

A Land to Call One's Own; Looking at Attia Hosain's Essay *Deep Roots* to Understand Her Sense of Belonging/Alienation as a Migrant

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Abstract

Attia Hosain (1913-1998), a novelist and a short story writer, was born and educated in Lucknow. In 1947, she moved to England and worked at BBC, where she presented her own women's programmes. Attia Hosain's essay *Deep Roots, New Languages* was first published in *Voices of the Crossing: The impact of Britain on writers from Asia, the Caribbean and Africa* (London, 2000), where she brings up the inadequacy of expressing herself in another language, how she is not able to penetrate the invisible barrier that surrounds her in England. In brief, *how does one belong?*

I would like to look at this essay by Hosain to understand the need to redefine oneself through history. It is this uneasy relationship of a person with his/her host country that I would like to explore in the essay by Attia Hosain and, in doing so, would shed light on the situation of a Muslim woman writer in the times and the age in which she chose to speak about it.

Keywords –Migration, Muslim women, Progressive Writers' Association, Partition, autobiographical writings, language politics.

“What is inside one's mind, one's heart and soul, which makes one wish to write? I cannot answer – but there it always was – that other dimension that seemed to set me apart when I was very young, and reality was merely a part of, or merely a shadow of, the world inside my head. I was not quite like everyone else and I can see how hard it was for others to follow the process of my thoughts and actions...”

–Attia Hosain in a letter to her niece, Muneeza Shamsie
(Hosain 2013, 5)

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In 1947, Attia Hosain left India for England with her husband, Ali Bahadur Habibullah. She did not want to go to the newly created country, Pakistan. For Attia, her home would always be India. I would like to look at this essay by Hosain to understand the need to redefine oneself through history. It is this uneasy relationship of a person with his/her host country that I would like to explore in the essay by Attia Hosain and, in doing so, would shed light on the situation of a Muslim woman writer in the times and the age in which she chose to speak about it.

Postcolonial literature has rejected the representation/stereotyping of the non-Western woman as being voiceless, having no agency of her own to voice her experiences, and incapable to portray a true picture of one's surroundings. Books by women writers talking about themselves and their experiences have slowly been claiming a space for themselves in an arena that has been predominantly considered a masculine activity. Attia Hosain's essay – "Deep Roots. New Languages" describes the deep conflicts and splits that the diaspora writers have often felt while writing in the language of the colonisers about the societies where their cultural roots lie.

Identity and a Sense of Belonging

Identity is bound up with one's origins. The origins consist of the place you come from, the people you grow up around (community), and invariably the boundaries that are constructed around this identity, through its markers. As Neluka Silva reiterates, "... the sense of self is bound up in the actualities of blood, race, language, religion or tradition." (Silva 2004, 218) Critical studies have divided identity into two ideas; one can understand better by looking at the difference. Collective identity comes from living in a community and being recognised as a part of it, while personal identity deals with the question of who am I? Identity is also created through recognition of the 'other'. That awareness and understanding of the 'other' becomes a crucial juncture at which one realises the position that one has taken rather than opted for. In 1997, Attia Hosain wrote an essay titled – *Deep Roots*, later published in 2000 as *Deep Roots, New Language*, where she brings up the inadequacy of expressing herself in another language; how she is not able to penetrate the invisible barrier that surrounds her in England. The essay brings up a pertinent question – *How does one belong?*

Eric Hobsbawm (1987, 3) writes "...there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalised record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one's own life. For individual human beings this zone stretches from the point where living family traditions or memories begin – say, from the earliest family photo which the oldest living family member can identify or explicate – to the end of infancy, when public and private destinies are recognized as inseparable and as mutually defining one another." In these lines, Hobsbawm tries to explain why fiction becomes that arena where people can find this "twilight zone".

Family, Honour, Tradition

The preoccupation of early Muslim women writers was around family ties, and their negotiations in real life with such ties made their way into the works they produced. In her book *Am I that Name? Feminism and the category of "Women" in History*, Denise Riley (1988) explains that being a woman is an uncertain condition since a woman is historically and discursively constructed in relation to other categories; women are differently positioned within the collectivity.

