

Discourse of Dispossession in *Dayamayeer Katha*

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Abstract: Sunanda Sikdar in *Dayamayeer Katha* reveals two aspects of partition memory: first, the sense of trauma, thus she wants to forget or conceal them; and second, the sentiment of nostalgia, the element of attachment. This paper intends to highlight how, conceived within a sense of trauma and tragedy, *Dayamayeer Katha* maintains a completely different relationship to the event of partition of Bengal, leading to Indian independence. The paper also endeavours to argue that, contesting Foucault's notion of 'knowledge as power', the manner in which Sunanda Sikdar has labored to forget her past, even at the extent of substituting her public-identity from Dayamayee to Sunanda, that in turn has enabled her in a kind of myth-making, shows how projected/manufactured ignorance is also one of the aspects of power.

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Scripts and plans serve as guides for individual acting and become indispensable in the pursuit of complex social activities (Doleđzel, 65). A plan is made up of general information about how actors achieve goals (Schank and Abelson, 70). Scripts are "organized by goal structures that are used to make sense of the need for them" (Schank and Abelson, 227). According to Alan Palmer: "In a role theme, a particular actor's goals are determined by his role. . . . Once a role theme is invoked, it sets up expectations about goals and actions" (*Fictional Minds*, 132–33). The preface to *Dayamayeer Katha* explains the intention of the writer's lettering of her remembrance: "My childhood memories, that are exclusively mine, would remain perpetually silenced within—such was my plan. But with time, the burden of reminiscence became too much to bear with; the only way out left was scripting them down". These statements of Sunanda Sikdar reveal two aspects of partition memory: first, the sense of trauma, thus she wants to forget or conceal them; and second, the sentiment of nostalgia, the element of attachment. A traumatized memory, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty, has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. A historical narrative would lead up to the event, explaining why it happened and why it happened at that very time. For historical analysis of the event of partition, the event itself would have to be fundamentally open to explanation. Conceived within a sense of trauma and tragedy, *Dayamayeer Katha* maintains a completely different relationship to the event of partition of Bengal, leading to Indian independence. Sunanda Sikdar does not centrally come to it in her narrative but only refers to that as her backdrop—the author who confesses that she has been trying to forget the ten years of her life in East Bengal, seems to be in a perennial sense of stunned disbelief at the fact that it could happen at all, that she could be adrift in the sudden and

cruel manner from the familiar world of her childhood. There is no clue of Hindu-Muslim combat that we have been receiving from the historians—no traces of the questioning, why did the Muslim population of East Bengal turn against their Hindu neighbours? Rather, in order to cope up with the trauma, may be taking advantage of her self-conscious labour of 'forgetting', she goes adding on the elements of nostalgia—Dayamayee, during her childhood stay at the village in East Bengal, almost becomes Wordsworth's Lucy. All seems not only to be well, but excessively well. Not only her foster-mother, but almost all of her relatives have bighas of land with abundant food stuff, cattle, wealth. Her relationship with the Muslim dada again is akin to Wordsworth-Dorothy, who teaches her to ask 'duwa' not only for entire humanity, but also for animals, birds and even for the plants:

"Dada, what did you tell to Allah?"

Dada replied: "I told Khudatala, for all those whom You have sent to this world, provide them with enough of rain, give them food, keep their offspring well. People, animals, plants, insects—take care of each of them." (12)

This apolitical narrative makes this memoir a safe text compared to others on partition. May be a sort of political silence is required for a book on Bengal partition to become prize-worthy (*Dayamayee Katha* has received Ananda Purashkar). For there are bulks like *Strangers of the Mist* by Sanjoy Hazarika that deal with the problem of immigration even after years of partition, from Bangladesh to North East India and ULFA in Assam or ATTE in Tripura already have enough documents to justify their reactionary politics against the refugee Bengalees:

If that level of migration was maintained between 1974 and 1990, then the out-migrants from Bangladesh could not be less than 1.76 million. This would make a total of not less than 7.6 million migrants and perhaps as much as 8.6 million. (Hazarika, 30)

