's child," on the other hand, in Midnight's Children is vexed with the political situation in post-

independence India. His notion of the history of India is complex, as he says, “the nature of Indian culture has always been multiplicity, plurality and mingling.” Like the country his women characters have multiple meanings.

Though Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie belong to two different generations, the concerns that underlie Sunlight on a Broken Column and Midnight’s Children are similar—nation and national identity. Both the authors write about India from England, from the metropolis. Nation and national identity are all the more important to them because they are exiles. To them “the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 9).

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‘Intertwined History’ and ‘Imaginary Homelands’

...history was like an old house at night. With all lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside. “To understand history,” [he said,] “we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and pictures on the walls. And smell the smells.”¹

The expansion of the British Empire around the globe made it a vast network, in which millions of people aliens to each other met and established relationship. Empire was, however, primarily a relationship between the dominating and the dominated, between the colonizer and the colonized. While the British domination of Asia and other parts of the world is a long history of economic exploitation, it is also, according to Shamsul Islam, “a fascinating story of the development of an Imperial theory, an imperial idea, a mystique about imperialism” (2). The imperial idea was “to bear the torch to the dark places of the world,” and to materialize that idea the British introduced their language and literature in their colonies. Other than bringing light, the more practical purpose of such enterprise was to educate the colonized people so that they could communicate with their masters and the British could proceed more easily with their administrative work in the colonies. Thus, with imperial expansion the English language established itself as a tool of communication and as a means for civilizing the natives.

The British, who lived in the Empire or visited it, also began to write, for example, diaries, missionaries’ reports, travelogues, memoirs and novels. The purpose of these writings was to interpret and introduce the strange lands to the people at home. They described the colonized people and lands as exotic and “other.” These texts were also the vehicle of imperial authority symbolizing, according to Elleke Boehmer, “the act

of taking possession” (13). As Frantz Fanon observes, “The settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus the history he writes is not the history of the country that he plunders but the history of his own nation...” (51). Moreover, in the late nineteenth century most British imperialists cherished heroic images of themselves as conquerors and civilizers. That is how they were portrayed. Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad wrote about such colonizers and civilizers in Asia and Africa. In contrast to the heroic portrayal of the colonizers, the indigenous people were stereotyped as degenerate and barbaric. The later imperial writings began to take a different shape. Though the natives and the situation in the colonies were presented more sympathetically, these writings did not altogether avoid the former stereotypical concepts of the nature of the natives. Added to this sympathetic picture was the portrayal of the colonized land and natives as the quintessence of mystery. Writers like E.M. Forster, George Orwell and Graham Greene, who belong to the more liberal group, portray the natives with some sympathy. Post-colonial writers respond to the colonial writers’ portrayal of the indigenous people as the quintessence of mystery, the colonial other or just the other. Edward Said in his book Orientalism (1978) discusses how Europeans have looked at the East and formed their opinion of indigenous people as the other or Orientals. To him Orientalism “is the body of knowledge on the basis of which Europe developed an image of the East to accompany its territorial accumulations” (Boehmer 51).

By the 1930s the British Empire had begun to weaken. Nationalist movements in Asia and Africa were launched against the imperial power, and the colonized people

began to write their own story. But how did they do that? They used the white men's language to speak for themselves and often to scrutinize the colonial relationship or its aftermath. Moreover, "post-colonial" writings tried to establish the colonized peoples' right to take their place as "historical subjects" (Boehmer 3). Writers like Chinua Achebe, R. K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul set out to write about their perception of the former colonies. In Home and Exile Achebe, commenting upon the nature of post-colonial literature, remarks that when African writers started to write, they reinvested "the continent and its people with humanity, free at last of those stock situations and stock characters, 'never completely human,' that had dominated European writing":

The new literature that erupted so dramatically and so abundantly in the 1950s and 1960s showed great variety in subject matter, in style of presentation and, ... in levels of skill and accomplishment. But there was one common thread running through it all: the thread of a shared humanity linking the author to the world of his creation; a sense that even in the most tempting moments of grave disappointment with this world, the author remains painfully aware that he is of the same flesh and blood, the same humanity as its human inhabitants. (49)

Thus, post-colonial literature embraces a bewildering diversity of texts. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, "place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English" (9). Edward Said is of the opinion that "The post-imperial writers of the third world [therefore] bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past

tending toward a post-colonial future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist” (212). Elleke Boehmer feels that post-colonial texts “partake[s] in an overarching metanarrative of *journeying* and *return* [in original]” (199).

Thus, post-colonial writers are on a quest—a quest to establish control over the past and give it form. Most critics agree that the post-colonial text promotes several ideas, among which the most crucial is the writer’s responsibility to his society, as Denis Walder believes. So, post-colonial writers portray societies, traditions and cultures, which have changed or are still in the process of changing. And the issue of women’s place in such societies is all the more important in post-colonial literature as they are doubly or triply marginalized, “disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class, and in some cases religion and caste” (Boehmer 224). Moreover, as many of these writers were either exiles or lived abroad, their writings were influenced by, according to Simon Gikandi, “the call for return to the native land” (194).

However, in India, the resistance and nationalist movements affected post-colonial writers’ version of the colonial period and the indigenous people, and they began to decolonize the perceptions of their native land and its people. In India the imperial power was first shaken by the mutiny of 1857, which is considered to be the first resistance towards the Raj as well as a first step on the path to independence. After the mutiny came the *Satyagraha* (“Hold fast to the truth”) which was a resistance movement against the “Rowlatt Acts” in 1919. In the same year the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre took place. All these incidents stirred up all-India mass protests and eventually such protests

led to the “Quit India Movement” in 1942 and finally in 1947 India achieved its independence and was divided into India and Pakistan.

As post-colonial Indian writers, Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie have written about the social, cultural and political changes of India respectively in Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) and Midnight’s Children (1980). Their urge to recreate their native land in their narratives binds them together. Both Hosain and Rushdie were affected by the resistance to British rule, the partition of 1947 and its aftermath. Rushdie goes a little further to display his discontent with the situation of India in the post-colonial period. In Imaginary Homelands (1981) he comments:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will, not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

In Sunlight on a Broken Column and Midnight’s Children , Hosain and Rushdie try to create “homelands,” “Indias of the mind.” Rushdie remarks that a writer who writes from outside India “tries to reflect that world, [and] he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 11). To Hosain the broken glass is a mirror of nostalgia, of the glorious past which people could not hold.

Attia Hosain is described by Mulk Raj Anand in his introduction to the 1979 edition of Sunlight on a Broken Column, titled “Attia Hosain: A Profile,” in the following way: “Out of the Purdah part of the household, screened by a big Kashmiri walnut carved screen, emerged the profile of a young woman—apparently to see who was in the living room” (iii). A daughter as well as a daughter-in-law of a Taluqdar family, she possesses the characteristics of the Oudh aristocracy. Anand remarks: “Surely an 18th century Mughul picture of the time of Bhahu Begum.” While Anand gives her such a profile, Jasbir Jain remarks:

It is difficult to place Attia Hosain or her work in any pre-defined slot. How does one approach her—as an artist or an aristocrat? How does one assess her and her work? Who is Attia Hosain—what is she?—a woman, a rebel, historian or exile? Where does she belong? What does she represent? (Kaul and Jain 95)

Born in 1913, Attia Hosain was the youngest daughter of a Taluqdar of Gadia in the United Provinces (U.P.). Her formal education took place at La Martiniere and Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, and she was the first woman to graduate from among the Taluqdar families. The period when she grew up—the 1920s and 30s—was full of political upheavals. The two lives—the traditional family life of Attia Hosain and the outside world with its political changes—often clashed with each other (Kaul and Jain 100), a clash that can be seen in the life of the heroine of her novel. To her “Partition was not merely a political situation, it hit people at very personal and emotional levels, dislocating and dividing families, resulting in widespread riots, violence and division of

families” (Kaul and Jain104). Thus, Hosain’s writing, as Jain observes, is not only about belonging, but is also about loneliness, isolation, and exile.

Salman Rushdie also has the feeling of being exiled from India. He was born on June 19, 1947, in a westernized middle-class Muslim family. After the partition of India, many of Rushdie’s relatives moved to Pakistan where Muslims were in the majority and felt more secure. But Rushdie’s parents decided to remain in Bombay. His father was an admirer of English education and so at the age of fourteen his son was sent to Rugby School in England. W.J. Weatherby describes Rushdie in the following way:

Aged fourteen, wiry and tall for his age with a pale, intense face, young Salman was leaving the safe refuge of his parents’ prosperous home in Bombay to attend Rugby School...Salman wasn’t worried about the big change in his life. “I think I had actually wanted to go—I was groomed for it,” he recalled later. (9)

Rushdie spoke English as well as Urdu, one of the main Indian languages, and was accustomed to many aspects of British culture as he had gone to mission school in India and had been brought up in a “very Anglophile and Anglocentric way” (Weatherby 14). But he always felt happy when it was time to go home from school. He portrays this journey home in Midnight’s Children. He left home thinking that England would be just another home for him, but he was thwarted by the harsh treatment that he received in England. In England he was an Indian, a former colonial subject, and therefore, inferior and even to some extent a savage. Such perception of him was hard for Rushdie to accept, as he was unprepared. After completing education at Rugby, he went to India and decided not to go back to England again. But on receiving a scholarship from Cambridge,

he made a second voyage out and pursued a degree in history. After graduating he went to Pakistan and found it uncongenial to live there. Moreover, he felt that Bombay was his home and he regarded himself “more as an Indian than as a Pakistani” (Weatherby 28). Finally, he once again went to England, settled there and began his writing career.

I have chosen Attia Hosain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children because, although, both authors write retrospectively about colonial and post-colonial India, their approaches differ. Hosain presents the colonial world as a framed picture, belonging to the past, which can be revived only through memory and nostalgia. Rushdie, on the other hand, shows that colonial India is a part of ongoing life and that people build their present from that world. It is a part of life itself, not a framed picture. Both Hosain and Rushdie, according to Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, engage in the task of historical retrieval and reconstruction from “their location –their residence in the (imperial) metropole [Britain] as members of diasporas from former British colonies [India] ...” (Using the Master’s Tool 12). Both write about India but “the India in her [Hosain’s] work is not seen ‘through a tunnel,’ or through pure imagination ...” (Kaul and Jain 215). It is the India whose dimension she has experienced that she evokes in Sunlight on a Broken Column and this in turn makes it a realistic novel. Rushdie, on the other hand, sees India and India’s past through “CinemaScope and glorious Technicolour” (Imaginary Homelands10), a perspective that gives Midnight’s Children the shape of an allegorical tale like Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene. Though the novel, according to Mark Mossman, is “a rambling, fabulously digressive panorama of diverging stories and tangents, a kind of the full blown restoration of the past” (73), it recreates not only colonial but also post-colonial India.