One of the categories that come up is that of honour. The concept of honour revolves around women, and communities vest their honour in women. Constructions of images of womanhood depend on the spatial boundaries of a nation. Before the Partition and creation of a new nation, the idea of the nation as a Mother rallied people to fight for the freedom of their nation. Once that purpose was achieved, the women of the nation became victims of mass plunders and rapes during the Partition. The transition from being a revered image to an instrument of wreaking revenge/havoc was a swift one. The honour of men has always been inextricably tied up with the honour of "their" women. And this has been explored by writers who wrote on Partition; one of the powerful voices who explored this dynamics was Saadat Hasan Manto. Patriarchy has always relied on the concept of *Honour* and *Tradition* to send across a strong message.

Tradition has been considered one of the strong voices of authority. For many Muslim women, this was and, to a certain extent, continues to be defined through two main ways – Purdah and the Quran. The ambiguity of the latter regarding the advancement of women in various spheres of life has been handled by men in power who claim to have a final word on its interpretations, while it is the former that has come to be synonymous with a Muslim woman's identity. The words "Muslim woman" evokes a certain set of stereotypes, and the image of a woman covered from head to toe in a black garment comes to one's mind.

In the patriarchal and postcolonial spaces, the construction of the image of a woman in the colonialist and nationalist texts fortified the power relationships. Women who fought along with men for independence were now fighting a new fight – against those very men they had fought along with. As Elleke Boehmer (1995), in her book "Colonial and Postcolonial Literature", observes that women felt the need to rewrite their (stories) and to do so they had to resist, recreate, and empower themselves. The category "woman", considered a construct of Euro-American culture, finds no applicability even in the 1950s as Sara Suleri warns in her book "Meatless Days" that the third world is locatable only as a discourse of convenience and she asserts that there are "no women in the third world". The concept of a woman was not really a part of the available vocabulary: "We were too busy for that, just living and conducting precise negotiations with what it meant to be a sister or a child or a wife or a mother or a servant" (Suleri 1991, 1).

As Partha Chatterjee observed in his essay, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India":

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into ghar and bahir, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir. (Chatterjee 1989, 624)

The Creation of the Self

When a woman writes, it is not just a description of how life has been rather it includes deciphering her own experiences. Attia Hosain describes how her upbringing was tied up with the culture she came from. "I was brought up very conscious of our own culture, our feudal background and relationships. I grew up with the English language but not with the culture behind it. I was always outside that and deeply rooted in my own." (Hosain 2013, 19). There is a need to situate oneself in a particular time and space in order to understand our own selves, and this is where nostalgia turns up as a coloured version of memory. But it is through this baggage of memories that one writes one's own cultural and personal identity. Not just cold facts or historical circumstances create a piece of fiction but the distillation of it through the prism of memory.

Her life was divided between two worlds. While her sense of her roots and her home played a strong role, her early journals note the political and cultural changes of the time. Attia Hosain started writing around the time when literature was dominated by male writers. Unlike women a generation earlier to her, she was not someone who lived in seclusion. She did not grow up in a patriarchal household. At the age of eleven, when her father passed away it was Attia's mother who took over the running of the estate in Lucknow and set up a school for girls – Talimgah Niswan. "I learned from her how strong women can be when faced with tragedy and pressures...my mother kept us close to the roots of our own culture." (Hosain 2013, 4) Attia never observed purdah and in one of her conversations with her daughter, Shama Habibullah, she recalled how as a young girl she could read any book from her father's library and had grown up on English classics. It was Attia's love for literature that later on converted into her expressing herself through her works. The decisions she made in her life placed her at odds with her family and society.

Elaine Showalter's (2012) concept of three stages of writing by women helps understand the politics of women writing the South Asian novel. She theorises the transitions made by women's writing as a progression from the feminine space to a self-constituted female stage. It is in the female stage that authentic self-exploration and a confident engagement with the world can occur. This proclamation of the rights of selfhood is symbolic of coming out of the woman into the world.