Hence, *Dayamayee Katha* becomes the most safe text that can at once help the victims to relate themselves emotionally with their bygone days, without providing much proof of the socio-political turmoil. The concluding lines of *Dayamayee Katha* are equally significant: "That day, looking at my maa's face, I had promised myself never to utter of my desh. We never talked of our homeland. Ultimately, I was able to keep my promise. Till my mother's death, on no account have I spoken of my country." These lines disclose the author's equating of her residential village with her *desh* (nation). In Bengali, *udvastu* is the word used for a refugee, that is someone who is homeless. But homeless for *udvastu* is used with a special connotation, in a unique political sense. *Vastu*, the original Sanskrit word meaning 'foundation of a house', becomes *bhita* (or *bhite*) in Bengali—often the combined word *vastubhita* is used. In Bengali, the temporary dwelling/newly built house is referred to as *basha* (Dipesh Chakrabarty has made elaborate discussion on this in his essay) and the permanent/ancestral house is *vastubhita* or *bari*. In Bengalee rituals like marriage, the reference is always given to this *bari*, which is often prefixed with *desh* and is called *desherbari*. Thus, *bari* would also be exchangeable with the word *desh*, signifying one's native land, or

homeland. So far the East Bengalees are concerned, the idea of nation is related to that particular region from which they have been uprooted—maximum a district/village to minimum the locality or the *bari* itself. In *Dayamayeer Katha*, *desh* becomes almost synonymous to her ancestral house, for all the description about her girlhood recollection is centered round that particular house and its neighboring houses. For a change, Sunanda Sikdar talks of the house-holds of her mother's relatives whom she had occasionally visited. Here again, emerges out what Partha Chatterjee calls the binary of the 'home' and the 'world'. In an influential essay Partha Chatterjee examines the 'nationalist resolution of the women's question' ("The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question", 233). He begins by pointing out that "The 'women's question' has been a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal." (*The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, 116). However,

What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate toward the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of public passion ... The over-whelming issues are now directly political ones—concerning the politics of nationalism. (*The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, 116).

Chatterjee then argues that nationalism resolved the women's question in terms of its own 'preferred goals' and it did this by 'situating the "women's question" in a inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state.' (*The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-colonial Histories*, 117). Briefly, his argument goes something like this: nationalists have constructed a dichotomy revolving around *ghar* (home) and *bahir* (the world) which could be transposed onto a homologous dichotomy of outer and inner spheres of sovereignty. The outer sphere is the domain of political action and material interests and it is here that the superiority of the west as represented by the colonial state is recognized. The inner sphere of sovereignty, however, is concerned with the 'spiritual' as opposed to the material, and here the east is clearly superior. This sphere constitutes the true self and is thus the repository of cultural 'tradition' and women, associated in patriarchy with the domestic space, embodied it. Hence, all women related discourse of Indian social reform/Indian nationalism according to Partha Chatterjee, has been evolved round women's freedom, but on the paradoxical matrix of the inner and the outer—the *ghar* and *bahir*. In *Dayamayeer Katha*, the female narrator while describing her *desh* as a collage of several *ghar*, house-holds, confirms it. Catherine Belsey has offered her own perspective on how a woman can be "a *subjected being* who submits to the authority of the social formation represented in ideology as the Absolute Subject (God, the king, the boss, Man, conscience)" (Belsey, 596), and yet also at times find agency and the ability to resist received roles and definitions. Like Kristeva, she focuses on "process" and possibilities for change therein:

The subject is... the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by

alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a *process* lies the possibility of transformation.

In addition, the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourses implies a range of positions from which the subject grasps itself and its relations with the real, and these positions may be incompatible or contradictory. It is these incompatibilities and contradictions within what is taken for granted which exert a pressure on concrete individuals to seek new, non-contradictory subject-positions. (*Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* 597)

A vital departure from the conventional account of one's original habitat is of immense significance in *Dayamayee Katha*. This shows, what Belsey has called the "possibility of transformation" through women intervention. The *desherbari* or *vastubhita* is traditionally described in connection with the male owner—the *purvapurush* (male-ancestors). However, in *Dayamayee Katha*, the *desherbari* has always been associated with the female-narrator's foster-mother. Whenever she takes a sojourn down her memory-lane, she recalls the *bari* of two women—her *maa* and herself. This female centric depiction of *vastubhita* is significant from feminist standpoint. *Dayamayee Katha* deserves critical acclaim for its significant *thick description* (Geertz, 30), which, according to the new historical and cultural criticism should be a prominent feature of marginalized narratives. *Thick description* focuses on the personal side of history—the history of family dynamics, of profession, habitual practices—as much or more than on such traditional historical topics as war or passing of laws. The titles of the following chapters give clue to Sikdar's endeavour of writing an alternative her-story:

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| • <i>The Death of Ailakeshi's Mother</i> | • <i>Night-sniveling Thief</i> |
| • <i>Shastra</i> | • <i>One Pirbaba's Story</i> |
| • <i>Medibhabi's Account</i> | • <i>My Mother</i> |
| • <i>Mejobhabi's Journey to Karachi</i> | • <i>Marriage Saga</i> |
| • <i>Id, Roza and Chores</i> | • <i>The Delight of Village Life</i> |
| • <i>Abandoned Bhite</i> | • <i>Father's Last Coming to Desh</i> |

