
UNIT 28 READING THE NOVEL

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28.0 OBJECTIVES

This is the third Unit of the Block entitled *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (Arnold-Heinemann; first Indian edition 1979). In this Unit we shall be looking at the novel closely and giving you a chapterwise summary.

The objectives of this Unit are to enable you to understand the basic story of the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Our summary is in no way a substitute for reading the novel. You ought to read the novel at your Study Centre library or buy a personal copy.

28.1 INTRODUCTION

Images -- whether they be of men or women -- are not constructed in a vacuum. The social context has a great deal to do with the perspectives from which we observe the society.

A woman may be seen and understood by her father in one way, her husband in another, her son and daughter in some other way and by her own self in yet another way. The opinion of each of the perceivers depends on his/her interaction with her in different situations. So, writers, especially women writers, having experienced different phases of women in different roles, have reflected the same in their fiction, resulting in a feminine form.

The predominant issue and theme in this novel emerges from the situations that focus on a woman caught in the crisis of a transitional society, where the shift is taking place from the conventional to the unconventional.

Sunlight on a Broken Column is a record of the growing-up of a young girl Laila in the two decades before and after independence during which India passed through a number of crises.

Let us look closely at the story of the novel which is divided into four parts.

28.2 SUMMARY

Cast in the autobiographical form, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is a novel in four parts and covers a period of about 20 years in the life of Laila, the narrator heroine. When the novel begins she is fifteen years old. At the beginning of Part II, she is almost nineteen, and towards the end of the narrative we find her a mother and a widow "and the second half of the century was now two years old".

An orphan, Laila is brought up by her rich relatives and she spends the impressionable years of her girlhood in Lucknow, joining a University, making friends, dreaming dreams. Belonging as she does to an influential Muslim Taluqdar family, she is half-distracted by

the politics of the thirties. The nationalists are being ranged against the alien bureaucracy and the Muslim Leaguers against the Congress. Even homes are divided and the acerbity of politics enters the dining table. Father and son also argue for different sides:

“No one seemed to talk any more; everyone argued, and not in the graceful tradition of our city where conversation was treated as a fine art, words were loved as mediums of artistic expression, and verbal battles were enjoyed as much as any delicate, scintillating, sparkling display of pyrotechnic skill. It was as if someone had sneaked in live ammunition among the fireworks.” (part 3, Ch.12)

Laila herself is more an interested observer than an active participant, and having in the meantime fallen in love with Ameer, she marries him unmindful of the family's disapproval of her choice. Ameer joins the army in 1942, is taken prisoner and is killed when he tries to escape. “I lived and moved through an endless tunnel with no exit.” says Laila, recalling that anguished time, but she has her daughter, and so she learns to fight despair and come to terms with life.

After the coming of independence doubled with partition Laila visits the home of her childhood and girlhood -- Ashiana and finds that things are not what they were in her time:

“There were strangers living in the rooms once so private and guarded, strangers who were names in Government files balancing Saleem's name against theirs - he labelled 'evacuee', they 'refugees'. Their presence here, and Saleem's in their erstwhile homeland, was part of a statistical calculation in the bargaining of bureaucrats and politicians, in which millions of uprooted human beings became just numerical figures. The official words describing them had no meaning in terms of human heartache”. (Part 4, Ch.1)

Of her two cousin brothers, Saleem has opted for Pakistan while Kemal remains an Indian citizen. New times bring new fashions, new fads :

“European and American aesthetes and intellectuals and the 'smart set' of Bombay and Delhi had discovered the art and culture of ancient India simultaneously.

It appeared at times that neo-Indians wore their nationalism like a mask, and their Indianness like fancy dress”. (Part 4, Ch.2)

In the twenty years that witness Laila changing from an orphan girl of fifteen to the widowed mother of a girl of that age, India too moves from colonialism to independence. The old feudal order loses its property, privileges and poise. The old world habits and attitudes give place to the exertions and frustrations of the post-independence era.

Thus the novel is not only the story of Laila -- but also a valuable document of the social and political happenings of that time.