Progressive Writers' Association

Attia's friendships with Sajjad Zaheer and Mahmud Zafar influenced her a lot. *Angaarey* was published in December 1932. This collection of short stories was banned in 1933 by the government of the United Provinces. Reason: the writers had commented on the social and moral conventions of the time and rejected them. The four young contributors to this book were Rashid Jahan, Ahmed Ali, Sajjad Zaheer and Mahmud Zafar. The book laid the basis for the establishment of the Indian Progressive Writers' Association in London in November 1934, which later matured into the Progressive Writers' Association in 1936. Known as *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussanafin* in Urdu and *Akhil Bharatiya Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh* in Hindi, they were united in their vision of using writing as a means to attack class and gender discrimination. Attia later on describes this period for a broadcast for BBC, and what turns up is the focus on language:

“...Because in the struggle for freedom, English was both a weapon, as well as the key to what I might call the ideological arsenal. The result of this clashing and merging of different cultures was that I, like many others, lived in many worlds of thought and many centuries at the same time, shifting from one to the other with bewildering rapidity in a matter of moments.” (Hosain 2013, 7)

Autobiography and Women

In the works of many Muslim women writers, there has been a conscious decision to break down the traditional ideas revolving around religion and cultural expectations from women. Trauma that has been lived and experienced has been used to break down the monopoly of religion and culture on a woman's life. Regarded as keepers of culture and carriers of age-old traditions, it is through the medium of writing that women have tried to dismantle the tropes that bind them down and confine them to roles of a woman, a wife or a mother and carve for themselves a more autonomous space where they can explore their individuality. The act of writing became a way of breaking one's silence. Writing has been looked at as one of the ways of defining the world as one sees it, but repeatedly, women have not been considered reliable sources when it comes to defining the self. And, therefore, were considered incapable of writing an 'authentic' story about themselves. Autobiography became one of the forms for a woman writer to express herself freely; to weave her memories into this

medium of expression and empower her to share that private space of her mind and heart as and in whatever manner she wanted. Since the mode requires talking in the first person, it helps the writer explore her life in the sequence she desires. Thereby opening up a space to highlight what she considers important sections in her life that support her motive to write. If one tries to tie this up with Attia Hosain's writings, the question that comes to one's mind is – Why was Attia Hosain not using this mode of writing, given the times in which she grew up? Was it a conscious decision to hide her motive to write? Or were elements from her life woven into the stories she wrote?

Writing as an Indian Muslim woman, her new nationality (her decision to settle down in England) gave her the fluidity but did not break her ties with her home country. It is interesting to note that despite the image of a Muslim woman as a secluded one; most of the early Muslim narratives in English have been produced by women. As Attia Hosain observes: “I regret that I do not write in the language of my own people...It prevents me from having any contact with them, but when I write in English, in this there is also its own advantages; I can tell others about my own people – We are displaced writers and do not forget about our own national routes. We carry in our soul a deep anguish.” (quoted in Kalinnikova 1982, 167)

Language and Home

Two prominent themes that come up in Attia Hosain's essay are to do with language and home. Language is a part of one's identity. When writing in English, in the South Asian context, it brings with it its own set of cultural baggage and ideas, one of which seems to revolve around the fact that it is the privileged who have access to the English language. An education in English medium automatically determines a language's social power over other languages. In this case, Hosain reading and writing in English and then moving to England determined for her the language in which she would write and express herself. But the voices that one hears in one's head needn't be in the language in which one writes; therefore, that dichotomy exists. And she writes:

“But though English was so familiar, it was at the same time not my mother tongue Urdu. Then why should I write in it? ...I spoke my own language and lived with it at home., but I was taught it only in the time that could be spared from studying for the examinations. This is how I formed the habit of reading, writing and even thinking in English. In fact, I think in both languages – but there were more occasions to think in English. My vocabulary in my mother tongue was limited – and more so because the pressure of other studies constantly interrupted my studies of our own classics, of Arabic and Persian.” (Hosain 2013, 19)

