

The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 8 & Issue 1, (February, 2023)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 28th February, 2023

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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Article History: Abstract Received on: 15th November 2022 | Full Article Received on: 23th December 2022 | Revision received on: 9th January 2022 | Plagiarism Checked on 10th January 2022 | Peer Review Completed on: 10th February 2023 | Article Accepted on 11th February 2023 | First Published on: 28th February 2023

Research Article



Memory, Trauma and Partition: Reading Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha*

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.1.05>

Pages: 39-47

Abstract

In recent years the scholastic emphasis on the refugee narratives, which conventionally focused on the loss of lives, homes and resources, is now reimagined as stories of survival and

resurrection of people deprived of their homes. Nostalgia for a lost homeland often takes centre stage in refugee narratives. To be physically severed from a space internalised as the safest eternal abode and start afresh is a daunting task. Anchita Ghatak's translation of Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha, A Life Long Ago* narrates the life events of Dayamoyee, who chooses to revisit her past, deciding to write about the first ten years of her life in the East Pakistan village of Dighpait following the death of Majamda, a Muslim brotherly figure who sells his cows to come and meet her in India. The return to her childhood's blissful land unearthed several hidden memories that brought the politics of religion, caste, class, and gender to the forefront. Without paying attention to her aunt's continuous warnings not to mingle with the Muslim neighbours, Daya found it possible to eat, touch, and have fun with them in her childlike innocence. As the refugees arrive at Dighpait, her aunt remains unwilling to equate them with the native Muslim folk, the '*bhoomiputra*, the "sons of the soil". Besides the narrator, we also have Snehalata, Daya's aunt, her foster mother and a child widow. As she narrates how she grieved over the withdrawal of fish and other materialistic pleasures from her daily life rather than her young husband's demise, we are reminded of the unfair austerity imposed on them in contrast to the elderly widowers who had no restrictions and even remarried occasionally. Characters like Modi *bhabi*, the woman who lost her mind as her childhood companion Suresh Lahiri left for Hindustan; Mejobhabi, wife of Khalek, who had to be 'modernised' to join her husband, now a senior army officer in Pakistan; Sudhirdada, the effeminate male whose murder portrays a show of power in the village, and Gouri, an instance of widow-remarriage needs scholarly attention. The novel further mentions Daya's mother, the headmistress of a school in Hindustan, and Anita, a leading actress opposite Kishore Kumar, thus representing the educated, empowered women. The very moment of Daya deciding to write about her past is auspicious; it is the moment of finding one's voice, of illuminating the horrors of the past, and the moment of triumph and healing. Dipesh Chakraborty mentions two aspects of memory: "the sentiment of nostalgia" and the "sense of trauma", which pervades Dayamoyee's narrative, but for her, it is equally therapeutic. The proposed paper looks forward to understanding Daya's notion of her lost motherland and childhood and how the marginalised gender conceptualises home and rootedness. It proposes to analyse the politics of remembering, forgetting and retelling the stories from the point of the female subaltern who consciously buried her past and later chose to speak up, and in the process, portrayed a realistic picture of women during partition.

Keywords: Partition, Memory, Nation, Trauma, Refugee, Home, Nostalgia, Women, Sunanda Sikdar, *Dayamoyeer Katha*

Memory is an elusive entity. Our remembrance is often manipulated by our desire to create a dreamy sequence of the past we lived or our unconscious attempts to delete parts of our lives that are undesirable and must be shut behind in the deep caverns of antiquity. Romanticising the past is to give in to the idea of re-living it. It is born out of the deep emotion of holding on

to something that is long gone and cannot return. The joys of yesteryears are paired with the sense of having lost them. Similarly, erasing the past isn't an effortless act; it has to be painfully shrouded in deliberate forgetfulness to relieve the mind of past pain and atrocities.

