

Beyond Sentimentality: “Tale” of an Alternate *Bhadramahila* Refugee

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Introduction

Two recent films, Raja Dasgupta-directed *Lizard* (*Tiktiki* in Bengali, 2012), a small-screen drama aired as a telefilm in Tara TV Bangla, and *The Ghost's Future* (*Bhooter Bhabishyat* in Bengali, 2012), a big silver-screen hit directed by Anik Dutta, testify to the fact that even after several decades of Partition, art is exploited to appeal to the sentimentalist dimension of “The Refugee Experience.” The main proponent and consumer of this simplistic rendition is the Hindu elite male refugee. This version has obscured the possibility of counter-narratives that are, for instance, recounted from the position of the unconventional refugee woman or the Dalit refugee man. Alternatively, in order to consider the Partition of Bengal in all its complexity, it is necessary to assume a more well-rounded stance that offers new vistas of aesthetic and ethical points of view. Recent works on Partition studies by scholars like Ravinder Kaur, Udit Sen, and Nilanjana Chatterjee have created disjuncture through challenging the supposition of any unified meaning of the identity marker “refugee.” Placed against this existing social climate, in this paper I examine the development of an East Bengali immigrant woman’s perception outside the purview of nationalist history and what has come to represent the key motifs of the Bengali refugee past. My analysis is based on the reading of Sunanda Sikdar’s Bengali memoir *Doyamoyeer Katha* (*Doyamoyee’s Tale* 2008).

By ‘nationalist history,’ I refer to the overgeneralized official accounts on the Partition of India that lay stress on sectarian and separatist politics, and explain the entire episode of the cracking up of the subcontinent in terms of patriotic exploits of prominent leaders. According to these legends, the freedom-fighters had given birth to an “enemy-less” sovereign State. This mainstream version disregards the fragmented and painful memories from the afterlife of Partition, and there is marked privileging of a specific class-, gender- and community-oriented voice that submerges the possibility of other post-Partition voices. Women, children, religious minorities and Dalits all constitute the polymorphous texture of India. To conceive the “Partition tale” in dissociation from these multifarious categories results in a biased perspective that does not identify with the unofficial accounts.

On the other hand, by ‘key motifs of the Bengali refugee past,’ I refer to the emotional use of the memory of Partition in artworks produced by the *bhadralok* (genteel class) immigrant artists. Until recently, many of these works have defined the canon of Bengal Partition scholarship. They have a tendency to colour the mundane realities of East Bengali rural everyday life with identical clichés. I juxtapose *Doyamoyeer Katha* to these canonical artworks, and study the formation of narrator Doyamoyee’s heterogeneous identity, in order to propose that it is crucial to revisit the dominating stereotypes through reading of non-*bhadralok* refugee experiences. The central argument of this essay is, thus, based on the absence of typified emotive tropes in Sikdar’s memoir, such as the metaphor of the placid, almost utopian depiction of the East Bengal village, which have otherwise pervasively been used in *bhadralok*-sponsored narratives. ‘Narrative’ here means both fictional and non-fictional works on the Partition of Bengal that have been created at a scholarly level, as well as the anecdotes unofficially circulated by the masses.

Doyamoyeer Katha is a recollection of the first ten years of Sikdar’s life, from 1951 to 1961, in an East Pakistan village called Dighpait in Jamalpur, Dhaka. Each chapter of *Doyamoyeer Katha* is a discrete, short piece about an incident in the village, which includes referring to a particular neighbour, a special festival, etc., and which in many cases does not continue into the later part of the narration. Doyamoyee is the local name by which Sikdar is known in her village. She does not conform with hackneyed gender, class, communal and caste ideas, in a post-Partition rural setting. While several characters of her childhood village keep intermittently coming back in different chapters, only the space of Dighpait and the time (the 1950s decade) are the two constant frameworks in the bulk of the narrative.