Now we shall be taking up the novel in greater detail :

28.3 SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN -- PART I

Chapter I

Attia Hosain introduces some of her main characters very subtly in this chapter. The ailing patriarch Baba Jan, Laila's paternal grandfather, is the pivot around which, the lives of all those who inhabit the house, revolve. This ailing patriarch's daughter Abida, who is the heroine's aunt, and his daughter's daughter Zahra, who is the heroine's first cousin and the heroine herself, who is the patriarch's deceased son's daughter, are more specially the ones whose future course of life depends upon his existence. The atmosphere of gloom which has been created in the chapter through Baba Jan's illness and perhaps pending death, is also indicative of the lull that usually precedes a storm. This lull later will give way to a storm not only in the personal lives of the women folk, but also in the political situation of the country. The first chapter is thus indicative of the mood of the novel - and Baba Jan's passing away signifies the passing away of an era.

Chapter 2

This chapter talks at length about the two girls -- with their different temperaments - effervescent Zahra serving as a perfect foil to the sober and quiet Laila. A new male relation is introduced and Laila's favourite aunt Abida's fierce and independent nature is revealed. Laila and Zahra are the young teenagers, not allowed to voice their own opinions even when the subject deals directly with them i.e. choice of their future husbands.

An interesting character Nandi is introduced, who is the daughter of the family washerman. She is the very embodiment of what the traditional and orthodox feudal family abhors and hates. She is therefore at once an object of scorn and hatred, and only Laila thinks otherwise. Nandi's character becomes important from another point also, because it is through her that the author brings out very subtly the double standards of the feudal landlords. The carelessly happy, fearless and free Nandi whose favourite game used to be to act the bride in an innocent way, is reprimanded when she's found with the cleaner in the garage, in compromising circumstances.

Uncle Mohsin, the self appointed advisor of the family calls her a liar, a slut and a wanton. The answer which Nandi gives "and who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you" is symbolic again of the double standards of male morality, as prevalent then.

Chapter 3

After Nandi's episode Attia Hosain takes us on a nostalgia trip to Baba Jan's past and a very slick description of Karim Ali -- the man Friday of Baba Jan, who had fascinated these children's childhood with folklore and stories from the Arabian Nights, is given. The photographs hanging on the wall introduce us to Baba Jan's dear friends -- the fierce and generous Thakur Balbir Singh -- the Hunstey Raja; the poetry of Raja Hasan Ahmed of Amirpur or the Mote Dada; the skinny square bearded lawyer, the scholar of Sankrit, Persian and Arabic, Mr. Freemantle or the Gore Dada. Thakur Sahib's humour and enjoyment of life, Raja Sahib's grand pattern of thinking and Mr. Freemantles' brilliance as a lawyer and Baba Jan's integrity that tempered his unchallenged tyranny present a lovable group or foursome of that great city.

Chapter 4

Laila introduces us to her darling spinster aunt Abida and Hajjan Bibi whose husband had been a companion of Baba Jan as well as to Asad and Zahid who are the orphan sons of poor relatives. We also meet Hakiman Bua the supervisor of cooking and serving meals. Laila remembers them fondly but detests the uncanny presence of Uncle Mohsin the person with double standards.

Festivals have always acquired a special significance in the social milieu of Indian society. In pre-independent India the unity and diversity of cultures had still greater significance when Diwali, Eid, Holi or Shubh Raat were celebrated with the same aplomb and mirth by all the communities.

This chapter also highlights the inherent loneliness of Laila who thinks about her dead parents and she seems to derive all her strength from the religious beliefs of her dead mother.

Chapter 5

We are introduced to the household chores that Laila and Zahira indulge in. Mrs. Martin, Laila's ex-governess pays a visit to the young begums, Abida and Majida.

In this chapter as is the case in many other works written in pre-independent era, the characters from the Raj are brought in. Their influence and their western way of thinking and their fashionable outlook on life which serves as a foil to the timidity and coyness of the Indian woman, is brought out.

In this chapter Laila's revolutionary stirrings are also made known to the readers.