The Partition in 1947 resulted in the building of much-unaddressed trauma in the people who once lived a secure and stable life in undivided India. Millions of men and women were displaced from their homes, murdered, raped, abducted, separated from their loved ones, lost and injured. Violence and bloodshed, especially among those living in harmony for centuries, left an indelible mark on the psyche of the new-born nations, which continues to be discussed and debated even today. Deepanjali Barua calls the partition "*opus de profectus*", "a work in progress" (Baruah 213). The memory of the lost past in the form of an idyllic safe space in the pre-Partition era returns to the survivor as either a romantic remnant or a traumatic experience which must be kept in the shadows. The past is never lost or obliterated from the psychological space; instead, it hides until it is stimulated to reveal itself by external events or internal causes. Dipesh Chakraborty characterises the memory of the Partition as inhabiting the "sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma" and "their contradictory relationship to the question of the past" (Chakraborty). Victims/Survivors of the Partition violence dwell within the polarised emotional states of positive 'nostalgia' and damaging 'trauma', oscillating between what has happened and the disbelief of the same. Arévalo puts forth how the twin acts of forgetting and remembering are connected by silence, where the latter may be visualised as the interpretation of the event in the present moment (Arévalo). This replaying of the former experience, looking back in time, may be traumatic or therapeutic. While most victims prefer to remain silent, their trauma buried deep within their hearts; others have spoken hesitatingly about it, mostly in front of a select audience, to overcome the agony.

Most partition narratives focus on the notion of a ruptured nation, and disruption of communal harmony between people who battled against the British imperialist together, the wreckage of dreams and hopes of a free country, of harmony and prosperity. However, those penned by women have garnered particular critical attention, as they voice concerns related to the agonising female experience in a land of turmoil and deceit. The violence perpetrated on the female body becomes the site of "parochial nation-state fantasies" (Sobti and Kumar), being marked by religious tattoos as well as the suicides committed by women to save themselves from such a fate. In fact, women left behind were conditioned to end their lives as they will no longer be accepted by their families. The discourse surrounding the female body and the honour of the community where the woman would rather die than survive as a partition victim permeated society back then. Narratives by Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa and Shauna Singh Baldwin are reminiscent of such ideological traps. Therefore, the purity of the woman's body gained supremacy over her life. The women during Partition thus suffered immensely, for they had become play-things in the hands of men who toyed with them, thinking that they were inflicting injury and humiliation on the enemy community. Having lost all traces of humanist attributes, women suffered the animalistic tortures of patriarchal violence.

Partition narratives have often been divided into those centering on the experiences of people migrating in the North and the migrations in the east. Critics have often suggested that there seem to be subtle differences between the writings on Punjab and Bengal partitions. The present paper looks to engage with the migrants to and from erstwhile East Pakistan. One of the major ways in which the partition compelled women to come out of their homes to earn for their families in the outside realm, that is, the Man's world. The new East Bengali refugee woman would then start to work in educational institutions, government offices, private firms etc. Those who lacked such high education vigorously engaged themselves into working as maids, making pickles, *papad*, *badi*, even *bidi*, paper packets and selling them. Many women got introduced to cinema and theatre; famous among those are the legendary Sabitri Chatterjee and Madhobi Mukherjee. Others who did not achieve such phenomenal success managed to act as 'extras' in films. As the situation demanded, the once *antahpurbasini* (woman living inside the house) stepped out of her house and of her comfort levels to earn a living. Initially this was a compulsion, but with time, it added to her identity and became an integral part of her being. However, needless to say, the story was not the same for all women. Nevertheless, it gave rise to a group of upper class upper caste educated *bhadramahilas*, the intellectual woman. Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyee Katha* is the tale of such a woman who chooses to write about her experiences after the past memories engulf her at the unexpected death of a brotherly figure, *Majamda*, in *Dighpait*, her long-lost home. The work translated by Anchita Ghatak bears a befitting title: *A Life Long Ago*. It seems as if the joys and horrors of her yesteryears have huddled together to present themselves at a time when she desperately wants to get rid of them. Denying their existence for thirty years, Daya unloads her burden, viewing the tragic news as a 'release' and relief.