Beyond *Bhadralok*-sponsored Partition Narratives

Ella Moore describes how in the post-independence era, the *bhadralok*, by virtue of his class position, social status and education, became an agent in creating knowledge, as he was privileged to record his own experience in the process of history writing. Therefore, exploring the voices of women, peasants and children, many of which are lost or irretrievable, can provide the Partition scholarship with a “wealth of perspective” (n.p.). Specifically in the context of an “alternative narrative of [P]artition,” Moore states: “marginalised groups such as women had traditional roles which were dictated by a paternal authority within families, limiting their expressions of freedom” (n.p.). Bidyut Chakrabarty, moreover, elucidates that it is not enough to know the popular upper and middle-class narratives on Partition because a majority of these stories are situated against the background of the high politics of Partition. The mainstream history, in which major political factions such as the Congress and the Muslim League invested their allegiance, was exclusivist in nature, failing to address the in-between clusters “not represented by the majority and [with]

their own peculiar concerns and interests” (Moore n.p.). One can derive, therefore, that the non-*bhadralok*’s gender, class and caste experiences need to be documented in considering a multi-dimensional view of Partition.

In reference to “The Abandoned Village” (*Chhere Asha Gram*), Urbashi Barat reflects how the East Bengal village home has always been the emotional centre, acting as a powerful pastoral image in Bengali literature and popular consciousness (Barat 215). From Jibanananda Das to Sunil Gangopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay to Ritwik Ghatak, Bengali authors have extensively produced narratives about the journey from *desh* to Calcutta, especially the post-Partition permanent immigration to a point of no return. Even as the post-Partition plots cannot be physically located in East Bengal, “the village” plays a prominent role in the discussion of the ideal, and in the simultaneous depiction of Calcutta’s degraded society.

By comparing East Bengal’s fertility with West Bengal’s lesser agricultural abundance, its people’s simplicity and talent against the Calcutta’s depravity and fake demeanor, its love of the Bengali language, culture and folklorist traditions against Calcutta’s Westernized values, these narratives have erected two permanent poles of “good” and “bad,” “genuine” and “false” Bengalis, which continue in the present times. To begin with, this can definitely be taken as a logical defense mechanism by the *bangal* (East Bengali refugee) *bhadralok* against the innumerable deprecating jokes circulated about them by the *ghoti* (West Bengali native) *bhadralok* in West Bengal. As long as such unfounded debates on “superiority” and “inferiority” exist in the regular parlance of everyday, it serves a harmless social interaction. But the problem arises, when the initially powerless immigrant Bengalis (especially the gentlemen class) accumulate power by constantly appealing either to their own “lesser” and victimized status, or by emphasizing their sheer positive qualities. In this discourse, there is hardly any mention of the socio-cultural networks that the immigrants have been exploring in post-Partition West Bengal. Under such circumstances, the idealized Otherness that the *bhadralok* immigrants claim becomes an active tool for gaining access to and accumulating social assets. The naturalization of these tropes in literature and artworks greatly facilitates the material aims of the immigrants in the host land. This romanticizing tendency is more prominent among the upper-caste, middle- and lower-middle-class Hindu immigrants, who could not re-establish themselves completely without governmental aid.

Examples of works emphasizing the middle-class immigrants’ fall and resurgence are rife. Sunil Ganguly’s *East-West* and *Arjun* are based on the popular myth about the *bhadralok* immigrants’ decline of status upon arriving in a hostile Calcuttan milieu, where the natives are generally immoral and selfish. In *Arjun*, the Dalit girl Labonyo cannot rise above her situation and is raped by the colony goons, whereas Arjun, a brilliant student and an upper-caste refugee in the same colony heads for an affair with a rich West Bengali girl, so that the caste- and gender-based status quo becomes apparent. In Atin