There is spatial segregation between the public and private spheres where language in women's hands turns important. For them to be listened to, they have to step into the public sphere; for

that, the language in circulation must be taken up. The English language becomes the medium in order to be heard. Struggling with emotions that one considers private, the language has to be taken from the public sphere and that causes the split between home and the world. In order to be heard, the woman steps into an unfamiliar territory of language and space to give vent to what one can call the sense of displacement. What becomes clear as one moves from one's home to another place is that there is no going back to that idea of a unified sense of the self. The split has happened and will remain a part of one's new identity.

As Attia Hosain observes in her essay, "My mind could not accept the division of India...what then became of the choices? There were not just two – India and Pakistan – but a third, Britain. There was to be no renouncing of nationality; everyone from the Indian subcontinent had British passports in 1947. We had a legal right to be British citizens, which I exercised. ... Above all Britain was a neutral area where I could still meet those from whom we were now divided by borders of nationality and an artificially nurtured hostility." (Hosain 2013, 21) That fixed idea of one's nationality turns fluid the moment one steps across the border. Hosain goes through a sense of displacement when she first arrives in England. Her writings are thought-provoking, and one realises the amount of negotiation of identity that she must have gone through. Sara Ahmed, in her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, feels that it is the memory of one's home that determines the construction of home narratives:

"Indeed, if we think of home as an outer skin, then we can also consider how migration involves not only a spatial dislocation but also a temporal dislocation: 'the past' becomes associated with a home that is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present. The question then of being at home or leaving home is always a question of memory, of discontinuity between past and present." (Ahmed 1999, 93)

Partition and the Definitions of Home

In the Partition narratives, it is the memory of one's home that comes up strongly. It is not just the physical layout of a place that is invoked through memory but how our social relations are tied up with the spatial relations we inhabit. Just like writing in the English language is considered an act by the educated upper or middle class, it extends to the description of one's home as well where there are concrete descriptions of the houses possessed by those who were privileged enough to have a house to call their own.

But it is not an easy relationship. "...unless one is completely part of a language there are always limitations to one's use of a language because it is not bred in one's bones and so one misses certain subtleties; colloquialisms and dialects unfamiliar. And all this means that one cannot be completely at ease, can't play about with words without self-consciousness coming as a shadow between one and the reader." (Hosain 2013, 19)

As Bhabha (1990) observes in *Nation and Narration* it is through one's memory that nations are resurrected, and he likens it to narratives calling both of them (memory and nation) as lost in waters of time and losing their story of origin. He also discusses how national identities have been rendered fixed in a nation's official narratives and should be questioned/contested and looked at as if they are in a state of flux. In August 1947, at the cusp of Independence Attia Hosain recalls, "Together with the raising of the national flags and celebrations came the enforced migrations of more millions than ever before, of massacres and infinite loss. That we were in London did not lessen the anguish. It sharpened it. There was no family from which to draw strength no advice beyond rumour, and a cold definition of statistics." (Hosain 2013, 21)

Attia Hosain did not go either to India or to Pakistan.

"There was no renouncing of nationality. In 1947 everyone had the legal right to be British citizens...For personal reasons, and to avoid going against my conviction that there should not have been a Partition, I chose to stay with my children in England". (ibid.)

The important part to remember is that this was not a diaspora of choice but of circumstance. She began to write because she had an intense feeling for home as well as to "...console myself for the maiming sense of loss of identity." According to Salman Rushdie, in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1982), the origin of his 1981 book "Midnight's Children" lay in memories of a return visit to his childhood home in Bombay, when Rushdie realised how much he wanted to restore the past "to myself, not in the faded greys of old family snapshots, but whole in cinemascope and glorious technicolour." Rushdie had become almost a foreigner in his homeland. "I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim." (Rushdie 1991, 10)