Dayamayee Katha, by its confessional scripting of personal history of dislocated women, excluded as the *udvastu* 'other' of the mainstream, serves to illustrate the motif of *thick description*, that is, history is not only a matter of dominant facts, but also of interpretations of the concealed private domain of the traumatized, victimized populace. However, as stated earlier, there remains fundamental difference between the treatment of the historian and the writer. History and Dayamayee's her-story differ not in terms of the presence or absence of realism but in their respective ontologies, in what they do to the sources from which they draw their materials:

While the historian meticulously records all the little details of a huge canvas, the fictionalist, like a photographer, reduces, from the huge canvas of history, and like a painter, he fills into the vacancies he creates on the canvas the characters and events he fabricates in his

mind. In this way, the novelist in being a combination of a photographer and a painter, differs from a historian in his strategies of 'selection, reduction and enlargement', in his comparative freedom to make an epic of an episode or a mere episode of an epic event. (Kapoor, 188)

Dayamayee Katha on partition of Eastern India, though not be treated as history, by virtue of its respective ontology, is, nevertheless, an approximation of it within the closures of creative forms by virtue of its poetics. Foucault has believed that so long forms of knowledge constantly carve out new objects, the population could continue, and remain as the privileged correlate of modern mechanisms of power:

Hence the theme of man, and the "human sciences" that analyze him as a living being, working individual, and speaking subject, should be understood on the basis of the emergence of population as the correlate of power and the object of knowledge. (Senellart 110)

In conclusion, it can be argued, contesting Foucault's notion of 'knowledge as power', that the manner in which Sunanda Sikdar has labored to forget her past, even at the extent of substituting her public-identity from Dayamayee to Sunanda, that in turn has enabled her in a kind of myth-making, shows how *projected/manufactured ignorance* is also one of the aspects of power. Anup Beniwal, while summing up his observations on partition narratives, has stated:

The Partition fiction is by and large situated within the binary aesthetic closures. The trauma, the truth of the lived experience and amnesia or forgetting inherent in the secular credo of its writers form the two opposite poles of this dichotomy. While the foregrounding of pain leads to an angry piling up of graphic details of violence, reducing the narratives into an episodic string of impressionistic-naturalistic images of brutalities and victimization; the secular vision, of necessity, demands an exclusion or suppression of pain. (Beniwal, 185)

Dayamayee Katha does not fit into these either categories. It reveals personal trauma and trouble without portraying the (di)stressed communities. Again, the absence of amnesia is apparent in the minutest details of the past-even the secularist motif can not be tagged with *Dayamayee Katha* for, despite the author's conscious avoiding of illustrating the political confusion, the hints of mutual divide at the ritualistic level is there in Dayamayee's narration. For example, "Paikarsahib does not accept food from Hindus, studying Hindu shastra is a sin for him. However, in our village the Muslims never had such barriers; rather they often used to follow some of the Hindu customs." (125). The most striking feature of the memoir is a show of 'surplus', an amount of excess in description along with the author's recurring effort of being 'ignorant' of and 'unaffected' by that blissful past-the amnesia is not psycho-pathological, rather a projected one. The example of such an 'excess' finds expression in the following instance-the moment the narrator-writer talks of Dayamayee's mother as never allowing her to eat, apart from the fruit items, in the Muslim households, she counter balances this by showing Dayamayee eating all sorts of meat in Muslim

neighborhood, including that of rats. Right from the starting, however, we get to know how the writer has struggled to remain oblivious of her past: "My real life has started from January 1961; here live my relatives, my friends. I have tried to ignore absolutely the years in between fifty one and sixty." (10). This *manufactured ignorance* of the writer is not only an excuse for myth-making (that in turn seems to compensate for the real loss), but is also a strategic mechanism to maintain the status quo, to remain powerful even though enclosed by the alienated environment: "Now why can't I live in the way I feel like! The people who are surrounding me now, let me take care of their well-being and keep them happy. I have already discovered a means of existing according to my own desire, since quite a long time... Whenever there was any news about East Bengal... I never wanted to listen to those. ..I tried to convince myself that I have fully wiped out the ten years prior to 1961 from my memory." (10). Hence, Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamayeer Katha* highlights how, apart from Foucauldian concept of 'Knowledge as Power', even *projected ignorance* becomes one of the means of retaining power amidst antagonistic surroundings.

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