Chapter 6

Another major character is brought in. This is Asad who voices his philosophy of life which undergoes a transformation for the better later on in the novel. As we shall see Asad at the moment is very bitter and full of despair.

Chapter 7 and 8

These chapters are symbolic of how life goes on with monotonous regularity with some intense moments thrown in to cause ripples. But life moves back to its patterned smoothness once again. We gear up for Zahira's wedding preparations on the one hand and on the other we realize that Laila has yet to learn the practicalities of life.

Chapter 9

This chapter gives us a thorough insight into the poetic style of characterization that is employed by Attia Hosain the author. Be it the Hakim's wife or the lawyer's wife or Thakur Balbir Singh's wife or the scented young Rani of Bhimnagar or even Mushtari Bai, each character is so realistic that it stands vividly in front of the reader's eye. Take for instance her sarangi player, "a gaunt man who played as if praying, with his eyes shut; and every muscle of the tabla player's body twitched in tormented rhythm with the drums".

Chapter 10

Muharram celebrations are on and an argument over religion is generated between Zahid and Asad. Zahid's fanatical views are contrasted with Asad's non-violent ones.

The writers' ideas regarding religious ceremonies are revealed through her characters. An indication is also given that Laila also abhors violence which in her opinion only breeds more violence. She also does not approve of the "volumes of hate" in Zahid. Zahra is taking no part in this argument. Therefore the contrast between her character and Laila is immediately apparent to the reader.

Chapter 11

The Moharram procession is on and Zahra and Laila listen to its sounds, since Mohsin Uncle had forbidden anyone to go and see it as there were rumours of riots taking place.

Chapter 12

News of riots filters into the household and it is discovered that Zahid and Asad have defied the orders and gone to see the procession. Zahid returns towards evening and Asad comes in much later. He has been injured during the scuffles and gets a high fever, during which he reveals his love for Zahra in his delirious condition. Four days later Baba Jan dies.

This chapter is very important because it is at this juncture that we are made aware of two major changes taking place. We are made aware of the growing unrest in the country - and also of the violence that had begun to take place preceding the partition of the country. Along with this Baba Jan's death, provides the final symbolic blow to the passing away of a particular way of life.

Chapter 13

Baba Jan's death is described and Laila's own reaction to seeing him dying in front of her eyes evokes guilt since she had not covered her head or raised her hand in salutation to him.

Chapter 14 & 15

In the midst of intense mourning uncle Hamid and his wife Saira arrive. Preparations are on for the funeral. The gloom and the pathos surrounding the ongoing preparations for Baba Jan's burial symbolize the hammering of the last nail in the coffin of a gradually

disappearing era. With this fading out, the old values, traditions and lifestyle - in fact the very essence of an age is symbolically passing into oblivion.

The arrival of uncle Hamid and Saira heralds the beginning of a new way of life "an expectancy of unknown yet inevitable changes".

Chapter 16

Continuing this new era of change the drive to Hasanpur where the funeral is to be held is described, where the fast dying pastimes like kite flying and cock-fighting can be seen. Zahra and Laila (in spite of the gravity of the situation) cannot help enjoying the sights and sounds along the way and are constantly reprimanded by Hakiman Bua. They're greeted by Sharifan who is the Mirasin (singer and dancer) on their arrival at Hasanpur.

Chapter 17

Laila and Zahra are met by various cousins out of whom Zainab is described. Nandi is also at Hasanpur and a hint is again given at the double standards of respectability that the feudal lords maintained.

Chapter 18

Laila and Zahra go to see Zainab's parents and grandmother. There they meet Zainab's brother who had been to Aligarh University but now is a dejected and cynical man who believes that the country's political situation can never be improved whether the rulers are the British or whether there is self-rule. He mocks Asad's belief in non-violence, and feels that Asad's idealism is really ignorance and that he has been stretching out for things beyond his reach.

Chapter 19

Laila's irritation at double standards and old customs is apparent. She cannot understand why people should continue following customs which have lost their utility and she hints at the purdah system being one of those dead rituals.

