

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

She published two books throughout her lifetime that provide a unique insight into the courtly life of India's Muslim aristocracy, and the divisions and changes which Partition brought about. Hosain began writing in a period which was mostly dominated by male writers and is known as one of the earliest female diaspora writers from the subcontinent. As Lakshmi Holmstrom points out in her essay 'Attia Hosain: her life and work', published on the 'Indian Review of Books' (Vol. 8 and 9, 1991), Hosain was at least a decade older than other South Asian women writers, such as Kamala Markandaya, who also settled in the UK, and Nayantara Sahgal.

In her 30s, Hosain began writing for newspapers such as 'The Pioneer' and 'The Statesman' which were both leading English newspapers in Calcutta. She was also affiliated with the Progressive Writers Movement, a group of socialist writers and artists such as Dr Rashid Jahan, Mehmood Zafar, Ahmad Ali and Mulk Raj Anand. She was heavily influenced by the ethos of the organisation and attended the first Progressive Writers' Conference. In addition, she was encouraged by the writer and political activist, Sarojini Naidu, to report the All-Indian Women's Conference in Calcutta in 1933. During this period she also began publishing a few of her short stories in various publications.

In 1947, during the Partition of India and Pakistan, Attia Hosain moved with her husband and two children to England, where she began to write professionally and became actively involved in broadcast journalism. She worked for the BBC Eastern Service in 1949 and presented a variety of shows for the regional services in Pakistan in Urdu, the Indian service in Hindi and the English regional service which was broadcast to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. She presented and participated in popular shows such as 'Brains Trust', 'Radio Roundabout' for women and children, a series called 'Asian Club' and also read for numerous plays. Her radio shows dealt with various topics such as literature, health, arts and culture and history, and include: 'A Dialogue with Loneliness' (1962), 'Pakistanis in Britain - life in Britain' (1961), 'Women in the World Today' (1960), 'English Writing - Caesar & Cleopatra' (1959) and the 'London Calling Asia'. She continued to work for the BBC until the early '70s.

In the 1950s and '60s Hosain published two books. 'Phoenix Fled', a collection of short stories, was published by Chatto and Windus in 1953. Her stories draw from her own knowledge of the social structure she grew up in and explore with great insight themes such as poverty, power, exploitation, pride, socialism, westernisation and tradition. As Anita Desai states in the introduction of Virago's 1998 edition of 'Phoenix Fled', 'Her greatest strength lies in her ability to draw a rich, full portrait of her society - ignoring none of its many faults and cruelties and capable of including not only men and women of immense power and privilege but, to an 'equal' extent, the poor who laboured as their servants'.

Her novel, 'Sunlight on a Broken Column', is also evocative of her own life experiences. Published in 1961 by Chatto and Windus, it traces the life of the main character, Laila, who grows up in a feudal, taluqdari, family. As Lakshmi Holmström states, 'Sunlight' is much more concerned to portray the 'taluqdari' family from within, and to chart the life of Laila, the protagonist, against history and change'.

Although Attia Hosain is best known for her literary achievements, she was also an actress and appeared in television and theatre productions. For example, she acted as the character 'Mrs. Sharma', in the West End production 'The Bird of Time', which opened at the Savoy Theatre on May 31st, 1961 in London.

Attia Hosain continued to give lectures and interviews at institutions such as the Nehru Centre in London and at the India International Centre in New Delhi, India, in 1987.

In 1988, Virago re-issued both of her publications which are currently in print.

Attia Hosain died on 25 January 1998 at the age of 84.