The Context: Journal of English Studies
Volume 12, Issue 6, September 2025
ISSN: 2349-4948
www.thecontext.in

Article

Nostalgia for a Lost Homeland: A Reading of Partition Memories in Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha*

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Accepted version published on 5th September 2025

DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17060017

Abstract: The partition of 1947 of the Indian subcontinent was a cataclysmic event in history, leading to the formation of two nations, namely India and Pakistan. The national rupture resulted in migration, displacement, communal riots, and violent acts of massacres, abductions, and the rape of women. Fictional writings, memoirs, and oral histories offer subjective accounts of the devastating effects of that social and political upheaval. *Dayamoyeer Katha* is a partition memoir of Bengal written by Sunanda Sikdar. The memoir, set in Dighpait, recounts her memories of the first ten years of her life spent there. Dighpait became part of East Pakistan after the partition. The memoir focuses on her experiences with social life, customs, taboos, prejudices, and the subtle demographic changes. Sikdar's painful experience of leaving her 'desh', Dighpait, is the central trope of her memoir. In "One Who Stayed Back: Sunanda Shikdar's Partition Memoir *Dayamoyeer Katha*," Debjani Sengupta states, "In Bangla partition memoirs, elements of the pastoral are used to recreate a history of its people" (Sengupta 10). This paper aims to explore how the memoir unearths painful insights into the trauma of displacement through the perceptive understanding of a girl-child narrator. It also critiques the formation of two nations that have complicated Sikdar's sense of belonging and identity.

Keywords: partition; migration; homeland; memory; nostalgia; trauma of displacement

Introduction

The partition of India was a harrowing experience in the socio-political history of the Indian subcontinent. The demarcation of territorial boundaries was arbitrary and absurd, leading to mass migration, dislocation, loss of homeland and material possessions, ruthless sectarian violence, massacre, abduction, and rape of women. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India,*

observes, "Mass scale migration, death, destruction, loss - no matter how inevitable Partition seemed, no one could have foreseen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed" (Butalia 188). Official history provides a comprehensive and objective account of the partition. It has failed to explore "the 'underside' of this history - the feelings, the emotions, the pain and anguish, the trauma, the sense of loss, the silences in which it lay shrouded" (Butalia 347). Consequently, "...there was a contradiction in the history that we knew, that we had learnt, and the history that people remembered" (Butalia 350).

Fictional and literary representations, as well as oral narratives and memoirs, present a subjective view of the 1947 partition. The horror and trauma unleashed by partition violence constitute the oeuvre of partition literature. Fictional partition writings centred on women critique the shameful aspect of gendered violence and its tremendous psychological impacts on them. In "A Nation Partitioned or Homes Divided? The Severed Relationship between the State, Community and Abducted Women in the Post-Partition Period," Rachna Mehra explains, "The literary representations have successfully articulated the manifold experiences triggered by partition. A creative writer does not make conspicuous attempts to be historically authentic or politically correct while exploring the human dimensions of such a grave tragedy. Thus, literature on partition as a creative expression of a specific memory or experience has paved an alternative way through which an individual tries to grapple with the past. An interesting feature of many such narratives is the sensitive mapping of the inner terrain of the female psyche, which brings out her unspoken pain and trauma" (Mehra 1394).

Memory texts are an integral part of Bengali Partition literature. Memory acts as a link between the past and the present. In "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition", Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that there are "two aspects" to this memory: "the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma, and their contradictory relationship to the question of the past" (Chakrabarty 2143). Life writings or memoirs give an account of the experiences of those people who have survived partition. In "Nostalgia of 'Desh', Memories of Partition," Anasua Basu Raychaudhury states that although memories of individual beings "may be subjective in nature, these could act as a rich archive of the experience of displacement" (Raychaudhury 5653-5654). While musing on the relevance of excavating "Partition memories," Butalia argues, "Krishna Sobti, a writer and a Partition refugee, once said that Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember. However, does this mean then that we must not remember it? Over the years, despite many uncertainties, I have become increasingly convinced that 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, perhaps even of forgetting" (Butalia 357-358).