But home is not a neutral space. Working up a memory of a home can also extend to imagining one's home country. So it does not remain limited to just the material existence of a structure that one previously lived in. It wraps up the idea of the country as a home one had to leave. Home becomes a place one returns to as well as a place one goes away from. The meaning is fluid; in Attia Hosain's case, she left her home in India but found one in England. Her writings did not forget the home she had left. Instead, they found themselves in her stories and her novel – *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

"At the same time, I could never have written so truthfully about Britain and the British as I did about India...Perhaps because I was always an observer, watching through glass, never really made to feel at home as in the eastern tradition. I could have described what I saw, but I could not penetrate that invisible barrier to enter into a 'self' other than the polite exterior.... Here I am, I have chosen to live in this

country which has given me so much. But I cannot get out of my blood the fact that I had the blood of my ancestors for eight hundred years in another country, and I am still that person.” (Hosain 2013, 26)

Migration and the Idea of Home

Time and again, it has been seen that the formation of fixed identities is never for good. With the passage of time, identities tend to change; they adapt and take on new elements. Degenerating or developing with time. When it came to women – they either discarded or identified with particular identity formations. One of the factors that, to a certain extent, changes this is migration. It is through migration that in order to live in the present, at times one has to give up on one’s past. Leaving one’s home takes on a new meaning for a woman who comes from a privileged class. A sense of belonging in a new country is then fashioned upon by the memories of one’s home that one carries with herself into a new place. What is interesting is that the writings that are produced from such spaces (away from home) have home or the absence of it at their core. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) in her essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” talks about the concept of being home as referring to the familiar, safe, protected boundaries whereas not being home is a matter of realising that home was an illusion of coherence. But the best-known critique of home in this context has been offered by Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty in the 1986 essay – “Feminist Politics: What’s home got to do with it?” where it states:

“Being home refers to the place where one lives within the familiar, safe, protected boundaries; not being home is a matter of realising that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of difference even within oneself. Because the locations acquire meaning and function as site of personal and historical struggle, they work against the notion of an unproblematic geographic location of home.” (Martin, Mohanty 1986, 196)

The space one occupies comes with its baggage of struggles at the historical and personal level. One must remember that searching for what one can call one’s home is not about finding a place that reminds of the past nor is home a defence mechanism against what the present can offer. But what it does is redefine what it means to belong to a particular place and search for one’s identity. For Attia, it took on an added colour, “There is that sense of belonging one never has except in one’s own country. Anywhere else, no matter how long you stay, they never let you forget you are alien. Indeed, it is a good thing, because it is on foreign soil that you are made more conscious of your own roots and consequently become more knowledgeable. And that is why in my writings, I talk of my country, present my people to others.” (Hosain 2013, 14)

Writing as a Migrant

UK's multicultural heritage and South Asian migration have a complex history. The citizens of the former colonies were given a right to residence in the UK under the Nationality Act (1948). Riots broke out in places like Liverpool and London after the arrival of the immigrants. There was a shift in what constituted a British identity. The immigration influx resulted in introducing two laws to curb it in 1962 and 1968. The migrant writer had arrived. One cannot overlook the impact that migrant literature has on its destination country. When one lives away from one's country, away from one's language, one's history, then one is inevitably forced to rely on memory to resuscitate home. It is the fragmented self – between the older self, the one that parted from their original setting, and the newly found self in a new country – that requires a balance. Attia had opted to live in Britain and in whose language she chose to write. Her papers included notes and cuttings documenting the flow of people from a colonial empire that had ended. She published a series of articles in 1965 in the London Times headed "The Dark Million" about how Britain could deal with immigration from India, Pakistan, West Indies and the recently decolonised African nations. There was a rise in racism by 1968, with Enoch Powell, British politician and Conservative Member of Parliament, opposing immigration from Commonwealth countries. Attia's unfinished novel *No New Lands, No New Seas* is set in England and depicts a wide spectrum of exiles showing that a single view of diaspora is not possible, and it takes different strands to show the complexity of this. The BBC eastern service around 1965 was divided into language sections, and Urdu was designated for Pakistanis only.