Chapter 20

A family meeting is held. It is decided that Zahra would be married as soon as possible and that Laila would continue her education and till the time her college re-opened she could stay where she wished. Laila chooses to stay with Aunt Abida at Hasanpur. Asad voices his opinion that he would like to go to Delhi to study at the Jamia. This Chapter is thus indicative of a ray of hope entering Laila's life when she is allowed to continue her education.

Chapter 21

In this chapter which is that last one of Part I, we get to know that Zahra and Aunt Abida are both married off. Abida's husband was Sheikh Ejaz Ali -- insignificant except for the fact that he was chosen to be her husband. Zahra's wedding to Naseer was celebrated with great pomp and when the ceremony took place the only thing Laila could think of was that Zahra had let down Asad's love for her.

In the words of the author herself this last chapter is significant because it is here that we get the feeling that "the tight hands had been loosened which had tied together those who had lived under the power of his will and authority". Aunt Abida's marriage followed by Zahra's marriage when "the whole house spilled with gem-set colours", symbolizes a brighter note coming in to dispel the prevailing gloom - which had begun at the beginning of the novel with the illness of Baba Jan.

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28.4 PART II

Chapter I

This chapter provides a sort of connection between the past events and the present. Aunt Abida and Zahra go away after marriage and Zainab too gets married. Laila goes away to live with her aunt and uncle.

Chapter 2

Ashiana the ancestral home was now taken over by Uncle Hamid and Aunt Saira and they introduced new changes into the old house. So much so, that Laila felt that the very character of the house had changed.

Chapter 3

Laila's college friend, Nita and Nadira are introduced. Their political and religious loyalties are shown. Laila's mental unease at the memories of an idyllic past and an undesirable present are conveyed to us. We can notice that socially the world is changing and a subtle transition is being made.

Laila's world would henceforth be confined to resentment alternating with spurts of rebellion against a society which tries to curb the aspirations of females in a hitherto male dominated society.

Chapter 4

Laila's aunt has visitors in front of whom Laila gives vent to her innermost feelings by talking about her convictions -- much to the horror of those present. She also shatters her aunt's hope that the Begum Sahiba present would perhaps choose Laila for her son.

Laila symbolizes the feeling of the new generation which slowly wanted to shape its own destiny and was questioning the age old ideas of love and marriage.

Chapter 5

Nandi's mother dies after bearing a stillborn child and once again the belief in old superstitions is brought to the fore when her husband refuses to take her to a hospital as he believes that she is possessed by evil spirits rather than an illness.

Chapter 6

Rebellious tendencies arise in Laila but can find no outlet. She becomes intolerant of her Aunt's ideas of progress and benevolence which she finds hollow.

Zahra comes back from a European tour with her husband, after having acquired all the social graces befitting a young modern wife of an ambitious Indian Civil Services officer.

This chapter is important from the point of view of the insight we get into the characters of Laila and Zahra. Zahra is content and blooming as she has acquired all that materialism has to offer. On the other hand Laila is becoming slightly insecure since she is unable to adapt herself to the superficiality of the materialistic world. She still tries to hold on to her idealistic views.

Chapter 7

Here again Laila and Asad's down-to-earth attitude which is rooted in reality is contrasted with Zahra and her husband Naseer's superficiality.

Chapter 8

Laila and Zahra prepare for a social occasion where Laila is to be formally introduced. A slight hint is given to the readers about the man Laila would one day marry as Zahra teasingly tells her that his reflection would appear in the mirror and just at that moment Asad appears. Is it possible that the two will eventually marry? What do you think?

Chapter 9

The reception at the *Baradari* is described graphically. Laila is separated from Zahra and while she is fleeing from a drunk man she bumps into a gentleman who is to play a very important part in her life.

Like any teenager, Laila too feels the stirrings of romance which later on would sweep her away to the extent of rebellion against her family.

Chapter 10

Undercurrents of political unrest are felt when some students disrupt a foundation stone-laying ceremony by their slogan shouting. Police and students clash and there is a verbal clash between the differing ideologies of Laila's friends Nita, Joan and Romana.