Where and how do the women characters situate in the world of these novels by Hosain and Rushdie? Both writers portray the women characters as beings behind a veil; not a physical manifestation of the veil but a spatial one. In Sunlight on a Broken Column, the veil separates the world of “Ashiana” with its feudal values from the outside world with its political upheaval. Hosain’s women characters are caught between these two worlds. While some of the women characters struggle to clutch on to the old world and withdraw into themselves, others try to accept the post-colonial society as a truth that they must confront. Thus, through the confrontation of the past and the present, Hosain tries to point out that one’s identity is attached to the identity of the Indian nation which will be ultimately divided. To Hosain and also to her women characters, the division of the country is analogous to the division of the feudal home “Ashiana.” The notion that one’s identity is attached to the identity of the nation is also true of Rushdie’s women characters. Rushdie’s women characters are themselves seen through the veil, or the perforated sheet. They are seen in parts, which is symbolic of Rushdie’s idea that one can only have a partial view of one’s nation, not a whole one.

Sunlight on a Broken Column portrays the women characters against the backdrop of a Muslim feudal society, striving to retain its position in a time of political disturbances. The novel begins in the 1930s when the narrator-heroine, Laila, is 15. The story is both a post-independence *bildungsroman* and a retrospective account of India during the 1930s and 40s. Laila observes and experiences the effect of the conflict between contact culture and indigenous culture on the women around her. In Sunlight on a Broken Column, colonialism, feudalism and Islam are bound together and all three work to shape the lives of the women characters, including Laila.

Midnight's Children, similarly, is a story narrated in retrospection; it is about Saleem Sinai, who is born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947. His identity remains a mystery until he tells the readers that he has been changed in the cradle by Mary Pereira. As Saleem recounts his own life, he narrates the lives of women from his grandmother, the Reverend Mother, to his Hindu wife Parvati, herself a midnight's child. These women range from Muslim to Hindu, from old to young and from middle-class to working-class. Saleem's women function on two narrative levels—they are characters as well as metaphors. They do not suffer from nostalgia or longing for the old order. Most of them belong to the post-colonial society of India.

While analyzing the women characters of Sunlight on a Broken Column and Midnight's Children, I use the post-colonial theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Patrick Colm Hogan and Mary Louise Pratt. Though I refer to third world critics such as Partha Chatterjee and Susie Tharu, I focus mainly on the third-world feminist theory of Fatima Mernissi because both Hosain and Rushdie describe Muslim women inhabiting societies in which orthodoxy and the purdah system influence the lives of women. I also use the western feminist theories of Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir. These theories are in accord with my analysis of the women characters not only because the novels are written in English, but also because what Hosain and Rushdie articulate about the conditions of women in their society is universal. Male dominance and female subjugation exist in societies all over the world. I also touch upon Marxist feminist theory to explain the condition of working-class women. These theories have deepened my understanding of women's issues in the third world and helped to expand my analysis of the women characters.

Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie are concerned with nation and nationality. Their depictions of women portray the struggle of the individual to, on the one hand, establish her own identity and on the other adjust to the nation's struggle to establish independence and then to the changed Indian post-independence society. Both Hosain and Rushdie feel that the past influences the perception of the future, one's wish to build the future. The two writers' portrayal of women characters in both pre- and the post-independence India serves to illuminate the condition of the women in the Muslim society as well as their relationship with India as a nation. They struggle to retain their identity or to form a new identity, as well as to accommodate themselves to a post-colonial society.

Behind the Veil of the Feudal Class

Let us raise the sails and lift the veils—the sails of the memory-ship.²

Sunlight on a Broken Column depicts a feudal Muslim society with its restrictions and purdah system through the life of the narrator-heroine Laila. Hosain's Laila grows up in a rich and cultured land-owning Taluqdar³ family, against the background of unprecedented social and political change, which was “marked by strife with the British, certainly, but also by strife within communities divided along communal, religious, and class lines, and by competing conceptions of what ‘independence’ meant or should mean” (Needham, “Multiple Forms” 99). The novel uses Laila as both observer of and participant in the changes that took place in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s in the city of Lucknow⁴ in India, when the British Raj was about to end. It was a time when there were many groups of people with contradictory views—there were the Indians and the British, the Muslims and the Hindus, the supporters of the Muslim League and the supporters of Congress, the Sunnis and Shiites. Amidst this situation the nationalist movement and its voyage to the road to independence complicated the lives of men and women. The men struggled against the British as well as among themselves, arguing about who will have the ultimate power, where they would go after the division of India into India and Pakistan. And all the women characters are found to be entangled in the web of the crises of cultural identity. On the one hand they are exposed to English language and manners and on the other hand to political upheavals and the dissolution of the feudal class. Thus, Sunlight on a Broken Column is not only “a narrative about the

emerging Indian nation and about emerging national identities” (Needham 94), but also about the lives of women with their dreams and aspirations.

Hosain’s women characters belong to two generations. The women of the older generation are more resistant towards change and modernity, whereas the younger generation consists of two groups—one changing with the time and accepting modernity without question, and the other questioning all events as well as their own selves in relation to the family and society. Moreover, there is also a definite conflict between restrictions and freedom—restrictions enforced by Muslim orthodoxy and patriarchal authority, and freedom brought by the winds of change, an independent India. Thus, the women characters exist on two levels—on the one level they are individuals with individual ideals about self and family, and on the other they belong to a certain class, the feudal class, a certain type of life centered in “Ashiana.” So, there seems to be a veil between the different types of life—the life within “Ashiana” and a life outside, the life of a woman as an individual and the life of a woman as a part of a community.

Sunlight on a Broken Column encompasses the period from 1932 to 1952, a period of change which, according to Novy Kapadia, resulted from “the throes of partition which relentlessly divided friends, families, lovers and neighbours” (75). When the novel opens, the narrator heroine, Laila, an orphan raised by her paternal Aunt Abida, is 15 years old. Laila’s father, a liberal thinker who shunned the Islamic orthodoxies, emphasized an English education for his daughter. Laila lives in the feudal home “Ashiana,” which means nest or home, with her Aunt Abida, Aunt Majida, Cousin Zahra, her distant relatives and other women ranging from relatives to old servants. There were Ramzano, Saliman and Hakiman Bua who were maidservants and also a part of the

family, Ustaniji who taught Laila's aunts Urdu, Persian and Arabic, and Hajan Bibi, whose husband has been the companion of Baba Jan.

“Ashiana” is divided into two wings –the zenana and the mardana.⁵ The zenana, which according to Hana Papanak is “the physical segregation of living space,” is a part of purdah observed in traditional Muslim families of that time. The very opening of the novel introduces us to the concept of purdah, as Laila remarks: “The day my Aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men’s wing of the house, within call of her father’s room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live” (Hosain 14). So, Aunt Abida moves into a room near the mardana to take care of her father; otherwise she is not allowed to go to that part of the house unless she is called for. This restriction holds true for every other woman in the household. Even for Laila, who does not observe purdah as do Zahra and her aunts and has access to both the zenana and the outside world, there were restrictions during the lifetime of Baba Jan.

According to Sarla Palkar there is a “solid stronghold of patriarchal authority”(107) in “Ashiana.” The old patriarch Baba Jan is sick and counting the last days of his life. But this man is such a figure that Laila thinks, “Surely he could not die, this powerful man who lived the lives of so many people for them, reducing them to fearing automatons” (Hosain 31). To her Baba Jan, with his patriarchal figure, is the epitome of the feudal class and culture. She is awestruck, as is Geeta in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli.⁶ Baba Jan appears to Laila as Geeta’s grandfather-in-law, Sangram Singhji, appears to her:

Geeta’s eyes rested on her grandfather-in-law Sangram Singhji who sat like a prophet. He was frail with age, but still one could see from his fiery

eyes and determined lips that he was a man of strength. His face was gentle but not soft. His eyes had a far away look, as if he were not interested in those present, but recollecting the past. (Mehta 34)

The old men, one Muslim, one Hindu, are figures of the past hovering over those who live in the present. They had the power to change the lives of the common people according to their wishes. These two figures are representative of traditionalism as well as a certain class—the feudal class. Baba Jan’s domination goes so far that he, as Laila’s other aunt Majida says, “found no one good enough for her [Abida]; he refused one good proposal after another” (Hosain 22).

Laila’s Aunt Abida is a woman immersed in traditional Muslim culture, who tries to “hang on to any or all traditions” that can give her some sense of identity. Identity to her is enfolded around tradition, responsibility and duty. The name of her Taluqdar family is everything to her. Though Aunt Abida spends her whole life in the zenana, she makes sure that Laila is educated in secular school according to her father’s wish as well as in religious learning. She tries to infuse ideas of reverence, duty and respectability into Laila. When Laila talks back to Uncle Mohsin for beating Nandi, Aunt Abida asks Laila to apologize. On Laila’s refusal she says:

My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed. I have been responsible from the day God willed you to be without a father and mother. 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.” (Hosain 38)

To Aunt Abida, her tradition, which Patrick Colm Hogan thinks is based on “Indo-Persian” culture, is very important. She is an instance of the “strong traditional woman” (Colonialism and Cultural Identity 284). Her traditionalism is “orthodox,” “sincere” and more “devout” than that of Mohsin and others. Mohsin calls her “a scholar of Persian poetry and Arabic theology” (20). She seems to live in the glorious past, in religion and in the world of poetry where she finds seclusion and peace as does Dr. Aziz in E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India. Dr. Aziz finds refuge in the mosque, religion and Persian literature: “here was Islam, his own country, more than a Faith, more than a battle cry, more, much more...Islam, an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable, where his body and thoughts found their home” (Forster 19). Religion is home to Aunt Abida too. After the death of Baba Jan, Laila finds that she “spent a longer time sitting on the prayer-mat in deep meditation, after finishing the formal prayers. It seemed as if time meant nothing to her but its divisions into the five hours of prayer sounded by the *muezzin* [in original] from the mosque” (Hosain 108). Again Laila finds her reading her favorite poetry of Ghalib. Aunt Abida is sad that Laila has no interest in this tradition:

“Do you ever read the books I give you?”

“I am sorry, Phuppi Jan, I ...”

“I am sorry too. I thought you would learn one cannot live fully out of what is borrowed. You must love your own language and heritage.” (139)

The borrowed tradition to which Aunt Abida refers is English education and culture.

Though there is no conflict between the indigenous culture and the contact culture in Aunt Abida's character, it is clear that she keeps a gap between them. Aunt Abida's resistance to the contact culture does not prevent her from appearing in front of Mr. Freemantle, Baba Jan's friend, without being in purdah. Mr. Freemantle is "the good European" whom Hogan considers a type of character used by "critical and liberal orthodox writers to express a sort of dual critique of imperialism and indigenous culture" (Colonialism and Cultural Identity 273). Hogan goes on to say that such authors often include one or two benevolent Britons among their white characters. Characters like E.M. Forster's Cyril Fielding and Mrs. Moore do not go so far as to adopt the Indian culture as does Mr. Freemantle. Mr. Freemantle is, as Hogan says, "genuinely assimilated." He is bicultural. He is a "skinny, square-bearded lawyer, a scholar of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, who wore Indian clothes when he visited the houses of dancing girls, and prim Victorian clothes at other times. He held frequent *Mushairas*, soirees where poets recited their verse in Urdu and Persian. He scorned motor cars and drove in his landau drawn by a perfectly matched pair of greys" (Hosain 34). He is able to function in both cultures with ease.