The novel begins with Daya finding solace in the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Thereafter, the flashback happens, and we are taken to the picturesque childhood of the innocent younger girl Daya who lives with her foster mother, whom she calls *ma*. The apparent class difference between the two is starkly observed as Daya consumes "fine-grained kalojeera rice" while Majam has "plump hanshol rice" (Sikdar 19). The disparity in their status does not stop her from being his close confidant. She goes on tours, seated on his shoulders, to faraway places. The attachment between these two, irrespective of their age, social status and religion, must be seen in the context of the otherwise volatile environment. We also meet characters like *Radhiadi*, *Jhumiyadi* and consume their food, which was forbidden by her foster mother. The simple Daya would eat, nevertheless, and later write the name of the god on her slate, which served as atonement for her sins. *Radhia* and *Jhumia* will later steal rice while working in the fields. For them, there is no fear of sinning. Their struggle for survival has taught them to be unbothered by the manmade divisions of society:

The only faith we subscribe to is that of saving our lives. If we don't survive, what will we do with either religion or caste. We are Hindus, who wear *sindur* and we have *Ganesh* and *Lakshmi* in our homes. However, we don't know which caste we belong

to. My father-in-law survived the famine because he fed on rice gruel in a Muslim home (Sikdar 33).

The poor women faced with the reality of a life driven by hunger and poverty have uttered the undeniable philosophy of living. However, others were not so enlightened. On the occasion of Ranudi's marriage, the groom's family was offended with the arrangements. They stirred an uproar citing the payment of the meat being made by a Muslim. Even on a trip organised by Nitaida, Daya and *ma* would travel on a separate boat, so that the eatables will not be contaminated by being touched by the lower caste neighbours. The narrative though primarily a nostalgic return to deep-delved memories, does not always portray a rosy picture of the quaint countryside; it critiques the class and caste disparity, religious differences, untouchability and a stringent hierarchized society that refuses to change its mannerisms.

The native land occupies a central part in this novel. Daya's *ma* regards the land as their mother, whom they are forced to give away to strangers. She is reluctant to sell it to the outsiders, or *ripuchis*, as she calls them. Initially, Daya considered them to be their enemies, the word '*ripu*' meaning adversary in her native tongue. Interestingly, it is only the migrant Muslims that troubles her foster mother; she refuses to compare them with the "sons-of-the-soil Muslims" (Sikdar 27). The general air of mistrust hung all over Dighpait as most original inhabitants refused to associate with the 'foreign', 'rootless' refugees. Dipesh Chakraborty mentions two words used to mention refugees: '*sharanarathi*' and '*udvastu*'. Being driven from one's *vastubhita*, a patrilineal connection across generations, was considered a gross misfortune (Chakrabarty). Daya, her *ma* and all other migrants carry with them the burden of leaving behind their ancestral homes; their memories become both a blessing and a boon. The refugee is stuck in the memory of the home, aggravating his present state of homelessness.

The native homeland being the epitome of perfection may be construed as another reaction to the unforeseen violence permeating the then contemporary scenario. Where neighbours who have known each other for generations, and friends have turned foes in such short time periods, the memory of the earlier peaceful days serves as an idyllic image that was, but can never manifest in the physical realm again. Sudeshna Majumdar refers to such images as "space(s) of compensation" (Majumdar 163). The scarred psyche of the Partition refugees finds solace in such spaces, an archive of bygone days and lost human relations. There remains a possibility for these refugees to romanticise the past, or paint an exaggerated version of reality. Narratives built on memory, especially of trauma victims, therefore might seem unreliable historical sources by academicians or those in requirement of authentic data. However, their value as individual deliberations on a historical event might be considered. It is also important to remember, that majority of such unverifiable documentation of life events will belong to the marginalised sections of society. Therefore, eliminating such narratives built around the memory of a trauma victim just because they are subjective and therefore unreliable as historical sources may lead to an elite hierarchized gathering of partition experiences. Majumdar emphasises the significance of such writings, including memoirs:

Personal bias and exaggerations notwithstanding, these memoirs, with their rich resource of documentation and analysis of facts, with the expression of private emotion and intimate tones, are capable of creating a subaltern version of the great historical event that is Partition. (Majumdar 165)

The narrator of the present work is undoubtedly an upper class privileged individual. However, as mentioned earlier, we find her empathising with the less fortunate. She recalls her days at Dighpait with adorable tenderness but does not seem blind to the oppression of others. Daya's foster mother, Snehalata, a sixty year old widow, offers to take care of her besides the land and cattle the family owned on this side of the border. She serves as a burning example of how women, especially widows, were pushed to the margins of society, leading miserable lives. The memories of her past married life revolves around, unfortunately, the death of her husband. When the corpse is brought inside the house, she can barely recognise the grown-up man. Daya recounts how the dead body seemed to distract the senses of her *ma*:

Ma had seen deaths in the village from epidemics, she had seen the Partition of the country, she had witnessed great trauma. Despite all this, she continued to be puzzled by the body of this young man. (Sikdar 39)

The young woman, bewildered at the incessant mourning at the death of her husband in the house, was reminded of the widowed lifestyle without fish, the white colourless attire and shaving her head. The memory of the dead husband brings back nothing, but the mourning and funeral arrangements and her mean selfish desires of being unable to consume the delicacies or wear different hues. The spousal remembrance arouses no love, no emotion; rather, it is the initiation of a life that holds no pleasure.

The character of Bhuli *pishima* is another instance of how the author recalls the gender atrocities on women, especially widows, in her youth. Fuelled by her intense desire to be literate, the self-taught Bhuli *pishima* had written to be admitted to an institution that taught young widows. The transformation that challenged the orthodoxy of the then contemporary society is evident as the widows taught by the Mitra sisters could be educated, work or re-marry if they wanted. However, in a cruel turn of events, the family members physically assaulted Bhuli who had fainted and was later nursed back by Daya's foster mother. It is interesting to note that while remembering the past, Daya simply does not provide merely the rosy details; she criticises a society that allows Bhuni *pishima*'s elderly father-in-law to marry thrice, after the demise of his son and son-in-law; but compels the young widow to live a life of austerity and penance despite no fault of her own. Shikdar's memoir, in this case, is not a re-telling of events but a critique of a social structure paralysed by its own double-faced attitude. Later in life, Bhuli *pishima* will travel to most religious shrines all over India, living a minimalistic life with almost little or no material requirements.

Sudhir *dada* was another gender minority at Dighpait, an effeminate male. He enjoyed wearing fashionable attire and meticulously adorned himself. One day, as per the orders of an influential villager, he entered Usha *kakima*'s room and was beaten for that. Later, on revealing the person who set him upto this, his body was found along the river Bansa. The socially

influential people remained unquestioned due to their power, thus justice was denied to poor Sudhirdada: “Although there was the stunned silence of grief all over the village, no one protested the death. The weak villagers feared the power of wealth and influence” (Sikdar 69).

The novel further gifts several intriguing characters. Modibhabi, whose separation from a childhood friend Suresh Lahiri drove her mad. She had interwoven their memories onto the blanket she promised to sew for Suresh. The *kantha* that never reached him becomes a storehouse of their happier days when Madini had not lost her sanity due to grief. Most of the time, when we imagine trauma victims, we envision those that were compelled to leave their homes. Dayamoyee Katha presents the other side of the picture, where those who were left behind go through similar agony. While the former mourn the physical loss of their land, acquaintances and resources, the latter cling on to the geographical spaces devoid of the warmth of yesteryears. We see Mejobhabi, the young wife who clung to her brother-in-law in fear of having to fly to Karachi, where her husband Khalek was employed. The trauma of an airplane journey and adapting the ways of a modern wife seemed to bother her. However, this was a momentary reaction, and she later assumes the role of an urbanised woman, in line with the wishes of Khalek. Trauma manifests in quite a different manner in Gouri, the young widow who gets married again to Monish. Though her husband faces social ostracisation and yet decides to legally accept her as his wife, Gouri is unable to detach herself from socio-cultural dictums and continues to dress and eat like a widow. In a bizarre twist, the subaltern female continues to live in her misery, though life presents her an opportunity to quit the same. The trauma of her past life refuses to release her soul, and the “ghost of widowhood” (Sikdar 156) continues to torment her.