Having worked for BBC before this divide was introduced, Attia could not come to terms with this new change. *The sense of otherness was always there.* She again goes back to the Partition phase and comments: "It is never just a physical division but a cutting apart of human beings." (Hosain 2013, 26) Memory can be construed as an unreliable narrator given that it is coloured by the creative methods used to sustain it. Therefore, one can conclude that identity can become subjective. Subjective as it adds/discards and constructs a self according to the surroundings in which it survives. As an Indian writer who lives in uncharted territory, having read about the faraway lands only in books; on her arrival, the migrant writer searches for home in the narratives – narratives that remind her of home, that are relatable as a diasporic writer. A part of her remains Indian without her having to declare it, and while the new identity is negotiated and made peace with at a place that is not home, one looks around for familiarity.

The time around which the likes of Attia Hosain entered the uncharted territories became known for the multiple identities that it produced. It could not be bracketed as being only those of exiles. One needs to remember the distinction between being in exile and being a diaspora. In exile, the idea of alienation and loneliness is highlighted, whereas in diaspora, one's identity and the problem of location is highlighted. There is relocation in diaspora –

from one home to another. As Bhabha, in his essay “The World and the Home” points out, “...to be unhomed is not to be homeless” (Bhabha 1992,141). There is a remoulding of identities that takes place. At the same time, the fixed ideas of home and location are constantly questioned by the diasporic element. It was in Britain that Attia Hosain turned to writing fiction.

Language Politics

Attia’s stories had human relationships at their centre; her works dealt with the dilemmas one faced in the social and political context. As she observes, when she began writing she realised the cultural differences that manifested in the form of language. It was difficult to explain a particular word from her culture, as she could not find an equivalent in the host country’s language. “My own difficulties arose out of this, both in the handling of words and in the search for related images.” (Hosain 2013, 23)

She observes how there comes a point when the two cultures neither clashed nor merged. The silent gap existed which she had to confront a lot during her writing days. “For difficulties of expression arise not in dealing with emotions or experiences that are universal, they arise when they are related to a cultural pattern.” (ibid.) She faced difficulty writing dialogues, as she would think in one language but write them down in another. She realised how phrases that sounded natural in the mother tongue sounded artificial in the translation. She gives an example of how the word *Aap* denotes respect, *Tum* is used for younger ones, equals and inferiors, while *Tu* is used to address inferiors, loved ones and God. But conveying this in English, where these words converged into a *You*, was difficult.

For Attia, it was a struggle to write in a foreign language about a culture that demanded more than this language could offer. “In fact when you write in a foreign language, you begin to realise how much it is given life by the culture that is behind it. It is born, grows, changes – and dies – with the people who use it to communicate their thoughts and desires. Its words are created as symbols of those very thoughts and desires.” (Hosain 2013, 20). She goes on to say how writing in another language can create an image through words that would not have a single meaning affixed to them. It can take on several meanings depending on the cultural connotations that come along with the words that are used. So, if the writer has a different image in mind and the reader construes it as an image that suits him/her, then there is no complete understanding between the reader and the writer.

So, the question that arises at this juncture is whether writing is dictated by the demands placed on a writer to write in a particular manner or does the writer exercise her freedom to break through the stereotypes – rather play with them in order to express herself and defy the conventions which are expected of a South Asian writer. According to Yasmin Husain, “What is interesting to note is that the dynamics within the South Asian women’s diaspora

develop according to the historical circumstances and alternating environments in which it is situated. The creative works become sites within which active identification appears through their creative works; these women engage in constant practical ideological work – of marking boundaries, creating transnational networks, articulating dissenting voices – at the same time that they re-inscribe collective memories and utopian visions in their public ceremonies or cultural works.” (Husain 2016, 4) And the language in which these ideas are transmitted plays an important role.

Redefining the Concept of Home and the Idea of Migration since 1947

“At times home is nowhere. At times one only knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations.” bell hooks (hooks 1989, 19).