Although Aunt Abida, unlike Mr. Freemantle, functions solely within her own culture, she nonetheless understands that times are changing. She recognizes the existence of the outside influences such as the education system introduced by the British, as well as the talk of the freedom for women advocated by those who have taken part in the nationalist movements. These external incidents make Aunt Abida insist that Zahra should be present when her elders are making a decision about her marriage, an idea that is mocked by Uncle Mohsin: "Is the girl to pass judgment on her elders? Doubt

their capability to choose? Question their decision? Choose her own husband?” (Hosain 20). “No, Mohsin Bhai,” Aunt Abida responds,

none of these things, I have neither the power, nor the wish, because I am not of these times. But I am living in them. The walls of this house are high enough, but they do not enclose a cemetery. The girl cannot choose her own husband, she has neither the upbringing nor the opportunity—
(21)

Thus, Aunt Abida is aware of the changing times and acknowledges her limitations, yet she shows no interest in changing the traditional ways. She resists anything and everything outside tradition and family heritage. Changing times do not change her mind, and later when Laila chooses to marry Ameer, she reacts with deep anger and hurt. To Aunt Abida the marriage of a girl is the responsibility of the family not the girl. As she tells Laila, “You have let your family’s name be bandied about by scandal-mongers and gossips. You have soiled its honour on their vulgar tongues” (312).

After her father’s death, Aunt Abida’s traditional views and ideas lead her to accept a marriage settled by her brother and according to Anuradha Roy, “to live a joyless life, chained to the idea of family obligations” (110). She devotes her life to looking after her husband and his family, who according to Annette Gomis, are “unable and unwilling to value her refinement and education” (111). When Laila goes to visit her aunt, she finds her living a loveless life:

In the days that followed I grew to sense the extent of their [Aunt-Abida’s in-laws] antagonism against Aunt Abida. They resented the

sensitiveness of a character beyond their reach and understanding. They attacked what was bigger than their comprehension with petty thrusts.

The jealousies and frustrations in that household of women were intangible like invisible webs spun by monstrous, unseen spiders. (251)

Aunt Abida, full of family obligations, soft and well-mannered, at times can be severe and even heartless. She not only took care of the household of Baba Jan but also looked after the accounts before his death. And Laila describes an incident of Aunt Abida's settlement with her tenants. She decides to evict some tenants, a woman and her son, from the land because to her the woman "was not Jumman's wife's brother's aunt, not an old, broken woman, not a mother pleading for her son, she was a case; she was a letter on a sheet of brown paper" (61). And, as Laila says, "There could be no mercy, only justice." According to Hogan, the reasons behind her decision are that she is "a member of her class" and that she, "always careful with her class identity, masks this robbery as a matter of 'principle' (62), as 'justice' (61)" (Colonialism and Cultural Identity 286). When Laila pleads with her, she tells her: "I do pity her, but what is there for me to do? This is a matter of principle, my child. Life will teach you to subordinate your heart to your mind" (Hosain 62). But Laila does not do so as she explains: "She was a part of a way of thinking I had rejected" (312).

The end of the woman who valued tradition, family, and the principles of the feudal class so much is tragic. Aunt Abida has a miscarriage and becomes fatally sick:

It appeared that when Aunt Abida had been taken ill the local midwife had been called, because the only woman doctor in the near-by township was away and her mother-in-law refused to allow a man to attend to her. It was

only after her condition had become dangerous that her husband insisted on calling the Civil Surgeon who had taken her immediately to the Medical College Hospital in Lucknow. (Hosain 204)

She finally dies and thus such creativity was sacrificed to tradition and her own seclusion.

Aunt Abida's concern about tradition, obedience and class hierarchy is at first shared by Zahra, Laila's cousin. She is not a devout traditionalist like Aunt Abida, but rather a mimic. Zahara, "brought up differently, correctly, sensibly" (23), first mimics the traditional culture as Laila muses, "Zahra said her prayers five times a day, read the Quran for an hour every morning, sewed and knitted and wrote the accounts..." (14). She seems to be the ideal Muslim girl in purdah and "an obedient daughter first and later a subservient wife" (Parker 112). A dutiful purdah girl, Zahra is also authoritative and conscious of her class. When Laila protests against her Uncle Mohsin's behavior towards Nandi, a servant girl, Zahra, supporting Mohsin, remarks: "the insolence of these menials that she should have dared to talk to our uncle in such a manner, and in front of everyone, of all those servants!" (Hosain 29). Again when Zahra and Laila are dying *dopattas* [in original] and a sweeper woman comes to sweep, Zahra shouts at her. In answer to Laila's rebuke for being offensive and harsh, she answers, "Offensive manner? She is used to it" (Hosain 45). There is no trace of Aunt Abida in Zahra. She is devoid of any kind of feeling for anybody except herself. That is why she rejects Asad, a poor relation of Zahra and Laila, and marries an Indian Civil Service officer.

After her marriage, however, Zahra changes dramatically from a dutiful purdah girl to the modern wife. She is an example of what Homi Bhabha calls "colonial mimicry," the product of "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a*

difference that is almost the same, but not quite [in original]” (86). Laila describes her in the following way:

Zahra had changed very much in her appearance, speech and mannerisms. I knew she had not changed within herself. She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful purdah girl. Her present sophistication was as suited to her role as her past modesty has been. Just as she had once said her prayers five times a day, she now attended social functions morning, afternoon and evening.

(Hosain 140)

When Laila asks Zahra, “Do you never question your present life in the light of your past? Is it not different from the way you were brought up” (147), Zahra says that she believes in only one world—“the world one lives in” (142). Zahra enjoys this new life of hers and “she was all her husband wished her to be as the wife of an ambitious Civil Service officer” (140). To Hogan, Zahra’s shift from one culture to another suggests “clothes, to be put on and taken off as the situation demands...” (Colonialism and Cultural Identity 273).

Laila’s Aunt Saira is another mimic who has been westernized by her husband.

When she comes to “Ashiana” after the death of Baba Jan, Laila observes:

Aunt Saira was Uncle Hamid’s echo, tall and handsome, dominated by him, aggressive with others. He had her groomed by a succession of English ‘lady-companions.’ Before she was married, she had lived strictly in purdah, in an orthodox, middle-class household. Sometimes her smart

saris, discreet make-up, waved hair, cigarette-holder and high-heeled shoes seemed to me like fancy dress. (Hosain 87)

After Aunt Saira's arrival at "Ashiana," the whole household changes. She changes the servants and eating habits, as Laila observes:

The furniture, too, was changed. The old-fashioned straight-backed, brocade-upholstered chairs, and the marble and brass-topped tables round which they had mathematically grouped, were exiled in Hasanpur. The rejuvenated rooms reminded me of English homes I had visited with Mrs. Martin, yet they were as different as copies of a painting from the original. (121)

Aunt Saira has a society of her own in which women like Mrs. Wadia and Begum Waheed, who are also mimics, belong. Laila explains Mrs. Wadia's appearance: "Her perfumes, and shoes and lace and linen and silver came from the most expensive shops in Paris and London. She went to Europe every year, was prouder of Western culture than those who were born into it, and more critical of Eastern culture than those outside it" (129). Aunt Saira spends time with these ladies and they talk of the "Club." The club is the place where people come only to gossip as do the expatriate British women characters in A Passage to India.

The adoption of the idea of the club by the Indian women is a concrete manifestation of mimicry. During the colonial period, the British formed clubs to create a surrogate home, and the club reminded every member that "he or she was British and in exile" (Forster 26). Margaret MacMillan in her book Women of the Raj remarks: "the club was the main focus of social life; every evening its members would gather for games

and gossip” (52) and thus it was a miniature version of British society. But the club that Aunt Saira advocates does not convey the first meaning. The Indian women do not need to create a surrogate home. Their purpose is just to have a place where they can gossip and also to show that they have become modern. Their club is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 86) like the British club. However, the idea of the club is new to the women of Aunt Saira’s circle: “ ‘You must remember, Mrs. Wadia,’ my aunt said, ‘that the idea of a Club is new to our ladies. We have to teach them the new ways of being sociable. We must be patient’ ” (Hosain 131-132). Built on the model of the British club in India, Aunt Saira and Mrs. Wadia’s club serves only as a place for gossip and a symbol of status for a certain class in society.

Hosain satirizes these so-called modern women forming clubs, as she does the election when the Rani Sahiba (Hosain 257) comes to cast her vote. The Rani Sahiba doesn’t know how to vote. After Mr. Cowley and Laila help her to vote, Mr. Cowley comments, “Now the Rani Sahib can go back to her village having exercised her democratic right...” Laila does not like the patronizing tone that creeps into this colonial officer’s voice. She remarks:

Who was he to expect her to understand what it had taken his people centuries to learn?...she is more true to herself than all the simpering, sophisticated ladies with their modern small-talk oozing out of their closed minds. She [Rani Sahiba] is closer to the people than us, sitting, standing, eating, thinking and speaking like them, while we with our Bach and Beethoven, our Shakespeare and Eliot put ‘people’ into inverted commas. (258)

Laila feels that knowing how to vote does not make a person modern, and neither does forming a club on the British model.

Aunt Saira, though not bound by traditionalism, is also conscious of class. She does not accept Ameer, the man that Laila wants to marry, as some one who belongs to her own acquired class. She says while inquiring about Ameer's background: "He must belong to the other branch"—"The old Raja's second wife's family. They were very ordinary people; no breeding" (Hosain 199). But the irony of her fate is that after her husband's death, she has to give up all her luxury, in other words, her status as an aristocrat by marriage. Thus, her good breeding and her westernized attitude cannot prevent her home from disintegrating:

She could not face the fact that Kemal had no alternative but to sell Ashiana. It was part of her refusal to accept the fact that her world had gone forever. She had clothed herself in remembered assurances of power and privilege just as the story –book Emperor had donned his non-existent clothes, but there was no one to make her see the nakedness of her illusions. (275)

After her husband's death she returns to her old self; she "sheds the façade of modernity that she had erected in the first place for her husband's sake." (Palker 113).

The interesting thing about the characters of Zahra and Aunt Saira is that first they are molded by their mothers and family tradition and then by their husbands who are at once colonial officers and subalterns. The husbands are subservient to the British and the wives are subservient to the husbands. Zahra and Aunt Saira are forced to comply with their cultural identity, first as dutiful purdah women and then as mimics of the contact

culture. Through Aunt Saira and Zahra's imitation of the way of European life style, Hosain criticizes, as Partha Chatterjee remarks, "the wealth and luxury of the [new] social elite emerging around the institutions of colonial administration and trade" (241).