There is a slight transformation in Laila's character because the surrounding political events do not evoke very strong feelings in her and she "is curiously detached". This indicates that for the time being she is getting more involved in the affairs of the heart rather than those of the country.

Chapter 11

Laila's rebellious spirit is getting more and more pronounced. A procession of young people including girls, is lathi-charged and Asad is hurt on the head. Notice the fact that even women were taking part in the Nationalist movement. The trouble escalates and a curfew is clamped. Ameer a friend of Asad comes to see him and Laila recognizes him as the same person who had bumped into her at the party and who had succeeded in making a special place in her heart.

Chapter 12

Nita has to leave the college as she had also taken part in the procession and a couple of days later she dies. Romana too is called back home, to be married. Zahra and Aunt Abida also leave for their homes.

This chapter also clearly shows that the joint family system was fading out gradually and its place was being taken by the concept of a nuclear family. This is shown by the attitude of Uncle Hamid who makes no attempt to hide his dislike of the joint family system with its "entanglements, unreasoning restrictions, unreasonable demands and lack of privacy".

The selling of his house by the Raja of Bhimnagar is again indicative of the passing away of the old order - as also of the changes which were taking place in society. It was becoming more and more difficult for the feudal aristocracy to maintain their previous standards of living. On the rise now was a new business class.

Chapter 13

Saliman leaves with Zahra and Abida and Laila is left with just Nandi for company and all her private fears and doubts.

Exercise 2

Describe the reception at the Baradari in about 10 sentences.

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28.5 PART III

Chapter 1

Laila is now 19 years old. The first mention of an East-West encounter (which was a favourite theme of Anglo-Indian writers) is made here when Laila's cousins Saleem and Kemal return home from abroad. They are taken to see Hasanpur and gradually Laila realizes that the rose-tinted spectacles through which she had viewed Hasanpur were now inadequate. She now notices the poverty and squalor and diseases of the place. An important comment on the East-West theme is made here when Laila says that "The ten years of estrangement had no significance. Centuries of kinship swallowed them up in a moment".

Chapter 2

The family goes to the hills for summer. Once again an oblique comment about changing values and thinking is made when Saleem laughingly tells his mother that she is very brave not to understand the new political ideologies which the present generation is thinking so hard about. There is an easy camaraderie between Saleem, Kemal and Laila.

Chapter 3

The party season begins with the first one thrown by Laila's Uncle and Aunt. Laila meets her old school friends Nadira, Sita and Sylvia Tucker. Also present is the nephew of the Raja of Amirpur -- Ameer Hussain the same person whom Laila had met on two memorable occasions. She realizes that the only meaning in her life is now through Ameer, to whom she has lost her heart.

Chapter 4

The young meet again for tennis and Laila and Ameer talk to each other comfortably. Laila is totally in love. Her Uncle gets visitors to discuss the new political developments, which are now seemingly taking a serious turn--far removed from the "drawing-room" political discussions of Asad, Nita and Laila. There are hints that religion will now infiltrate politics.

Chapter 5

There is a clash between Uncle Hamid and his son Kemal over political ideologies and it seems as if the politics of the street are getting bigger and invading homes. Laila realizes with a sense of foreboding that Ameer's status in society is not very favourable since he is the Raja's second wife's son.

Chapter 6

Laila is enveloped in all kinds of social gatherings which she finds absolutely superficial but for the fact that her secret love for Ameer is blossoming in her heart.

The chapter runs on two parallel tracks. On one hand is Laila's growing involvement with Ameer which she knows will be opposed strongly by her family. On the other hand we are made aware of the Nationalist movement which is reaching its zenith.

Chapter 7

Laila gets to know of Saliman's death and is sad that a part of her past is no more. A more distressing piece of news has reference to Aunt Abida, who is very ill after a miscarriage. But Laila is not allowed by Aunt Saira to go to Lucknow and she too easily succumbs to Ameer's pleadings not to go.