Bandopadhyay's *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje*, the idyllic East Bengali village-life is shown through the trope of a pious upper-caste Hindu family being served by the loyal Muslim tenant, until the "conspiring" Muslim politicians demand for a separate Pakistan. Steeped in nationalistic ideals, the storyline contains all the stock characters and themes—the poor, backward and lustful Muslim, the vulnerable raped Hindu widow who turns into a seductress, the Westernized and precocious Calcutta-bred children as opposed to the simple East Bengali rural boy, and the Muslim peasant girl's unrequited love for this Hindu boy—all of which point to the East Bengali *bhadralok*-ness of the narrative voice. In the same way, Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* depicts the communist terrorist groups of Bengal as highly elitist and patriarchal coteries, which hold out memberships to the educated middle-class women, but locate them at the fringes of the revolution, and use them only as handy-persons. The most nonconformist of the females commit suicide, whereas others become either vain *bhadramahila*¹ or unfortunate victims of men's disloyalty. Among the short stories, Ramapada Chowdhury's "Embrace" and "The Stricken Daughter," and Narendra Mitra's "Illegitimate" are preoccupied with middle-class notions of "pure" and "impure," and focus on the abducted women's rehabilitation and problematic re-allocation within the family.

Nationalistic History, Canonical Artworks and *Doyamoyee*'s "Nowhere-ness"

Ranabir Samaddar claims that memorial writings are an "undiluted political act" (Samaddar 2239), and that only historical motions, with their "impartial" stance, can help evolve discourses of right, dignity and citizenship. Samaddar is as cynical about the possibility of a guiltless memory, as he is critical about the literary works that claim ahistorical scores. In his understanding, not only is history more powerful than literature, but historicized memorial writing "kills 'pure' memory, and becomes another history" (2238). As a contrary viewpoint, Jill Didur emphasizes alternative depictions of "everyday," as is presented in literary narratives, rather than relying only on state-sponsored historiography. Examining literature in terms of its "diffractive" or interfering rather than replicating quality, Didur downplays the role of "empirical verifiability" that scholars like Talbot and Samaddar attach to literature. In this regard, Nandi Bhatia's observation of the Foucauldian unleashing of the suppressed parallel histories is useful for realizing the shortcomings of official history, on which Samaddar rests his hope. In the context of Partition, Bhatia reads this latter version as charged with national interests and focused mainly on the debates raised by the leaders and decision-makers of postcolonial India. However, it is wrong to assume that a monolithic and unbroken perspective can be obtained from alternative narrations, and critics like Didur and Bhatia point this out as well.

On the other hand, there is no denying that a certain violence is involved in bringing to light the silenced pains underlying the personal life-stories of marginalized people. This is understood from cases leading to a second abduction of the female Partition victim's identity, when scholarly research intervenes in their oral histories. Even the most sensitive scholarship risks stereotyping these women as set symbols of identity for the purpose of contemporary research (Hardgrove 2427). Additionally, the difficult side of literary writings appear as they attempt to deliver a generalized view on Partition, as can be read in Sukrita Paul Kumar's following statement: "In the literary narrative, though the historical aspect remains intact, the experience is likely to transcend historicity *and becomes a universal experience*" (Paul Kumar 235, emphasis mine).

My essay is a wary response to the class-specific ghetto that narratives with such a universalizing tendency have the potential to produce. While there is a relatively greater commitment to democracy in representation in memorial literature than in nationalistic accounts, the former, in its tendency to rehearse certain patterns of shared remembrance, is also likely to serve select facets of nostalgia. My viewpoint is supported by Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, who note that there can be possible similarities between historiography and fiction, especially when memorial documentation, by virtue of collective assertion and repetition, tend to substitute the absent past and become prone to closure as a historical text (LaCapra 8). In the case of Bengal Partition scholarship, this may result in the heteroglossic texture of refugee experiences being trapped into upper-class, upper-caste headships.

The "universal experience" that Paul Kumar observes in Partition literature can also be applied in understanding the category of "archive" that Dipesh Chakrabarty notices in Bengali history writings. According to Chakrabarty, these archives are aimed at remaking society by fetishizing life through "time-tested virtues and values" that have a populist appeal and are yet "different from the cold facts of the history recorded in official documents" (Chakrabarty "Romantic Archives" 677). They inextricably connect fiction, politics and history, interposing official accounts with imagination. This kind of archival tendency also explains the canonical works on the Partition of Bengal, where facts and imagination combine to create certain pre-anticipated conclusions. While the historical and political information in these narratives is fine-tuned in agreement with the author's pre-fixed agendas, the fictive aspects assume historical authority with the help of formulaic plots.