While Aunt Abida reflects traditionalism, and Aunt Saira and Zahra are mimics, Laila, the narrator-protagonist is neither. She is sensitive, well-bred, educated and questions everything. According to Palker,

Laila's education and her sensitivity set her apart from the other women in her family. She comes across a different kind of world first at school, and later on at the university. The insistence on the traditional values at home and the winds of modernity that are blowing outside the four walls of the house create a conflict within her and make her question and doubt everything. (112)

Laila constantly thinks: "What was wrong with me inside? What was 'wrong' in itself, and what was 'right'? Who was to tell me?" (Hosain 31). Auradha Roy deems that for Laila, "[p]laced precariously at the juncture of tradition and modernity, there can be no easy way for a woman who thinks and questions, who wishes to discover what life means to her as an individual" (103). At times she is lost in the maze of feudal life and at times she seems to want to break away from its web of restrictions, seclusion and traditional values.

As Laila is not a traditionalist, she does not submit to the established ideas about marriage. In Muslim families, the tradition has been that marriages are arranged by parents; pre-marital affection plays no part and is very often seen as a crime or immoral. According to Sonia Nishat Amin⁷:

Marriages would be arranged by guardians. Seldom if ever in [*sharif* (or in later parlance, *bhadra*)] society did girls and boys get a chance to meet each other before marriage. Individual preferences played a minor part and guardians generally went by a set of “standard” conditions. The ideal criteria for selecting spouses were laid down in manuals and contemporary periodicals. One of the Hadith that inspired the discourse on marriage set down in later manuals, dealt with the motivation behind selecting a woman as partner: ‘The Prophet said that the woman can be married for her religion, for her fortune or for her beauty. Be motivated by your choice of her religion.’ (54)

But Laila has different ideas as she says, “I won’t be paired off like an animal” (Hosain 29). Inspired by her own ideas about marriage, Laila’s protests against the stereotypical ideas of marriage come out while talking with Aunt Saira and Begum Waheed, who was looking for a bride for her younger son. The older women were scandalized by the story of a Muslim girl being married to a Hindu boy and how they had eloped. The Hindu boy’s family took him in when his money was finished, but they did not accept the Muslim girl and she committed suicide. Begum Waheed thinks that she was punished for her wickedness. But Laila thinks differently: “She was not wicked” (133). When Mrs. Waheed warns Aunt Saira that Laila might become a “Socialist,” Laila voices her opinion in the following way: “I am not defending wickedness. She wasn’t a thief or a murderess. After all, there have been heroines like her in novels and plays, and poems have been written about such love. The word ‘love’ was like a bomb thrown at them” (133-134). ‘Love’ has no meaning for people like Aunt Saira and the ladies of the club. Little did

Laila know that she would also commit the 'wicked' crime, that she would have to leave her family for love. She would marry by falling in love, by going outside of her class and against the wishes of her elders.

According to Hogan, falling in love and getting married without the consent of the family is a universal problem which Hosain is talking about in her novel. He refers to the Laila-Majnun love tale, pointing out that Hosain's heroine's name is Laila and Ameer, the name of the man she marries, was also the other name of Majnun. But Hosain is particularly portraying that part of feudal Muslim society in which in some families married women usually belong to the zenana and do not come in front of their husbands in the presence of their mothers-in-law, as Zainab tells Laila (Hosain 104). Laila cannot understand this prohibition and remarks:

Hamid Chacha talks to Saira Chachi no matter who is in the room. A thing cannot be shameful at one time and not another, for one person and not another. Besides if it is such a shameful business being married and having children, why talk of nothing but marriage from the moment a girl is born? (105)

Laila questions the ambivalence that exists in the relationship of man and woman in marriage and also the gender differences that prevail in her society.

Laila's education and freethinking generate inside her thoughts about gender and class difference. She thinks about the Muslim girl who committed suicide, about Nandi and her expulsion, as well as about the old mother who came to ask forgiveness for her son who was not able to pay the rent. About her feeling for the Muslim girl, Laila explains:

I lay on my bed with every nerve inside me quivering. Yet across the red splashes of my anger the face of the girl came to life in my mind, her face etched by imagined pain. A plain face, with large wounded eyes. What were the forces within her that gave her the strength her frail figure and frightened eyes belied? How had she crossed walls of stone and fences of barbed wire, and the even stronger barriers of tradition and fear? Why in seventeen years had I not learned the answer? (135)

According to Annette Gomis, Laila “does not associate herself with the power structure and consequently can break free from the mental constrictions that bind the members of her family who cannot tolerate their loss of power and cannot or will not abandon the feudal cast of mind and the purdah mentality” and traditional attitude towards women (115). Fatima Mernissi, while talking about the position of women in the Arab world, remarks that the roots of gender inequality are not found in Islamic theology, but rather it is the society that builds up this inequality: “The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women’s [sic] inferiority, but it is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely segregation and legal subordination in the family” (qtd. in Amin 36). Her comment holds very true in the case of Nandi, Jumman Dhobi’s daughter, which proves that subordination of women does not belong to a certain religion. Rather it is class-based. Nandi’s situation shows how the whole society can be blind to the truth and what happens to the woman who decides to act on her own impulse. Nandi is accused by the driver, Gulam Ali, of having an illicit relationship with a man. Nobody believes her denial, whereas everybody believes Gulam Ali’s story. When Uncle Mohsin calls her a “slut, a liar and a wanton,” she retorts: “A

slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?” (Hosain 28). Uncle Mohsin beats her for her insolence and she is sent to the village, Hasanpur. When she meets Laila again in Hasanpur, she complains: “We [poor] people can get a bad name because we cannot stay locked up... Respectability can be preserved like pickle in gold and silver” (97). She talks about a certain person who could preserve his daughter’s reputation even though she had an illicit relationship because he was rich. Nandi is actually Laila’s double in a way. Just as Nandi is driven away to live in the village, Laila is eventually isolated from her family because she marries Ameer without the family’s consent and because he does not belong to her own class.

Though Laila opposes traditionalism and gender inequality, she is at the same time embarrassed at the English governess Mrs. Martin’s conversation. Mrs. Martin keeps calling Laila by the westernized version of her name ‘Lily.’ At this Laila’s reaction is: “I felt my cheeks burn, hearing the alien name she had given me” (46). Mrs. Martin while talking about going to the Imambaras⁸ recalls, “And in the old days one could avoid the terrible crowds and go on a special day.” But Laila reminds her: “We needed passes that day if we didn’t wear European clothes” (80). So, Mrs. Martin reflects on the fact that times are changing. The old colonial period is no longer in existence.

Laila realizes too that the times are changing and she is affected by this sense of constant change outside the walls of “Ashiana.” Unlike her cousin and her aunts, she observes, thinks and reflects and is perplexed by the ideas of her cousins Asad and Zahid and later of her cousins Kemal and Saleem, who have studied at Oxford. Asad thinks that only, the non-violence or Gandhism can solve the problem of India and that the British could be driven away with “[t]ruth and non-violence” (102). He is influenced by the

philosophy of *Ahimsha* or non-violence, which is the basis of the Gandhian movement which began in 1919 and called for all-India mass protest against the Rowlatt Acts. As a part of a non-violent protest, Asad participates in the demonstration against the Viceroy's visit to the University of Lucknow. Laila observes the actions of Asad but she does not react and at times she asks Asad about her failure to do something: "Why do you not taunt me about inaction as Nita does?" (165). Laila constantly asks herself: "What was one to believe in? Why was I different from Zahra? What was wrong with me?" (161). Sometimes she does express herself or rather her anger: "I feel just angry—and frustrated too sometimes. Such hatreds are being stirred up. How can we live together as a nation if all the time only the differences between the different communities are being preached" (245).

Laila realizes that the guests of "Ashiana" change with the changing times. Earlier when Baba Jan was alive, Englishmen and feudal aristocrats came to visit, but now, as Laila explains, a new type of person frequented the house: "Fanatic, bearded men and young zealots... rough country-dwelling land-lords and their 'courtiers'" (Hosain 230). In the house the arguments now focus on the roles of Congress and the Muslim League. But Laila is confused, as readers can understand, though they are never allowed to hear her own opinion which she cannot express, possibly because of the cultural conflict in her mind. She along with her "generation is caught in the stresses of a period of transition —." Laila is paying for "being the product of two cultures..." (210-211)—the traditional, or indigenous and the contact culture as well as two periods—the colonial and the post-colonial. Amidst the political chaos around her, Laila is "critical of the political slogans,

of the fear they evoke and the fanaticism they spread and looks forward to being independent” (Kaul and Jain 161).

Laila is unable to comprehend what all the arguments are about, why a division of a nation is needed. The India she is born in, the India which is “a rich mixture of tradition” (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 2)—how can it be divided? While all the others opt for one country or the other (India or Pakistan), Laila remains numb. Her cousin Saleem directly comments: “Independence will have been attained, not only for one country, but two. There will be a new Muslim country born—Pakistan. We must think not in terms of India now, but India and Pakistan” (285). When Saleem tells his brother Kemal, “You can choose either country” Kemal’s opinion is: “A choice presupposes both sides mean the same to me. They don’t. I belong to it [India]. I love it. That is all. One does not bargain” (287). He goes on to say that he sees his future “in the past. I was born here [India], and generations of my ancestors before me. I am content to die here and be buried with them” (288). While refuting the argument of Kemal concerning migration, Nadira, Laila’s friend, comments that “One’s ancestors left their homes when they first came here. People do migrate from one country to another.” Laila cannot understand and suggests sarcastically: “Then let us return to our ancestors’ homeland. Let us return to Arabia, Turkistan, Persia” (288-289). She does not feel that migrating to Pakistan will suddenly make Pakistan her home. But all the arguments of Laila and her cousin Kemal on forming a united nation prove futile and India witnesses partition of 1947, which forces people to choose a country (India or Pakistan) on the basis of their religion. Saleem and Zahra move to Pakistan, while Laila, Aunt Abida, Aunt Majida and Kamel stay in India.

After Ameer's death, Laila, for the last time, comes back to "Ashiana," which functions as a metaphor in this novel, as do the houses in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain and Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli.⁹ The house "Ashiana," to Laila, symbolizes both "continuity and permanence" (Kaul and Jain 143). She found refuge in the seclusion of the house when her Aunt Abida was alive:

There my aunts Abida and Majida, their companions and maid-servants, had lived a more leisurely life, closer to our inherited culture than we had here across the dividing courtyard and garden. I had often sought refuge there when the conflict of cultural values had been confusing. (310)

For Laila the house is "the fulfillment of a deep need to belong, it was a feeling of completeness, of a continuity between now and before and after" (88). The house symbolizes tradition and the culture of Lucknow—the city which enters "Ashiana" in several ways—through the political violence and through the visits of men and women of different classes:

Through the memories of performance [of Mushtari Bai], of the way men dressed in 'embroidered achkins and rakish caps' and woman sang; memories of satyagraha and lathi-charges, memories of her father, and the early years of training under Mrs. Martin that the city invades the sacred precincts of the house. There are other visitors, both women and men, and each one of them opens up some secret memory and unlocks some known but unacknowledged truth. They are like the secret tunnels which lead from 'one old palace to another.' (Kaul and Jain 148)

The same house is partitioned after the partition and the death of Uncle Hamid. This partition has begun long back—with the death of Baba Jan. After his death the house passes to Uncle Hamid. The change of the household power structure alters the lives of the many women who used to live there. This change is symbolic of the power structure on the national level which eventually dawns upon the inhabitants of “Ashiana.”