Chapter 8

There is a farewell party for Kemal and Nadira acknowledges her love for Saleem. There are tension-filled undercurrents between Kemal and Sita since they had both been in love but had not married because of dissimilar backgrounds. Laila sees masks slipping off from the faces of people like Sita and Mrs. Lal. Laila arranges to meet Ameer the next morning.

Chapter 9

This chapter is the culmination of the romance between Laila and Ameer who confess their love to each other. Ameer's imminent departure depresses Laila but she promises to wait for him for even three years till he makes something of himself. Towards the end there is a hint of the uneasy atmosphere which is prevailing in the growing commitment between Laila and Ameer because of the opposition which was inevitable.

Chapter 10

Laila joins the University for postgraduate studies. Time passes. Nadira and Saleem come closer. Political manoeuvres intensify.

Chapter 11

Nandi becomes Laila's companion and sharer of moods. She gets her revenge on Ghulam Ali who had been instrumental in Saliman's downfall, by accusing him of molesting her. He is dismissed.

Chapter 12

Politics become the main topic of conversation at home. Differences in political ideologies even make father and son fight. Uncle Hamid is a Nationalist while Saleem backs the Muslim League. The discussion leads to explosions of anger. Saleem admits that he has decided to marry Nadira who is the daughter of Uncle Hamid's opponent. A lot of bitter things are said and it is clear that politics has really invaded the home.

Chapter 13

Ameer comes for a visit and he and Laila meet furtively and reiterate their love for one another. They plan to marry as soon as it is possible.

Chapter 14

Laila is now twenty and Asad comes home for a visit. Laila tells him about her love for Ameer and feels confident that she would be able to stand up for her convictions when the time arrived.

Chapter 15

Laila goes to visit Aunt Abida and is made painfully aware of "conflicts lurking behind outward forms of dutiful relationships" in Aunt Abida's home. Laila is shocked and saddened to see Aunt Abida's acceptance of her mentally and physically crushed life.

There is a clash between their ideologies. In spite of the suffering that Aunt Abida is undergoing she is still a passive bearer of what life hands out. She still believes in the age old beliefs that obedience to elders irrespective of one's own happiness is a virtue. The theme of personal fulfilment vs. family loyalty (which you'll be reading about in Unit 29) is seen here. Laila cannot understand why service and duty can only be achieved by the path of unhappiness.

Chapter 16

Nandi who had gone to watch a circus procession is attacked by Ghulam Ali who scars her face with a knife. Nandi as you may recall had got Ghulam Ali dismissed by accusing him of molesting her.

Chapter 17

Uncle Hamid's election day comes at last. Laila again feels sad at the way times are changing. To her surprise her musings are cut short by the appearance of Ameer who has come there in connection with a job.

Chapter 18

Uncle Hamid wins the elections. Ameer also arrives and Laila again notices her Aunt Saira's silent hostility towards him. Unfortunately Aunt Saira comes upon Laila and Ameer kissing. Though she is led away by Kemal, Laila is now aware that the secret is out in the open.

Another hint of the double standards of the morality of the aristocracy is given here, when Kemal observes that his mother would not object openly to the liaison between Laila and Ameer as she would be terribly afraid of a scandal. Therefore, she would build up "a neat little facade of respectability".

The chapter ends with Laila and Ameer going away for a party with Kemal. This is symbolic of the final ties being broken with Laila's past life. A new future awaits her.

Exercise 3

Recapitulate the events which take place in this part of the novel in about 15 sentences.

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28.6 CHAPTER IV

Chapter I

The author Attia Hosain takes up the story after 15 years as Laila drives back to her old home Ashiana. Part IV of the novel bridges the gap of 15 years in the life of Laila from the time that her romance with Ameer is discovered till she is 50 years old and "the second half of century was now two years old".

Laila finds strangers living in their house. She meets Ram Singh an old family servant. The decaying house is a living symbol of the decay that has crept into all their lives.

Laila remembers how she had left home after marriage to Ameer. And now she even has a 15 year old daughter. Even Uncle Hamid has died five years ago. Laila's wanderings through the house symbolize her mental reminiscences over the events that have taken place over the last 14 years.