The fictional narratives, in fact, outdo the historical recordings in terms of truth claim "by giving at least a plausible 'feel' for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods" (LaCapra 13). In the case of the Partition of Bengal, these accounts claim the legitimacy of a separate but more valid history, by going back to particular mythical, geographic and cultural points of connection in reference to the exiled East Bengalis,

fashioning a brand of reality in which only a nominated group of refugees sees their own reflection.

Even though *Doyamoyeer Katha* holds shared loyalties, it resists making truth-claims either as official history or archival literature. Doya's "tale" is liable to be claimed by both "major" history as well as "minor" quasi-historical literary works on Partition. Yet, because such a "tale" does not serve any premeditated goal to which both romanticized history and historicized memory are devoted, it will not find a comfortable membership with either. Doyamoyee's narrative deconstructs any sharp dichotomous binary formations or representation of clear-cut positions.

As already stated above, the mainstream narratives on the Partition of Bengal have overpoweringly high references to rape and abduction of victims among women, or to the larger-than-life martyr heroines within the domain of the family, as in Ritwik Ghatak's film *The Cloud-Capped Star* or Samaresh Basu's short story "The Woman Who Sold Wares." Among the male protagonists, attention is given to those who grow up into an actor or a pawn in the Partition discourse. Ghatak's film *The Golden Thread* features both these stock types of males. Stories such as these that make up the canon fail to speak for the less extremely victimized upper-caste male subjects, as well as the Dalit, female and juvenile refugees. As the pioneer authors of Bengal Partition literature have defined East Bengali-ness by the middle-class Hindu gentry's parameters of thoughts, tastes and attitudes, there is a lack of literary space and appreciation for immigrant authorships that do not identify with these dominant collective descriptions. Not bearing any sign of either the nationalist history or the canonical works, Doya's memoir's ordinariness destabilizes the basis of what it means to be an East Bengali immigrant and a direct inheritor of the Partition pangs. In a way, her storytelling upsets both official history and the *bhadralok*-produced nostalgic literature.

Bhadra Memories and Doyamoyee's Memoir: Different Perspectives

In post-Partition West Bengal, the *bhadralok* immigrants seized the center-stage through their self-portrayal as veritable patriots. They expected a higher status with respect to the natives, by asserting their contribution to the Indian independence, which they thought was unfairly repaid. Depicting a self-image based on victimhood, Hindu refugees reiterated the rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim communal tension, and acted as vanguards of a carefully preserved and disseminated past. Such descriptions, especially when happening through a spatio-temporal distance from the author's contemporaneity, used imagination to transform historical truth into a fictionalized one, and were removed from the position of objectivity. Nostalgia, in this respect, was instrumental in giving vent to a host of newly encountered emotional and socio-cultural orientations (Paul Kumar 231). The Bengali immigrants' attitude towards the Muslims was shaped by the

hegemonic discourse of “Bad Muslims” in Bengal. Since the pre-Partition phases, “Good Muslims” were those who abided by the Hindu ritualistic beliefs, whereas the ones voicing for the Muslim League and a demand for Pakistan were seen as a paradox and a breach from the past: “a modernist dream of ‘junking the past’ gone completely mad, a discordant image on a canvas of harmony” (Chakrabarty “Remembered Villages” 2150).

Thus, following the Partition and migration, the *bhadralok* immigrants from East Bengal celebrated a memory of their homeland, which was spatially and socially defined by an exclusive Bengali Hindu-ness rather than by a common Bengali ethnicity regardless of religion. According to Richard Park, even after the partition of Bengal, East Bengal, the only province of East Pakistan, comprising a 52 to 55% of the total population of undivided Pakistan, expressed greater ethnic affiliation with the Indian Hindus than with its fellow West Pakistanis. In fact, the minorities of Pakistan forming the Pakistan National Congress and the Scheduled Caste Federation demanded that Pakistan take after the secular Indian nation-state, in order to resolve the economic issues of the minorities.