Laila has come to visit “Ashiana” for the last time, not to take refuge, but to say goodbye. To her “Ashiana” has become “an archive, a storage space from which the past can be gleaned, can be made to come alive through the reconstruction of smells, sounds, images, voices” (Burton 132). Laila sees her reflection in the mirror and says: “I looked more closely at the face that stared back at me from the dusty mirror. That was how she and Ameer would be for ever while I grew old.” But the reflection was different from her because the reflection was what she was in the past, a prisoner whose “tomorrows were always yesterdays.” Her last visit to Ashiana gives her the freedom to look ahead into a life without Ameer and with Asad: “I began to cry without volition and seeing myself cry in this room to which I would never return, knew I was my own prisoner and could release myself” (319).

“Ashiana,” with its feudal background, haunts Laila all her life. She does not despise it, though she was sometimes confused by the values it propagated to her. Often she found refuge in this archaic house, as did other women of the household. The political and social changes influence the lives of Laila, her aunts, her cousin and her friends as they leave the feudal class, the colonial period behind and move towards a post-colonial period. Some of the women characters are forced to accept the reality of the

new situation, like Aunt Saira, and others realize the reality of partition by revisiting the place of their birth, for instance, Laila.

Thus, Hosain's women characters move from a colonial world to a post-colonial one, either by resisting the present or accepting it with its dismantled, fragmented and divided condition. Life to these women characters is no longer a picture in a frame, as a crack has appeared on the frame. The veil of the glorious past with its feudal and communal life has been lifted and there appears a life and a nation divided—a life divided between the past and the present and a nation divided between the country of one's birth and the country of nationality. The women are forced to choose their identity—whether to be an Indian or to be a Pakistani. Laila opts for neither and from the novel's ending it can be assumed that she thought it better to live in England with Asad rather than going through the torment of making a choice which “presupposes both sides mean the same” and as they don't, “One does not bargain” with one's nation, one's birthplace.

Saleem's "too many women" and the Story of the Perforated Sheet

*[This] phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him... Glued together by his imagination...*¹⁰

While Sunlight on a Broken Column is the saga of a feudal family history, Midnight's Children has different levels of possible meaning. However, critics have, for the most part, focused on its political and historical aspects. Timothy Brennan, for instance, finds the novel distinctive in that:

it systematically sets out in discursive fashion all the key historical roadmarks of the Indian postwar period, inserting them into the narrative like newspaper reports or like textbook lessons in modern Indian history: the massacre at Jallianwallah Bagh in Amritsar in 1919; the partition of 1947; Nehru's First Five-Year Plan in 1956; Ayub Khan's coup in Pakistan in 1958; the India-China war of 1962; the India-Pakistan war of 1956; the creation of Bangladesh in 1971; and the Indian 'Emergency' of 1975, when Indira Gandhi, convicted by the Allahabad High Court of malpractices, suspends all civil rights and gaols her opponents. (83)

Sara Suleri comments: "Opening in the politically untouchable territory of Kashmir, Midnight's Children takes as its shaping narrative premise the centrifugal divisibility that the idea of nationalism produces in the Indian subcontinent" (194). Feroza Jussawalla, on the other hand, sees Midnight's Children as a "reflection of the unwieldy chaotic form which in turn attempts to reflect the content, the chaotic history of India and Pakistan since independence" (40). Concentrating on the relationship between nation and

narrative, critics have paid little attention to the significance of Salman Rushdie's characterization of the women of Midnight's Children.

In Midnight's Children Saleem Sinai, born on the stroke of the midnight hour of 15 August 1947, recounts his story. But Saleem is not the son of his parents, Ahmed and Amina Sinai. He has been exchanged in his cradle. Saleem, who is not Saleem, narrates not only his own story but also the stories of all the women who, in one way or another, influence and change his life. Saleem remarks: "How are we to understand my too many women? As the multiple faces of Bharat-Mata? Or as even more...as the dynamic aspect of maya, as cosmic energy, which is represented as the female organ?" (Rushdie 392). Saleem's confusion in trying to explain the women whom he meets throughout his life is obvious. He seems not to understand the varied nature of the women of his associations. Although some of them symbolically become *Bharat Mata*, others appear to be very strong women in an emerging middle-class mercantile society. They do not become *maya* because they are living, breathing human beings, not pictures in frames. Even though Rushdie's portrayal of his women is sometimes derogatory, these descriptions fail to obscure the importance of these characters. Within the whole structure of the novel, the women characters work on two levels—social and metaphorical. While on the social level, the Muslim women are shaped by the traditional Muslim purdah system as well as by emerging middle class values, metaphorically some of them represent India. Some of these women are linked together by "the perforated sheet," which Rushdie uses as a *leitmotif*¹ to bind the huge structure of his novel. To Rushdie the idea of identity, nation and nationality can be viewed only through "a perforated sheet," as this idea remains behind the veil or is covered by a veil, just as women are in traditional Muslim families.

In Midnight's Children there are two sets of women characters—the colonial and the postcolonial, who belong to three generations. Naseem Aziz alias Reverend Mother, Saleem's grandmother, is the product of the colonial society. She believes only in traditional values. This attitude of hers creates cultural conflict within her which she expresses through her actions. Vanita and Amina, Saleem's mothers, and Mary Pereira, his nursemaid, show no conflict within themselves. These three women, though they come from three different religions and cultures, are central to Rushdie's narrative because they are the key figures behind the real identity of Saleem Sinai, the hero of Midnight's Children. Another important character is the Widow, who is thought to be Indira Gandhi, often seen by critics such as K. Purushotham as a character who subverts patriarchal norms (246). There are two other women, Padma and Parvati, who belong to the post-colonial period and who possess complex and symbolic meanings. Padma represents working class people, as does Nandi in Sunlight on a Broken Column, and as Uma Parameswaran sees, she is "a character who is functional at both narrative and symbolic levels" (5). Parvati, Saleem's wife, impregnated by Shiva, the other midnight's child, gives birth to Aadam Sinai.

Although Rushdie talks about the past, his women, unlike Hosain's, do not long for the past. As he explains in Imaginary Homelands: "I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the faded greys of old family album shots, but whole, in CinemaScope and glorious Technicolor" (10). As they are a part of a cinematic world, Rushdie's women characters do not find refuge or seclusion in the past. They are not framed figures of a feudal home; they are "rambling, [and] fabulously digressive" (Mossman 73).

Naseem Aziz, later known as Reverend Mother, resists all that is outside tradition. The daughter of Ghani, the landowner, is introduced to both her husband and the reader through the holes of a sheet. Saleem's grandfather Aadam Aziz, a Heidelberg returned doctor, comes to treat Naseem. Naseem's process of treatment reveals the workings of purdah in a Muslim household in early twentieth-century Kashmir. When Doctor Aziz asks for the patient, Ghani says:

You Europe-returned chappies forget certain things. Doctor Sahib, my daughter is a decent girl, it goes without saying. She does not flaunt her body under the noses of strange men. You will understand that you cannot be permitted to see her, no, not in any circumstances; accordingly I have required her to positioned behind that sheet. She stands there, like a good girl. (Rushdie, Midnight's Children 24)

So Aadam could look at her through the sheet: "In the very centre of the sheet, a hole had been cut, a crude circle about seven inches in diameter" (23). As the purdah system keeps women in isolation, Rushdie makes it an object of satire through this incident of Doctor Aziz. He also uses purdah as a metaphor to make a significant point: that the idea of identity, nation and nationality remains behind the veil or is covered by a veil just as women are in traditional Muslim families.

Naseem, thus, is shown to Doctor Aziz in parts: "You will kindly specify which portion of my daughter it is necessary to inspect. I will then issue her with my instructions to place the required segment against that hole which you see there" (24). Haunted by a partitioned woman, Doctor Aziz decides to marry Naseem. After marriage when Aziz tells her to come out of purdah, she is infuriated: "You want me to walk naked

in front of strange men... They will see my deep-deep shame.” Aziz argues: “Wife, are your face and feet obscene?” (34). But she remains unfaltering. She cannot think of coming out of purdah and she feels that Doctor Aziz’s European education has created such ideas in his mind. She feels that without purdah one is faced with “the loss of selfhood” (Afzal-Khan 152). She finds her existence in Amritsar absurd as “life outside her quiet valley had come as something of a shock to her” (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 33). So, she devises a system to continue her life; she lives “within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties” (41). Saleem remarks that Naseem Aziz did not have any pictures at home as she did not allow a photographer to take her picture: “She was not one to be trapped in anyone’s little box. It was enough for her that she must live in unveiled, barefaced shamelessness—there was no question of allowing the fact to be recorded” (41).

Naseem Aziz, unlike Aunt Abida in Sunlight on a Broken Column, believes only in religious instruction when the education of her children is concerned. She has no faith in the colonial education system, which Doctor Aziz wishes to introduce to them. According to her, “He [Aziz] fills their heads with I don’t know what foreign languages, whatsitsname, and other rubbish also, no doubt” (42). She engages a maulvi sahib (priest) to educate her children. Doctor Aziz, who is against all type of traditional teachings, finding the maulvi sahib not teaching proper ethics decides to throw him out of the house. At this the Reverend Mother is so angry that she begins to wail “What will you not do to bring disaster, whatsitsname on our heads,” and concludes her tirade by asking, “Would you marry your daughters to Germans!” (43). As Patrick Colm Hogan observes in “Midnight’s Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity,” she vehemently

rejects “modernity or westernization through the assertion of tradition ...” (530). Hogan reflects that when “the practices of colonial culture invade and threaten the [practical] identities of tradition, they invariably give rise to a reaction, a defensive response on the part of those who live that tradition” (“Midnight’s Children” 530). Reverend Mother’s further reaction was to deprive Doctor Aziz of food for several days.