There are a few narratives about partition that depict children's experiences after the event. Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* is a memoir of the partition of Bengal. Sikdar wrote it in Bengali, and Anchita Ghatak translated it into English under

the title *A Life Long Ago*. In the memoir, Dayamoyee shares her memories of the first ten years (from 1951 to 1960) of her childhood, spent in her ancestral village of Dighpait in East Pakistan. Her parents were living in India at the time. She was raised by her aunt, who became her foster mother: "My foster mother was my father's cousin, a pishi ma or aunt. I had always known her as Ma or my mother" (Sikdar 11). Daya's idyllic childhood was disrupted after the partition when they were forced to migrate to India. In "One Who Stayed Back: Sunanda Shikdar's Partition Memoir *Dayamoyeer Katha*," Debjani Sengupta comments, "Partition memoirs in Bangla are replete with symbols of loss and journeys. They are agonizing representations of the deep trauma of homelessness and voyages across borders into terrains of hope and disillusionment" (Sengupta 10). Sikdar's memoir centres on the trauma of being uprooted from her homeland, leaving a lasting scar on her mind. It contrasts her sweet childhood memories with the painful memories of partition.

Sunanda recounts the memories through the lens of Daya. Dayamoyee was fondly called Daya by her mother and the villagers. She asserts, "Later in my life, I had two other names - given to me by my father and my birth mother - Kakan and Sunanda. The rustic Dayamoyee still lives within me, even though she may be buried under these two other names" (Sikdar 89). The narrative revolves around the years after the partition of India. Following the partition of 1947, Dighpait became a part of East Pakistan. Daya was a sensitive girl. She understood that the society around her was changing after the partition, resulting in mass migration. The Hindus were leaving for Hindustan: "However, during this time, I also understood something that no one had explained to me. I could sense a great disquiet all around. Our familiar world was changing very fast. As I began taking baby steps and ventured to come down the stairs leading to the courtyard, I saw Palu da's family home literally sink into the surrounding land. All their possessions were piled on a bullock cart – the pots and pans, the flat stool made of wood from the jackfruit tree, huge bundles of homemade snacks, pillows and mattresses tied in large rugs, and of course, several suitcases and trunks. I had seen something very similar when Kanai and Balai, who lived in the house behind us, left. Moreover, of course, people would be howling and weeping...Standing by the road, I would see such things almost every day. They left, one and all. Biswas Thakuma, Khuki pishima of the Ghoshes and Jethi ma from Choddogawnda" (Sikdar 11-12). Daya was mature enough to observe that "...going to Hindustan meant travelling with all your possessions" (Sikdar 13). Daya found that the village was eventually teeming with the refugees. Her foresight enabled her to understand that she was going to be one when they left Dighpait.

Daya was aware that her mother was preparing to leave Dighpait, their 'desh': "Also, it was becoming quite clear to me that with every passing day we were getting closer to leaving" (Sikdar 21). A home or a 'desh' is not only a physical territory for Daya. It is an emotional anchor for her. Little Daya was not willing to leave her homeland. She asked her mother, "So why are we going?... We are happy here, in our home. You are the one who wants to die on the banks of the Ganga'' (Sikdar 23). Daya's mother, a pious woman, tried to establish it as a punishment sent by God: "The country has been divided, we will have to leave Dighpait, our village. God has punished us

cruelly" (Sikdar 153). The trauma of displacement was inexplicable, and little Daya promised not to talk of it any more when they were leaving their 'desh': "I looked at Ma's face that day and promised myself that I would never again speak of home—of desh, our land. Ma and I never spoke of desh again with each other. This is one promise I was able to keep, and till the day that Ma died I did not say a word about home—about desh, our land" (Sikdar 172).