Regarding the supposedly “pluralist” and “secular” Hindu *bhadralok* immigrant narratives, Manas Ray observes:

The Muslims were a constant presence in...stories but only in the figure of the eternal peasant, hardworking, obliging, happy with his marginality, part of the Hindu domestic imagery. No space was allowed to his rituals, his universe of beliefs nor did the middle class Muslim ever figure (“Growing Up Refugee,” 168).

Conversely, the figures of the “good” and “bad” Muslims in *Doyamoyeer Katha* do not conform to the canons. In Sikdar’s memoir, there is no absolute sense of Self and Other, as they emerge in relative terms and comparative degrees of dissimilarity and sameness. For example, while Hindus and Muslims, Dalits and upper-castes, or natives and immigrants are the starting points of the social binaries, complexity arises when refugees, a necessarily heterogeneous group, make new connections and groupings in the migrated land. Doya’s initial ideas about refugees are shaped by her Maa’s resentment towards the newly infiltrating Bihari Muslims. Ironically, Doya learns the new word “refugee” from its distorted colloquial pronunciation (“ripuchi”), rendering its meaning as being different from its original one, yet one that is contextually appropriate:

I guessed what ripuchi might mean. *Ripu* means one’s enemy. Reading of *Ramayana* made me aware that Ram and Ravana are each other’s *ripu*. I understood that Samsher-chacha and his family were my Ma’s *ripus* (Chakravarty n.p.).

This naive perspective of the pan-national crisis coming from a child’s understanding of *Ramayana*, changes afterwards with the awareness that “refugee” is not a unified identity marker outside of one’s class brackets: “And Doya realizes soon enough that if any ripuchi-chacha brings money, can read and write, talk his way through, he can ensure

his rights to the jungle and deal in timbres” (Chakravarty n.p.). Thus, she subsequently also realizes that Maa’s antipathy does not apply uniformly to refugees from all backgrounds.

The layered sense of community life in Dighpait brings out the rural values of Self and Other, which contradict the “high-politics” of Partition. By mentioning that the Hindus of the village prefer to stay with the native Bengali Muslims rather than the refugee Bihari Muslims or the West Bengali Hindus, with whom they are distant in terms of linguistic and cultural habits, the author lays emphasis on a particular state of peaceful coexistence. Yet, because such bondings are not insulated from but rather exist over and above everyday neighborhood quarrels, they complicate the “pure” imaginations about village life as evoked in canonical immigrant narratives. Sikdar describes the collaged faith that her villagers practiced, such as appeasing the local natural resources, as in the case of their paying adulation to *Padmadevi* (River Padma), or the Muslim shaman’s reciting *Lokhinder* and *Behula*’s folklore and invoking Goddess *Manasha* to cure snake-bites. These practices pulled the people together from both the communities under wise sayings that serve as mechanisms of survival, against the perils in a marshy landscape. So, when Maa as a rural female shows her prejudice against her neighbours by forbidding Doya from eating at a Muslim or a Dalit’s house or by not offering a community “outsider” to sit in her house, she does not automatically second the discriminatory Nation Politic. Instead, she acts as a mouthpiece of the traditional notions of “pure” and “impure,” which she has inherited and which have developed within her through uncritical engagement with Hinduism. Her attitude towards the Hindu community’s “outsiders” draws on feudalist social relationships, which, as Partha Chatterjee notes:

...were bound by norms of reciprocity, formulated in an entire system of religious beliefs—original myths, sacred histories, legends—which laid down the principles of political ethics, and were coded into a series of acts and symbols denoting authority and obedience, benevolence and obligation, or oppression and godhead revolt (“Agrarian Relations” 18).