Reverend Mother is so rigid and traditional that she believes that a man should not enter the kitchen to cook food, as it is a woman’s sphere. As Saleem tells us, her kitchen is her world. But amidst all her adherence to tradition, she has picked up a word: “whatsitsname” which reflects her dilemma—dilemma between the indigenous culture and the culture of the colonial master preached by her husband. Saleem observes:

I don’t know how my grandmother came to adopt the term *whatsitsname* [italics in original] as her leitmotif, but as the years passed it invaded her sentences more and more often. I like to think of it as an unconscious cry for help...as a seriously-meant question. Reverend Mother was giving us a hint that, for all her presence and bulk, she was adrift in the universe. She didn’t know, you see, what it was called. (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 42)

Reverend Mother’s use of the word “whatsitsname”¹² can be termed “transculturation,” which according to Mary Louise Pratt is a word that the ethnographers have used to describe “how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant metropolitan culture” (6). Pratt thinks that subjugated people cannot but accept these materials or words, but at the same time the use of these words depended on the colonized person. So, for example, here Reverend

Mother uses “whatsitsname” to express her inability to explain things as the times are changing. Moreover, her husband’s lack of adherence to traditions disturbs her and causes her to withdraw within herself. And she is so immersed in her own world that she does not react to political upheavals and also does not like talking about politics: “Among the things to which she denied entry were all political matters” (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 41). When her husband comes back from Amritsar after the massacre, she faints and asks no questions.

Naseem’s resistance to anything outside her traditional beliefs makes her advise her actress daughter-in-law, Pia, as follows: “Work, yes, you girls have modern ideas, but to dance naked on the screen! When for a small sum only you could acquire the concession on a good petrol pump...Sit in an office, hire attendants; that is proper work” (Rushdie 236). Nobody knows the source of her obsession with gas; as Saleem remarks, “None of us ever knew whence Reverend Mother acquired her dream of petrol pumps, which would be the growing obsession of her old age...” (236).

On one level Reverend Mother is a resistance character, even though she eventually opens a gas station, and on another level she functions as a symbol. She not only reveals “a particular form of identity politics” but also, as Hogan thinks, she is connected to India. Her name Reverend Mother associates her with Mother India or “Bharat-Mata.” According to Hogan the relationship between Naseem and India is established very early in the novel. We are told that Aadam Aziz can see Naseem only in pieces through the perforated sheet: “So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. The phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams...”

(26). In Hogan's opinion, "Aadam's partial and discontinuous views of Naseem mirror anyone's partial and discontinuous views of a nation, for our experience of a nation is necessarily an experience of bits and pieces only; we do not sense the whole directly, but imagine it" ("Midnight's Children" 529). That is why Aadam Aziz sees Naseem as a "partitioned woman":

In a novel about the birth of India, any reference to partition must suggest what happened in 1947, the division of South Asia into India and Pakistan. Here Naseem, India, is imagined as a whole, not India as opposed to Pakistan, but South Asia in its entirety. She is dreamed of as a whole that will be partitioned. (Hogan, "Midnight's Children" 529-530)

So, symbolically Naseem represents the united country which is going to be divided into two—India and Pakistan.

Reverend Mother's second daughter, Mumtaz, later named Amina by her second husband Ahmed Sinai, is not a woman to hesitate when she has to earn her living because of traditionalism. An exceptional woman, Amina is not beautiful, but very caring like her father Doctor Aziz. There is the resonance of being perfect and faithful in her names, Mumtaz and Amina. She first marries Nadir Khan, the secretary of the political leader, the Humming Bird Mian Abdullah. After Abdullah's assassination, Nadir Khan escapes and takes shelter in Doctor Aziz's house. He is a poet, but his poetry hardly makes any sense. This poet influences Mumtaz so much that she remembers him even after she is divorced from him. After her marriage to Ahmed Sinai, she moves to New Delhi. She seems to be a helpless woman, miserable because of her first husband's memory lingering in her mind, but once in Delhi she begins a new life:

Nobody ever took pains the way Amina did. Dark of skin, glowing of eye, my mother was by nature the most meticulous person on earth.

Assiduously, she arranged flowers in the corridors and rooms of the Old Delhi house; carpets were selected with infinite care. She could spend twenty-five minutes worrying at the positioning of a chair. By the time she'd finished with her home-making, adding tiny touches here, making fractional alterations there, Ahmed Sinai found his orphan's dwelling transformed into something gentle and loving. (Rushdie 67-68)

She becomes the dutiful housewife. She fits the pattern of the traditional wife as described by Simone de Beauvoir, who explains that after marriage a woman, not only takes her husband's name but also "belongs to his religion, his class, his circle: she joins his family, she becomes his 'half.' She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence: she breaks more or less decisively with her past, becoming attached to her husband's universe..." (429). While on one hand Amina tries to get accustomed to her new husband and his household, on the other hand she is haunted by the memory of Nadir Khan and the nights she spent with him in the underground chamber in Doctor Aziz's house. She is in a dilemma because in her opinion,

... a husband deserved unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love. But there was a difficulty: Amina, her mind clogged up with Nadir Khan and insomnia, found she couldn't naturally provide Ahmed Sinai with these things. And so, bringing her gift of assiduity to bear, she began to train herself to love him. To do this she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioural,

compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal tics and prejudices and likes...in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit.

(Rushdie 68)

Thus, like her father Doctor Aziz, she uses an invisible perforated sheet to love Ahmed Sinai. She cannot grasp Ahmed Sinai as a whole, so she decides to view him in parts. By doing so she fulfills the role of the dutiful wife. The perforated sheet, mentioned again, works on the personal level this time—Amina's attempt to love her husband. She tries to assimilate her husband into her life with bits and pieces. She tries to accommodate herself to the life of New Delhi. Coming from Kashmir is a kind of migration for her, though this is not the last time that she will migrate. From her New Delhi house she moves to the house at Methwold Estate, which was once the property of a colonial official William Methwold. Saleem gives the following description:

Methwold's Estate: four identical houses built in a style befitting their original residents (conquerors' houses! Roman mansions; three-storey homes of gods standing on a two-storey Olympus, a stunted Kailash!)—large, durable mansions with red gabled roofs and turret towers in each corner, ivory-white corner towers wearing pointy red-tiled hats(towers fit to lock princes in!)—houses with verandahs, with servants' quarters reached by spiral iron staircases hidden at the back—houses which their owner, William Methwold, had named majestically after the palaces of Europe: Versailles Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci. (Rushdie 95)

William Methwold sells the property on two conditions: “that the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new owners; and the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15th” (95). He calls this process of bargaining as “the departing colonial’s little game” (95). Methwold has a hard time in giving up his property. His estate reveals the grandeur and the well-designed architecture that reflects the British person’s love of ornamentalism. According to David Cannadine, “the houses of the British officials were clustered in ‘physical and spatial forms’ that reflected and reinforced the ‘deferential social hierarchy of the ‘Raj’” (55). Methwold’s estate is the symbol of the old Raj. He cannot sustain the dismantled shape of “the whole hierarchical embrace of empire” (Cannadine 166). Still proud of the hierarchical and empirical grandeur, he says: “...Oh, you know: after a fashion, I’m transferring power too. Got a sort of itch to do that the same time the Raj does” (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 96). So, he wants to transfer the estate just at the moment when the Raj is transferring power. Methwold is different from Mr. Freemantle or Gori Dada of Sunlight on a Broken Column who assimilated into the indigenous culture. Neither is he a noble Englishman like Fielding of A Passage to India. Rushdie uses William Methwold’s character to criticize the colonial attitude as well as the indigenous people. The Methwold Estate changes all the people who live there. They begin to mimic the culture of the sahibs—the culture of having a cocktail hour every evening at six in their gardens and when “William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford draws; and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold supervising their transformation ...” (98).

As soon as Amina Aziz, who seems to be a docile and unexceptional housewife, settles down in her house at Methwold Estate, her husband loses his business and becomes sick. After her husband's illness, she assumes the responsibility for providing for the family. She begins to bet on horses. She wins and with the money she takes care of the family affairs:

Schaapsteker money pays for our food bills; but horses fought our war.

The streak of luck of my mother at the race-track was so long...for month after month, she put her money on a jockey's nice tidy hair-style or a horse's pretty piebald colouring: and she never left the track without a large envelope stuffed with notes. (39)

A Muslim woman is not supposed to indulge in such a business, as Amina admits to Homi Catrack, " 'Please,' Amina asked him, 'Cattrack Sahib, let this be our secret. Gambling is a terrible thing; it would be so shaming if my mother found out'" (140). Here she crosses the boundary. One of the reasons for this is that she belongs to the middle class¹³ and not a feudal class. She has to go into this horse business because the "Rabana Bahini," a Hindu fundamentalist group, ruined her husband's business. Even after that Amina and Ahmed Sinai stayed in India. But Emerald, Amina's sister, and her husband Zulfikar went to Pakistan and they were doing good business there. In both Sunlight on a Broken Column and Midnight's Children, Indian Muslims who went to Pakistan after Partition prosper. One of the reasons may be that they bought [Hindu] refugee property at low prices (111).

Like Emerald and Zulfikar, Amina, Saleem and Saleem's sister Jamila move to Pakistan. Jamila's life portrays another side of the life of women of the sub-continent.

She is nicknamed “the Brass Monkey” by Saleem because of her “thick thatch of red-gold hair” (148). Jamila grows up to be a great singer who manages to sing in public in Pakistan but is never out of purdah. So, their relative, Major (retired) Latif, spreads the rumor that Jamila has been in a car crash that has disfigured her face and that is why she remains behind the purdah that he has devised:

her famous, all-concealing, white silk chadar, the curtain or veil, heavily embroidered in gold brocade-work and religious calligraphy, behind which she sat demurely whenever she performed in public. The chadar of Jamila Singer was held up by two tireless, muscular figures, also (but more simply) veiled from head to foot...and at the very centre, the Major cut a hole. Diameter: three inches. (304)

Thus the perforated sheet appears again. And Saleem tells us: “That was how the history of our family once again became the fate of a nation, because when Jamila sang with her lips pressed against the brocaded aperture, Pakistan fell in love with a fifteen-year-old girl whom it only ever glimpsed through a gold-and-white perforated sheet” (304). Her voice is like a “sword for purity,” “a weapon with which we shall cleanse men’s souls” (305). Thus, she becomes a woman who, as Susie Tharu points out in another context, is to “ensure the moral, even spiritual power of the nation and hold it together” (263). Like Reverend Mother, Jamila assumes a metaphorical role too. At first she embodies Pakistan, “the country of the pure” where all the faithful people will find their peace. But what becomes of Jamila Singer after all? She enters a catholic convent when Saleem is away in Bangladesh during the liberation war of 1971, and her whole family is killed. Through Jamila’s turning into a nun, Rushdie seems to suggest the fate and failure of a

nation which was created on the basis of religion and in the hope that it would be a free country.

Jamila influences not only the people of Pakistan but also Saleem by her magic charm. In Jamila, Saleem sees the emblem of a country. She can sing “Truth beauty happiness pain.” Saleem explains: “Did Saleem, who had yearned after a place in the centre of history, become bestowed with what he saw in his sister of his own hopes for life?” (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 306).