Dayamoyee, after her migration to India, stopped thinking about her past in East Bengal. She completely submerges the memories of the first decade of her life and decides to live like they never existed. However, she is not at all exempt from the trauma and sense of alienation that accompanies her every moment. Daya felt like an outsider. On visiting her father, who is a headmaster, she is able to state the names of her family and forefathers with correct salutations. This impresses her father, who otherwise has a strict no-nonsense demeanour. One of her brothers taunts her, saying once India decides to stop the rivers from flowing into erstwhile East Bengal, the latter will have no access to water. Daya, who had revelled in her land as the fertile, well-watered land, is rendered furious at such assumptions. As she grows up, she understands that her family in India adore her; but she can never feel close enough to them. Her home is the left-behind haven, Dighpait. Hindustan is the land she has migrated to; the sense of belonging and ownership that she enjoyed in the former was lost. Alienated in a new space, Daya also resembles a refugee, at least psychologically: she is compelled to seek refuge in art and poetry. Daya writes how she felt the discomfort of being a stranger in a foreign land despite living there for more than four decades:

Keeping my childhood hidden and secret, I have gone through most of my life feeling like a crow in peacock feathers. I have lived, and been deeply involved in a small town in West Bengal for more than forty years now, yet I feel like an interloper here. It’s as

if I don't belong. It's as though I don't deserve the riches of Rabindranath's works, and as if it's wrong for me to be mesmerised by the songs of Amir Khan or Bhimsen Joshi. (Sikdar 50)

Dayamoyee's memories are merely submerged, not drowned. The subconscious adherence to the past also keeps the memories alive, though hidden:

Those who deal with the workings of the human mind will perhaps be able to say why I have clung to the memories of the first ten years of my life and why they are so dear to me. Where had I hidden the rough and ready notes of folk music like jaari, shaari and bhawaiya; and the plaintive notes of the namaaz 'la ilahi illaha muhammadur rasullah'? I had buried them in some deep corner of my mind. (Sikdar 50)

On her way to becoming Sunanda, the essence of the rural Dayamoyee had to be banished into the innermost quarters of oblivion. However, she was never omitted; she lingered on the outskirts of nostalgic memories. To remember is to remain conscious of the pain, but to remember is equally important:

. . . while it may be dangerous to remember, it is also essential to do so—not only so that we can come to terms with it, but also because unlocking memory and remembering is an essential part of beginning the process of resolving, even of forgetting. (Butalia 358)

Sunanda's memoir is, in a sense, raw and real. It chooses not to glorify or disdain. It is, more importantly, an act of self-healing. The narrator confesses not to mention Dignipait to her foster mother again. The silence between the two persists, until after the death of Snehalata, Daya breaks it to voice her deepest darkest secrets. This moment of choosing to unburden her thoughts and reveal the trauma of her past is her way of finally coming to terms with it. The memory of bygone days that torments her finds an outlet in her writing, which then becomes a therapeutic act. Throughout the novel, we see snippets of Daya's life and are mesmerised by the innocence and honesty of her work. The adult Sunanda re-lives her life as Dignipait's Dayamoyee, her *ma's* darling daughter, the simple belle of the East Bengali countryside after years of struggling in vain trying to erase the memories of former years. The narrative, therefore, is one that offers solace to a bereaved heart overburdened with remembrance and reluctant to let go and move on from the life, lived long ago.

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