When Kamaal, the son of oilman Mafis *mian*, who is a Dalit Muslim, asks Doya why she calls his father by his *mian* designation instead of as *chacha* (uncle), Doya innocently remarks that their being “people from Kolabadha” suffices not to address them by any relation. She does not mean to demean their elders but, rather, there is an instinctive sense of caste and communal equation unthinkingly passed on from Doya’s Maa onto Doya. The layered framework of Self and Other also appears in the chapter “Shesh Mochchob” (“The Last Feast”). Doya recounts how the otherwise charitable and prosperous *borokorta* (literally: senior authority) of Chhaitani throws a big feast to the entire village before migrating to Cooch Bihar (India). He invites all the Hindus as well as many Muslims, but deliberately leaves out the likes of Ajgar *chacha*, who was at once a refugee, Muslim and poor. *Borokorta* would team up in the lumber business with the rich Muslim refugee Anar *mian*, but chooses not to familiarize with Ajgar *chacha*.

Such wealthy Hindus' discriminatory behaviour towards the refugee Muslims, based on the latter's economic and cultural status, leads to new circles of bonding in the immediate post-Partition decades. Rather than based on religious grounds, these circles are made of interest groups comprising both Hindus and Muslims, who gather around the aim of class and professional benefits.

On the other hand, public gatherings such as wedding ceremonies retain elements of the regressive sectarian structure. For instance, at a Hindu wedding, the bride's father Biren *kaka* makes obvious hierarchical seating arrangements while serving the banquet. The village upper-castes and close relatives sit in the indoor-courtyard and are served all kinds of delicacies; the Dalit Hindus sit in the mid-courtyard and are excluded from the treat of one of the sweetmeats; and the Muslim guests sit in the outer patio, and are not served any sweets altogether. A rigid sense of social gradation is made clear through such spatial and qualitative distinctions in hospitality. Despite being deeply offended and holding a grudge against Biren, the village *maulavi* (Muslim priest), however, does not reciprocate the former's attitude. The fact that the *maulavi* blesses Biren's daughter shows that religious sectarianism cannot offset their common membership and identity as residents of Dighpait.

The canonical narratives straighten the idea of "homeland" in terms of an exclusive Hindu sacredness, by strategically disregarding the Bengali Muslim component of history. Dipesh Chakrabarty mentions that such 'pure' perception of homeland originates from patriliney or ancestral connection, where worshipping one's village and land implies one's reverential feelings for the forefathers. This attitude of worshipping is related to seeing one's homeland or *desh* as the moral unit of the nation. Related to the sentiment about home and *desh* is the concept of *Kuladebata* or the family deity, which contains within it the kernel of patrilineal sacredness. *Kuladebata* is set against the backdrop of religious nationalism that ultimately led to the formation of 'India' and 'Pakistan,' so that the male members' nature of attachment with the family deity and the nation (frequently imagined as *Bharat-Mata* or Mother India) are quite similar.

Just as the 'son' was exclusively considered as the protector of the motherland and inheritor and controller of material assets, such as lands and homesteads, *Kuladebata* was considered as a member of the family to be inter-generationally worshipped typically by the male head (Ghosh 28). Such bondings evince the phallocentric man-nation and man-god relationships in exclusion of the Other, such as the woman, the Dalit servant or the juvenile. Therefore, when an individual is forced to evacuate one's homeland and displace or leave behind the deity that has time immemorially sustained one's *kul* (clan) and its rootedness to a geopolitical space, one's identity is largely undone. This sense of parting with the homeland and the deity, both of which are an integral part of one's Self, lead to a feeling of outrage among the immigrants.

Because home connotes "bhite," a Bengali word whose etymological root goes back to "bhitti" (foundation), the association of

holiness to land in the immigrant Bengali narratives implies a natural connection and right of the Hindus over the East Bengal geography. What is more, the narratorial voices recounting the past transcend the identity of the first person speaker “I,” and thereby the urgent emotional involvement, and instead builds on an affect, which, as Ngai explains, is formed through the onlooker’s distant re-production of a third-person feeling (Ngai 25, 27).