Like Jamila, another woman whom Saleem calls “the Widow” or “the Widow with a knife” influences his life. The Widow, a symbolic representation of Indira Gandhi, destroys¹⁴ Saleem and most of the Midnight’s Children with her power: “Saleem and the other one thousand infants born in that numinous hour of independence are representative of the post-independence generation, born to promises of plentitude and fulfillment and later *chutneyfied* by circumstances and the Widow” (Parameswaren 5). In the Widow a kind of patriarchal reversal is seen, asserts K. Purushotham. It is taken for granted that the head of state should be a man and if a woman becomes the head of a state, things are bound to go wrong. Fatima Mernissi, while discussing the role of women in the Arab world, ironically notes the opinion of the unenlightened majority: “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity!” (1). Though such a notion is referred to in the Hadith, the concept that Rushdie uses to blame the Widow for the chaos in the country is not limited to Muslims. Thus, Rushdie’s portrayal of the Widow conveys two superimposed pictures: the failure of a woman to rule a country and the mythical nature of women as destroyers.

Speaking of industrialized nations in mid-twentieth century, Kate Millet mentions that “the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society [Western], including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands” (25). Though much change has taken place, this system still holds true, to some extent, in both the societies of the West and East. Patriarchal society tends to think that if this chain of hierarchy is broken, then there will be problems in the state. So, when the Widow takes power after her father, Saleem thinks that she has cut the plant that her father has planted. In an interview with Hans Arndt, Rushdie gives the explanation for creating a character like the Widow, who could easily be identified with Indira Gandhi:

In the first thirty years of India, from independence to emergency, it seemed to me that was a kind of age and that there was a dark irony in the fact that it should be Nehru’s daughter who did so much to take the axe to the tree that he planted. It seemed to me that there was in that period a kind of progression from lightness to darkness, from optimism to the absence of optimism and the book adopted that shape. (16-17)

So politically she was a failure. She discontinued her father’s will to transform India into a socialistic society (Purushotham 244). To Rushdie as well as to his narrator Saleem, she becomes the temptress who tempts the people into accepting her ways of ruling the country. Saleem’s attempt to see the Widow as a demonic figure, who is connected to the sin of tempting the people, reflects that he is influenced by the fundamental pattern of patriarchal thought.

Whereas the Widow is presented as a destroyer, Mary Pereira, the nurse at Narlikar Nursing home, plays the role of a fairy godmother who changes the life of Saleem Sinai. Saleem Sinai is not the son of his parents Ahmed and Amina Sinai. He is the son of Vanita and the street singer Wee Willie Winkie. Ahmed Sinai's biological son is Shiva, another midnight's child, who becomes a major and is a rival to Saleem. Mary Pereira, influenced by the revolutionist Joseph D'Costa's "virulent hatred of the rich" (Rushdie 105), exchanges the children in the hope of winning Joseph's love: "...two babies in her hands—two lives in her power—she did it for Joseph, her own private revolutionary act, thinking he will certainly love her for this, as she changes name-tags on the two huge infants, giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accordions of poverty..." (Rushdie, Midnight's Children 116). Thus, she *chutneyfies* his life history.

Among Saleem's "too many women," Padma performs the role of supporter and caretaker for Saleem. It is through the perforated sheet held before the readers that we see Padma—bit by bit. At first we feel that Padma is just an audience to whom Saleem opens up; then when she leaves, we understand how indispensable she is and later she becomes a whole person whom Saleem decides to marry.

Participating with Saleem in composing the novel, Padma plays a significant role in Midnight's Children, though Charu Verma muses: "She figures only in the narrational perspective of Saleem's narrative. She has no role in the 'recalled' action of the novel" (59). But Padma not only serves Saleem's narrational purpose through her own comments, but also through her Rushdie portrays a certain class—the working class, uneducated and underprivileged. According to Timothy Brennan, "Padma is not only a

passive receptor, or a disembodied voice of the national conscience, but a literary critic, whose authority rests on her being a member of the lower classes” (101). She is a strong character in herself and an excellent narrative prop and symbol, as Parameswaren thinks. Through her, Rushdie tries to give the narrative a realistic touch. In trying to conceptualize Padma’s role in the narrative, Parameswaren compares her to the chorus of Greek drama, whose purpose is to give interpretation and also to give the play some progression.

Padma intervenes in the narrative by asking questions as well as by giving her opinion. When Saleem describes the Reverend Mother’s power of invading her daughter’s dream, she demands, “‘Well?’ ‘Was it true?’” (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 56). Whenever Saleem is side-tracked in giving the details of his birth, she asks him to come to the truth as to who his parents are. When Saleem finishes the story, she “exclaims in horror:” “‘An Anglo?’ ‘What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?’” (116). She asks the same questions that Rushdie’s readers have in mind. Thus, Padma, “named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is ‘The One Who Possesses Dung’” (25) is “model for the imperious reader, constantly demanding completion of a story that has no end...” (Wilson 59). So, Padma is a listener, an internal narratee with whom the readers identify. Saleem’s being an Anglo-Indian is a serious matter, but she asks the questions in such a naïve way that they provide much humor. Whereas Saleem provides pages of details about his birth and the mystery behind it, Padma needs only three sentences to reveal Saleem’s identity.

Saleem introduces Padma in the following way: “Padma—our plump Padma—is sulking magnificently. (She can’t read and like all fish-lovers, dislikes other people knowing anything she doesn’t. Padma: strong, jolly, a consolation for my last days...)” (25). Though Rushdie goes in the very same page to the story of Scheherazade and Prince Shahryar, that is the story of A Thousand and One Nights which is about kings and queens, Padma remains an icon of a down-to-earth working class woman like Nandi in Sunlight on a Broken Column. Undoubtedly, Saleem does take advantage of Padma’s being a working class woman. Padma cooks for him, takes care of him and even tries to cure his impotence. Her occupation, which is to make chutneys as well as to look after Saleem, relegates her to the margins of society. Such work is often regarded as, in Elaine Storkey’s words: “non-work, it is seen as inferior to that of the breadwinner, it is taken for granted, it is unwaged, it is often monotonous and demanding” (85). Like a servant Padma often gets rebuffed by Saleem, but when she leaves him, he misses her: “A mistress, but also a servant; a counsellor, but also a harpy, she seems both to revolt and impress him” (Brennan 103). Finding himself alone, Saleem remarks:

It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life...A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn’t enough. I am seized by a sudden fist of anger: why should I so unreasonably be treated by my one disciple? (Rushdie, Midnight’s Children 149)

When Padma deserts him he feels, according to Keith Wilson, “deprived of a recipient for his narrative.” Saleem wonders:

How to dispense with Padma? How to give up her ignorance and superstition, necessary counterweights to my miracle-laden omniscience? How to do without her paradoxical earthiness of spirit, which keeps—kept?—my feet on the ground? I have become, it seems to me, the apex of an isosceles triangle, supported equally by twin deities, the wild god of memory and the lotus goddess of the present...but must I now become reconciled to the narrow one-dimensionality of a straight line? (149).

Saleem feels the continued absence of Padma and feels also the consequences, as she is the “mother of the narrative.”¹⁵ The description of her thick waist associates her with the image of being the mother of narrative. According to Brennan, “She advocates instead ‘the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened next’” (105). She keeps the pace of the narrative. Padma continues to ask what comes after even when Saleem ends the history. Thus, eventually when she comes back to him, Saleem’s crisis of confidence passes as he thinks: “I am balanced once more—the base of my isosceles triangle is secured. I hover at the apex, above present and past, and feel fluency returning to my pen” (Rushdie 191). The reason that she gives for coming back to Saleem is that she loves him, “And love, to us women, is the greatest thing of all.” According to Verman,

...she is wholly, soulfully in love with him and love has become her trap. For a Hindu traditional woman, the decision to stay with a barren Muslim widower is simply radical. It is a testimony to her deep love for him. Given the possibility that Saleem is disintegrating and dying, the decision is overwhelming because of its courageous, decisive enormity. (62)

Her decision to marry Saleem can also be seen as a symbol; it is a symbol of the merging of the narrator and the narratee or the audience. This merger gives the text full shape.

Though Padma is illiterate, her “plebian” (Brennan 103) attitudes add spice to the story. She becomes the truthsayer against Saleem’s pretentious speech. She is Saleem’s “typical audience, bringing to surface the reader’s thoughts and questions,” his “necessary ear” (Rushdie 177), and principal critic. She is also “aesthetically speaking, much more important as an image of the Indian mass’s gullibility...” (Brennan 105). She, as well as the readers, believes what Saleem says. Altogether she is a complex character. She represents the postwar Indian people, willing to believe everything and anything that happens in the state. Perhaps Rushdie here, through Padma’s gullibility, tries to point out the nature of the Indian people who accepted the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi, her assassination, her son’s reign and his policies. Rushdie, possibly, expresses his grievance that the people who once fought for independence have now become mute.

Like Padma, Parvati is also a complex post-colonial character. Through her affair with Shiva, she gives birth to Aadam Sinai. In Hindu mythology Shiva and Parvati argue about the parentage of Ganesh, their son. According to Rushdie, the first Ganesh is Saleem Sinai with his big noise and the second Ganesh is Aadam Sinai (“Midnight’s Children and Shame” 9), who is actually Shiva’s son. Just like Saleem’s parentage Aadam’s parentage is mixed up. According to Wilson,

Rushdie creates a chronicler who provokes much of the history he records and who, born at the moment of Indian Independence, encapsulates in his equivocal personal heritage the ambiguous identity of India. His various father figures—Methwold, Wee Willie Winkie, Nadir Khan, Ahmed

Sinai—and his changeling assumptions of a family history to which he has no claim make him an identity-defying compound of Moslem, Hindu, British... (60)

The identity of India after the independence is analogous to Saleem's identity. India was once ruled by the Hindus, then came the Mughals and after that it was the British who ruled the country. Thus, India is a country which bears the legacy of three civilizations—Muslim, Hindu and British.

Parvati, in another sense, represents *Bharat Mata* or “Mother India” because she gives birth to Ganesh (Adam Sinai) who has both a Hindu and Muslim father. India is a place where there are Hindus, Muslims and other people belonging to different religions. As Parvati functions as a symbol most of the time, her thirteen-day labor is parallel to Indira Gandhi's thirteen days of political unrest. As Aadam Sinai is finally born, Indira Gandhi declares the Emergency rule. For one year Aadam does not cry. His silence suggests the silence of the Indian people who do not protest the Emergency rule (Parameswaren 30). With the birth of Ganesh, Rushdie tries to convey the message of unity. He tries to offer a future for India, a united India, as Shashi Tharoor explains, did others “...from Alexander the Great to the first of the Great Mughals, Babur [who] constantly saw the peoples of the land beyond the Indus—‘Hindustani’—as one. Divided, variegated, richly differentiated, but one” (13). Rushdie's first attempt to do so was through the birth of the 1001 children who were a “metaphor of hope betrayed and possibilities denied” (“Midnight's Children and Shame” 6).