When one refers to one's home country, it is automatically assumed and eventually established that the speaker is away from his/her home. One has to look back at the time of Partition to see the shift in the literary conventions; the Progressives could no longer hold on to the ideals they had believed in. The Muslim Urdu writers were confronted with questions of their own cultural identity and had to look for answers in and beyond the subcontinent. As cultural existence gained importance, social and economic problems took a backseat. The creation of a new country, Pakistan, gave the writers an incentive to explore the past. Migration (*hijrat* in Urdu) became the central focus for these writers – for those who migrated as well as for those who did not. *Hijrat* then became an event that was used by many early writers – Intizar Husain, Nasir Kazmi, Qurratulain Hyder to name a few.

The first generation of these writers in the twentieth century tended to represent the struggles toward independence from British colonial rule. And it was through writing and works of fiction that one could reach out to multitudes or so it was assumed. “It is only with the written word that one can reach out to people to let them know that they are not alone. But that sense of aloneness is often heightened when people who have never ‘crossed frontiers’, or never needed to do so, deny one a sense of belonging anywhere. They are not aware of the sense of solitude one can experience when, alone in space, reaching out for those ‘speaking one's own language’ of tolerance and understanding, seeks to balance consciousness of one's roots with a sense of belonging to the whole world.” (Hosain 2013, 26)

Negotiating for One's Space in a New Setting

Coming to a new place, a woman brings with her, her ideas of culture and her location from where she is uprooted. And she uses this to negotiate her place in the new cultural setting of her host country. There are preconceived notions regarding where a person comes from. When it comes to their mannerisms, language, food choices, and dressing sense, it is *us*

versus them that comes into play. This is an uneasy territory that one has to tread on carefully. Regarding works of fiction by the diaspora, they are not only looking back at the past or lamenting about what has been lost. What is interesting is that they are constantly in conversation with their sense of home and the self. How does that affect the way one writes for the people at home and those abroad? How, for the West, the idea of being a South Asian brings under the ambit of this term (South Asian) multitudes of identities as being one? Therefore, it brings to light an important matter of whether the writers are trying to break that mould or abiding by it simply to please the audience in the West.

Another question is how does a diasporic writer come to terms with the culture and history of one's country in a new setting which despite offering a space to speak out yet cannot understand the cultural context in which things are explained. In the notes Attia made in her last years, she advises, "You must keep trying because it is essential as drawing breath – like exhaling. All the thoughts breathed out, and shaping themselves visibly after being inside cells of the brain, and then released. If you do not breathe out and hold your breath, you will suffocate. The thoughts to which you say you wish to give form are part of your life –force, as necessary for you to keep alive as your limbs, except that the death of thoughts is neither visible nor mourned by others." (Hosain, 2013,17)

According to Stuart Hall (1990), "We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always in context, positioned." One must not forget in all of this the versions of nostalgia that circulate. It becomes important to note that memory cannot always be considered reliable. One needs to note whose memory is reliable – whose past can be termed politically relevant. This is where the sense of to what extent personal and cultural identities are constructed and not simply given can be construed. We often use our baggage of memories rather than history to create what we consider our given identity. The stories that we narrate about ourselves are shaped by our memories. The role of memory cannot be taken away when one looks at the writings by Attia Hosain. But in an unknown country, there lies an unwritten rule. A place is like a patchwork quilt, and a delicate fabric of power runs across the place that cannot be disturbed. There are lines that cannot be crossed. Anyone who is not familiar with these unwritten rules stands outside of them.

Coda

It is not just negotiating with a language to write it on one's terms. It is also negotiating one's identity in a country that one shifts to. In Hosain's case, the decision was to not to be made to choose between the two countries – a country she had been born into and felt attached to (India) and a country that had been created and was expected to be considered as a home for Muslims from India (Pakistan). The predicament that one goes through to find a third space where one does not have to choose has been captured in Attia's essay, *Deep Roots*.

There is that sense of belonging one never has except in one's own country. Anywhere else, no matter how long you stay, they never let you forget that you are alien.

–Attia Hosain

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