Differing from these *bhadralok*-constructed accounts, Doya’s narrative acts as a safety valve against the congealing “ethnography of [P]artition narrative,” which is based on “presenting the spectacular to the purported reader and thus claims a certain authenticity over the events and lives caught up in the turmoil” (Chakravarty n.p.). Sikdar “does not care to give us a *representative* narrative of trauma and tribulation; [the text] gives us an everyday, quite situated account of one person’s impressions over her surroundings, without an iota of sentimentalizing” (n.p.). The name Doyamoyee, which means compassionate, epitomizes the humane crux of the narrative. It is juxtaposed with the cruel activities and unforgiving beliefs propagated during the Partition.

Despite belonging to the Hindu upper-caste folds, and as someone who had to evacuate her ancestral home and migrate to India, Doyamoyee’s recollections do not bear the usual accusative or elegiac tone that is common in mainstream Partition literatures. She begins with the incident of her childhood Muslim caretaker having come to visit her in 1971 from Dighpait, after selling off his last belongings. Instead of repeating her own experiences of Otherness with respect to the native West Bengalis, Doya remembers the insensitive suspicion that her poor old attendant incurs after coming to India, as another Bangladeshi infiltrating the border with sketchy motives. Against the riotous time frame of the Liberation War (*Mukti-juddho* of 1971), his presence poses a threat to the Indian nation-state due to his linguistic, cultural and religious differences from the majority of the local populace, in addition to his material circumstances. Sikdar’s writing suggests that the economically downtrodden East Bengali migrants, regardless of the community they belonged to, were the worst victims of Partition. Rather than extensively describing her own predicament, her starting point is a Dalit peasant, which counteracts the lengthy accounts of *bhadralok* refugees in better-known Bengal Partition canons.

Striving to intersect everyday life with a casual reading of history, Doya’s writing has no obligation to reproduce accurate registers of events. She neither maintains the space-time continuum conscientiously, nor tinges her characters with permanent religious, class and caste meanings. Her bonding with fellow villagers induces a form of human interdependency, which is similar to the ecological law of the natural world. Her caretaker Majam *dada* inculcates this minimalism in her, telling her that one should pray to God for the blessing of rice and rain for all people on the earth, and for the good of animals, insects and trees (cover page, translation mine). While praying to Allah, Doya asks “to do everyone good, to satiate the

hunger of all with rice, to repeal the system of passport and to stop every kind of disagreement” (Sikdar 84, translation mine), which poses her primarily as a humanist.

The complexity in the narrator’s part-rural part-urban connections, coupled with refugee-native, Bengali-non-Bengali, high-class-low - class, Dalit-caste Hindu as well as Hindu-Muslim sense of correlations, altogether helps to fashion her shifting, fluctuating Self. She is neither committed to the cause of idealism nor speaks in a hyperbolic tone. In her third-person narrative voice, she never surpasses the premises of spontaneous equity and secularity, so that her “tale’s” characters are not overshadowed either by her love or by her empathy. As a narrator, even as she gains admittance into everybody’s collective and personal emotions, her presence is not like that of the intrusive nation-state. She understands the characters in an unbiased fashion, without concocting spot-on solutions to their problems or justifying their actions. For example, she mentions Sudhir *dada*, whom others would mock because of his “feminine characteristics,” but who she thinks is very beautiful (56-57); Ailakeshi, whose marriage is annulled because she “never had a father,” causing her mother to commit suicide (58-59); Ratkandu *da*, an infamous kleptomaniac of the village, whom she, nevertheless, likes very much (59-61); Modina *bhabhi*, a housewife, who loses her mind after her childhood-mate Suresh Lahiri, whom she secretly loved, departs for India (69-71).

While these individuals could have been treated as “aberrations” from the standards of a “*bhadra*” (refined) storyteller, Doya never attempts to expunge their presence. Her memoir, therefore, not only celebrates the village’s “prestigious” background, but also takes stock of the transvestite, the single mother, the thief and the extramarital affair. Seen this way, her writing is a break-off from the canons, which project the Bengali Hindu “home” as the breeding ground of virtuosos, enumerating the exploits of Hindu rulers, pundits and political leaders, who glorified their respective villages with significant feats at the national level.