The women characters in Midnight's Children range from resistant to modern, from colonial to post-colonial. Most of the characters perform symbolic roles, which are

connected to Rushdie's notion of identity, nation and nationality. These women characters represent the image of strong *Bharatiya Naris*. They are capable of controlling not only their own lives but also those of others. They do not live in the glorious past; neither do they belong to the feudal class. They belong to the middle-class mercantile society. Rushdie's women characters change with the changing of the times and, at a certain point, they become metaphors.

Beyond the Broken Column and the Broken Mirrors

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear the lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.¹⁶*

As post-colonial writers Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie “voyage in” the colonial period of India and retrieve its history, not the history as viewed and articulated by the imperial power but the history as it appeared to the indigenous people. Post-colonial writers try to “decode the colonized territory through the conventions of romance, reorganizing the materiality of colonialism into a narrative of perpetual longing and perpetual loss” (Suleri 10). Thus, their quest is to establish control over the past and give it a form, to create “an overarching of metanarrative of *journeying* and *return* [in original]” (Boehmer199). Moreover, both Hosain and Rushdie write from retrospection, which gives them the opportunity to analyze as well as to criticize the incidents that took place in colonial India as well as those taking place in post-colonial India.

Both Hosain and Rushdie write about India from England, from the metropolis, as they are exiles. Their positions as exiles influence them, according to Chelva Kanaganayakam, to “create a fictive version of home, one which entails a return to childhood and a concern with stasis...” (202). Both Hosain and Rushdie create “Indias of the mind.” They go back in history, reflect upon identity, nation and nationhood as they narrate the history of the Partition of 1947 which was “not merely a political decision but one which had to be acted upon in various ways. There was the loss of power, of social status, the separation from the loved ones, and unstated class war and a sense of

bewilderment at the way changing were being effected. The question of choice inevitably got linked with a religious position” (Kaul and Jain 192). These concerns also shape the lives of the women characters of both Hosain and Rushdie.

Hosain’s women characters in Sunlight on a Broken Column are caught between two lives—individual experience and the community life of the feudal class. Through Laila, Hosain recovers and questions the traditional life of the feudal Muslim class in colonial India, marked by a communal identity and clearly defined gender roles. Through Laila and especially through the character of Aunt Abida, Hosain tries to preserve a certain structure but she accepts the fact, in Yeats’ words, that when “things fall apart/ the center cannot hold.” Laila, inspired by western notions of self-expression and individualism, “ignores a basic principle of the traditional system—the individual is always subservient to the family and to the abstract ideal of duty” (Roy and Sinha 216). But again this traditional system in the form of an extended family, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, also seems to “stand for security. Relaxed comfort and a kind of sharing of joys and sorrows” (81). So, there seems to be a veil between these two lives, and the veil is lifted with the narrator-protagonist’s growth towards maturity and rent by the advent of Partition.

Rushdie’s women characters are themselves seen through a veil or the perforated sheet in Midnight’s Children. They also belong to two levels—on one level they are wives, mothers, daughters and on another they are metaphors, metaphors of *Bharat Mata* or India which will be divided. Rushdie’s portrayal of women characters is related to his notion of identity, nation and nationality. Just as his women characters are seen in parts through the perforated sheet, he feels that in the same way one can only perceive

one's nation in parts not as a whole. To him conceiving of a nation is like matching the parts of a jigsaw puzzle to make a whole. Rushdie's struggle to hold on to the center is seen through his attempt to create a bridge between the Hindus and Muslims of India. His hope that they will be united in future is reflected in the following sentence: "But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty ... What cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place" (Rushdie, Midnight's Children 444). The history of unification has not yet been written.

Though Attia Hosain and Salman Rushdie belong to two different generations, the concerns that underlie Sunlight on a Broken Column and Midnight's Children are the same—nation and national identity. To both the authors, nation and national identity are important all the more because they are exiles, "strangers living among strangers" (Kaul and Jain 219). To them "the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands 9). Amidst the reality of being exiles, they reimagine and recreate an India which is "a lived reality, loved and lost and the lost regretted" (Kaul and Jain 215).

Notes

¹ These lines are from Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (51). This extract has also been used by Antoinette Burton in her chapter discussing Sunlight on a Broken Column in her book Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India.

² Fatima Mernissi (11). In her Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry she goes back in time, into the past of Arab history to explain and prove that women can fully enjoy human rights in Muslim states. She believes that the men or society at large, not the religion, are to be blamed for the degradation and humiliation of women. According to her, "Any man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the *umma* and is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural identity" (viii).

³ The Taluqdars were people who had a degree of power which the landlords did not possess. They functioned within a feudal structure. There were lots of villages under them from which they collected revenue. According to Jain, "They could ask for an audience with the British royalty and thus occupied a status of dignity and possessed a degree of power within the colonial system" (Kaul and Jain 96). Zahra, who is proud of her breeding as a Taluqdar, mentions that the Taluqdars have a right of audience with the king in Sunlight on A Broken Column (147). But Laila thinks this privilege does not matter because to the English she is only a "nigger" (147). For more details of the relationship between the Taluqdars and the British, see Jasbir Jain's "Location" in Attia Hosain: A Diptych Volume.

⁴ Lucknow is an Indian city with an ancient culture. It has Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit centers of learning and has the history of being a cultural center of Islamic studies. Lucknow was the capital of Avadh in the 18th century when it became the major center of Mughal culture in Northern India. Decorum, courtesy and the conventions of social behavior were very important in the lives of the people of Lucknow in the colonial period. Hosain mentions the courtesan Mushtari Bai in Sunlight on a Broken Column, who taught Laila's father and uncles lessons in etiquette and courtesy (64). For details of the background of Lucknow and its role during the British Raj, see Firoze Mookerjee's Lucknow and the World of Sarshar.

⁵ The zenana means the women's part and the mardana means the man's section of the house. It is a part of the purdah system in South Asia. Though purdah actually means curtain, it can either mean the physical segregation of living space or the covering of the female face of the body with a burqa. Carved screens may cover the windows and balconies in Muslim households as a part of Purdah. For details on Purdah, see Hanna Papanek and Gail Mibault's Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia, and Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity, edited by B. R. Nandi. For details about the purdah system of Arab women, see Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood.

⁶ Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli (1977) portrays the life of an educated young woman Geeta who struggles to fit into a traditional Hindu family of Udaipur in Rajasthan with its purdah system after her marriage. Through her description we see the portraits of the guardians of the haveli who are traditional patriarchal figures. According to Anuradha Roy, "as she [Geeta] observes the men's apartment from a concealed vantage point, she is

filled with a glow of pride and affection at the sight of three generations of Sangram Singh's family and observes with admiration that 'the traditions of Mewar seem safe in the hands of these stern looking men' (35)" (92). Geeta, though suffocated by her life in the haveli, cannot but admire the patriarchal figures. Laila does the same when remembering Baba Jan and his role as a feudal ruler. Moreover, what Mehta's novel has in common with Hosain's is the aristocratic background. For more detail on Inside the Haveli, see Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin's Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English.

⁷ Though Sonia Nishat Amin discusses the Muslim society and its purdah system in Bengal during the period of 1876-1939, I believe that many of the Muslim traditions were the same in other parts of India.

⁸ Imambaras are places where the tazias are kept. Tazias are "replicas of the tombs of the Prophet's grandsons." Hosain gives a brief description of the Imambaras in Sunlight on a Broken Column (67).

⁹ The house also acts as the central metaphor in Anita Desai's Fire on the Mountain (1977) and Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli (1977). The house at Carignano in Desai's novel symbolizes loneliness, isolation, exile and to some extent, freedom from patriarchal domination. In Mehta's novel, the house is the symbol of tradition and where the concepts of izzat (honour) and sharam (modesty) influence the lives of women who have to remain in Purdah.

¹⁰ Midnight's Children (26)

¹¹ "So for instance in Midnight's Children there are various objects, there is a sheet with a hole in it, there's silver spittoon... and other things which recur at various

moments in the book in quite different contexts. Now these things have very little meaning in themselves. The meaning of the *leitmotif* is the sum total of the incidents in which it occurs, so it accumulates meaning the more it is used. And what one is able to do by using the *leitmotif* is to orchestrate what is otherwise a huge mass of material, which doesn't always have rational connections, but the leitmotif can provide this other network of connection and so provide a shape." Rushdie explains his use of the perforated sheet in this way in his lecture at the University of Aarhus, while giving summaries of his books Midnight's Children and Shame in Kunappi.

¹² Feroza Jussawalla feels that in making Reverend Mother use the word "whatsitsname," Rushdie tries to do some transliteration and transcreation of Language. She thinks that he is successful in capturing "the cadences of Urdu and the wry irony and humor that mark Urdu speech" (40). The Urdu translation of "whatsitsname" is "are voh tera nam keya hay, are voh uska nam kya hay" (40). According to Dr. Anne Zahlan, people use an equivalent of this expression, "shu ismo," all the time in Lebanese Arabic, which means, "what's its name," "what do you call it" as well as "what's his name." Mary Louise Pratt, on the other hand, thinks that Reverend Mother's use of "whatsitsname" is a form of "tranculturation" which is "a phenomenon of the contact zone." Contact zone, she explains, is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6).

¹³ I talk about the women belonging to the middle class because the Indian society was changing from a feudal structure to one based on the working middle class. The

Zamindar's right to property and all his privileges ended with the British leaving India, as there was no further need for such a class. Moreover, the growth of industrialization was a reason for the birth of the middle class in India. Independent India's five-year plans for economic development influenced the society a lot. The government itself consisted of middle-class intellectuals. There was also the rise of businessmen and the development of private as well as public sectors for economic benefit. For a detailed account, see A. H. Hanson's The Process of Planning: A Study of India's Five-Year Plans (1950-1964) (1966) and also B. B. Mishra's The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times (1961).

¹⁴ According to K. Purushotham, "The depiction of the widow as a destroyer is based on Indira Gandhi's Emergency during which 11, 080 people were detained and harassed under the MISA and other acts." Uma Pareswaren feels otherwise: "Rushdie's interpolation as to the identification of the Widow with Mrs. Gandhi (421) is in poor taste and is also an artistic weakness. Such explicit parallels are better left out of the novel, and left to critics!" For more detail, see Uma Parameswaren's "Handcuffed to History: Salman's Rushdie's Art."

¹⁵ The term "mother of the narrative" was suggested by Dr. Anne Zahlan while we were discussing Padma's role as a narrator. She is also of the opinion that large hips and thighs suggest a woman's ability to give birth easily.

¹⁶ These lines are from W. B. Yeats' poem "Lake Isle of Innisfree." Yeats also dreamt of an ancestral "romantic Ireland." He, like post-colonial writers, used his reading of myth and legend to create an image of a traditional homeland. Like them he valued nostalgia, and tried to shape the future by redescribing the past. His writings are full of

retrospective imaginings. I find some similarity between Yeats and Hosain and Rushdie—dreamy of the past and hopeful of the future of their beloved nations. Their ultimate design is to create imaginary homelands, homelands that exist only in their minds.

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