Dayamoyeer Katha narrates the emotional turmoil that one undergoes after being displaced from the homeland. When Daya migrated to India, she lost her former sense of belonging. She was loved and adored fondly, but she could never be the one with her family: "With every passing year, I realised that my brothers and sisters and my parents were very good people. However, I knew that they would never be part of my deepest joys and sorrows because I had my own private world which I could never tell them about" (Sikdar 133). She felt alienated and sought refuge in art and poetry. Daya confesses: "After being flung from that side of the border to this side, I had soon found a trusted refuge. Gradually, the foundations of that shelter grew stronger. I grew close to that person, and he to me. Like he was to many other people, Rabindranath became the refuge I clung to, my strength" (Sikdar 1). Although she has spent more than four decades in this country, she feels like a stranger in an alien land: "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…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 43).

The memoir draws a sharp distinction between the idea of 'desh' and the concept of the nation. Raychaudhury argues, "While the nation is largely an imagined category, desh is frequently revisited in memories. The nation, therefore, may be a product of imagination, but desh is a concrete but distant reality for the uprooted as it remains encapsulated in their past" (Raychaudhury 5654). The Bengali word 'desh' refers to one's native land. It embodies the very idea of "*vastuvita*": "The word *vastu* used here to mean 'home' is a Sanskrit word of Vedic vintage…In Bengali, the word is often combined with the word bhita (or bhite), a word connected to the Sanskrit word bhitti, meaning 'foundation'. The idea of 'foundation' is in turn tied to the idea of 'male ancestry' so that the combined word *vastuvita* reinforces the association between patriliny and the way in which one's dwelling or home is connected to the conception of foundation" (Chakrabarty 2144). Therefore, 'desh' refers to one's permanent place of residence. Raychaudhury further elaborates this concept, stating, "…desh has a concept of permanent dwellings associated with the idea of land. Probably that is why in English the corresponding word of *desh* would mean homeland, motherland" (Raychaudhury 5657). Dighpait is Daya's 'desh' and it will always remain so. Daya knows that she can never return to her 'desh'. The yearning to return to her childhood haven, where her sense of belonging is deeply rooted, evokes feelings of nostalgia. Hindustan, where she

ISSN 2349-4948

has been living for more than forty years, is an abstract idea. Dighpait, her home, her 'desh', is a tangible place. Unfortunately, it is "now only sustained by memories" (Raychaudhury 5653).

The concept of 'desh' is also very culture-specific. Raychaudhury opines that "The notion of desh...helps establish a close relationship between the self and a particular geographical space" (Raychaudhury 5658). While exiled from 'desh' for many years, the uprooted people try to "maintain a close psychological connection with their home. Their idea of lost home generates a feeling of nostalgia. While searching for a new home away from home, the cultural bond of these hapless people with their foundations gets strengthened through their nostalgia and their memories" (Raychaudhury 5658). Daya fondly cherishes her childhood days spent in Dighpait and feels a strong association with this place.

While most partition narratives illustrate the devastating consequences of communal violence, Sikdar's memoir depicts a time when there was no animosity between the Hindus and the Muslims in Dighpait. Daya was growing up in a society where communal harmony prevailed and people of different communities were bound together by love, respect, and compassion. They were sharing moments of joy and sorrow. Even after the partition, the warmth of their relationship did not fade away. It is very significant to note that "Dighpait had never seen riots" (Sikdar 47). Despite caste and community-based discrimination, there were occasions when people of different communities stepped out from these constraints and enjoyed together: "People got carried away playing football with grapefruit or jambura, and you couldn't keep the players—who were passionate about the game—apart on grounds of caste or community. Again, I had also seen that people forgot about caste, community, and untouchability when they sat together under a large tree listening to the *Quran*, which they called kitab, meaning book, or to Hindu religious texts, totally engrossed in the stories, enchanted by tales" (Sikdar 122). Daya recounted when it was time to bid adieu to their homeland, the entire village came to see them off: "Our courtyard was teeming with people and they were crying loudly...Everyone began to cry as we got on the train" (Sikdar 171-172). Sengupta aptly remarks, "Like the stitches of the kantha, the relations between Hindus and Muslims are invisible and interdependent; weaving together a sense of reliance, a syncretic tradition of living in the same land, loving the same seasons and experiencing the small joys of togetherness" (Sengupta 14).

The memoir offers a warm portrayal of love, affection, respect, and empathy between a Hindu girl and a Muslim old man who used to work in their field. Daya admits, "...Majam, my Dada, was the person I depended on the most, throughout my childhood (Sikdar 3). Daya recalls, "As a child, it was my greatest delight to stroll by the river Bansa perched on Dada's shoulders" (Sikdar 5). Although Dada was illiterate, he encouraged Daya to read. Daya was enthusiastically performing the ritual of fasting during Ramzan with her Dada. She did not know the prayers but joined her Dada and others during the namaz. After many years, Dada, who was "a landless peasant, with no other possessions except some oxen and his plough," came to visit Daya in India, selling his cow (Sikdar 3). This is an act of pure and unconditional love that surpasses

ISSN 2349-4948

the barriers of narrow communalism. Sengupta observes, "Longing is the open trope of this memoir: a desire to recreate a subterranean memory of a lost childhood that will make sense of everything that comes after it. The rapport that Daya shares with her Dada is also a manifestation of this intense desire to belong. It is this hermeneutic of yearning that encloses the narrative with such a powerful trope of the lost pastoral; it creates a circle of love and compassion that the memoir constructs intelligibly" (Sengupta 12).

Daya admits in the opening chapter of her memoir that the pain of displacement from her 'desh' was so traumatising that Daya tried to erase the memories of those ten years: "I was completely unwilling to acknowledge the years between 1951 and 1960" (Sikdar 2). She did not want to listen to the news of East Pakistan or talk about it: "…I'd block all this out and pretend that I had no memories of the ten years before 1961" (Sikdar 2). She acknowledges that the attempt to suppress the memories was so deliberate that "If tears threatened to well up from deep inside," she would "chastise" herself (Sikdar 2). The memories were buried inside for many years. When she received the news of the demise of her Dada, an old Muslim man with whom little Daya shared a close bond, she was finally able to confront her past, and felt an urge to write about those memories of her early childhood: "I was suddenly aware that there had been an immense pain within me, an anguish that, over the years, had solidified. I felt it all melt away, as though it had been freed of the weight of gravity. I could feel a sense of weightlessness, almost as if I were floating above the ground. For thirty years, I had been oblivious to the frozen tears inside. Moreover, those tears were now streaming down my face" (Sikdar 1). Writing became a tool to express her emotional wound and seek solace to cope with the loss that was deep and definite.

The memoir weaves "a personal history of the Partition" (Sengupta 14). Images of the past are drawn in the form of flashbacks. Sikdar's nostalgic recollection is soaked with the warmth of yesteryears. Sengupta observes, "This autobiography is history writing in the form of a memoir. Memory's invisible grip evokes nostalgia, and it is a vital ingredient of the text…In a sense, it is an idealistic history that will always hover over the material history of animosity that Partition articulated and made visible. Dayamoyee's memories, mobile and unmoored, bring alive the threads of a remembered history of love that was once true and real" (Sengupta 15).

Dayamoyeer Katha does not depict the brutal violence caused by partition or the atrocities faced by women through abduction, rape, prostitution, conversion, forced marriage, or honour killings. Instead, it focuses on issues related to migration, displacement, the loss of home, identity crisis, and feelings of disconnection and alienation from belonging. Sengupta argues, "The memoir goes against the canonical Partition narratives of exile, resettlement and rehabilitation; instead, it can be seen as a project of recovery of a way of life now irrevocably lost, yet whose memories have strong resonances and influence on issues of identity and belonging" (Sengupta 9). Unlike the grand history of partition, the memoir is intensely personal. This paper explores a female subaltern, Dayamoyee's understanding of her lost homeland and childhood through the politics of remembering, forgetting, and retelling stories.

ISSN 2349-4948

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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