According to Janice Haaken, “In the rush to produce women’s recollection as authentic, their faculty of imagination is undermined. This faculty is vital in resisting patriarchal control and imagining [sic] a world beyond it” (Haaken 1071). In the case of Doya, there is a lack of anxiety with regard to proving the accuracy of her reminiscence before the West Bengali public, who took many of the refugee accounts as “exaggerated” and “unreliable” (Chatterjee 2002 n.p.). Freestanding of the contemporary political map that severed Bengal into two, her actions are oblivious of the spasms of hatred and have an inbred agency of the local. Her narrative bears signs of significant strength, as it denies participation in the ongoing nationalistic debates on Partition. While it is possible to situate Doya’s *bhadralok* family members within the nationalistic bracket of power relations, the narrator Doya is a layered persona best identified within the coordinates of her ancestral village Dighpait.

Anasua Basu Roychaudhury's research indicates that refugees, especially in the camp conditions, mostly used shared memory as a powerful device for etching out a personhood that the State had denied them. In other instances, however, memory is also used as a means of cutting off the East Bengali past. The latter situation is observable in the case of Basu Roychaudhury's interviewee Nonigopal *babu*, who proclaims "Our *desh* has changed," and identifies with his current address at 24 Paraganas in West Bengal. His purposeful withdrawal from the former Self and its geopolitical belonging is because the native land had failed to sustain him and his kin. His nostalgic remembrance of the sacred homeland has been embittered by memories of riots, and therefore cannot be reconciled with the sublime imageries that *bhadralok* immigrants reproduce in their artwork related to "*desh*." By consciously detaching from the past, Nonigopal *babu*'s individualized memory disrupts the selective positive affect used in *bhadralok*'s nostalgic exercises, shifting from the realm of ideal to the grids of the real. This kind of personalized meaning of migration stands at odds with the rhetorical refugee memory and thus fails to augment the key cause of a predetermined narrative build-up on behalf of the refugee community in West Bengal.

Doya's individualized narrative is similar to that of Nonigopal *babu*, as it does not submit to the one-dimensional goal of utilizing past memories for elevating self-esteem and fostering social connectedness, or of treating memory to counter existential threat (Sedikides *et al.* 307). One should remember that she never could, and indeed never attempted to seal the distance between Doyamoyee and Sunanda. Between Doya the narrator and Sunanda Sikdar the author, there exists a lapse comparable to what Ranajit Guha would call a subaltern-elite or master-slave dialogue. Sikdar is a complete *bhadramahila*, who acts as a buffer for Doya and Dighpait. According to Spivak, the regional or local dominant individuals are the "buffer groups," who act as liaisons between the people and the macrostructural bodies. When a buffer-class writer speaks, there is a gap, as the writer is impeded from extending her own social being's interest. Irreconcilability is thus a precondition of the buffer groups with respect to subject and desire, desire and interest, language and action (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 284-285). When applied to Sikdar, her linguistic, geographical and socio-cultural distance from childhood episodes disqualifies her from direct intervention. In the current times, she is an elite mouthpiece of Dighpait. Her only way of reproducing the past memories is through Doya's agency. To ensure the reliability of her act of remembrance, Sikdar consciously remains aloof in the process of representation.

It is also important to note that Doyamoyee was not propelled to write about her past based on a pre-set thought-process that often explains nostalgic writings on Partition. Instead, she was enthused by a sudden train of thought, upon receiving the news of her childhood caretaker Majam Sheikh's death. The opening chapter "Dadar Katha" ("Dada's Tale") mentions the unnatural silence to which Sikdar had subjected herself till she received the news of Majam's death. For

example, she had consciously repressed her memories of East Pakistan, in the process of outwardly blending in with the West Bengal society. To dissociate herself from the past, she had deliberately lost track of the official news and unofficial rumors about Pakistan and East Bengal. The recovery of her pre-Partition memories occurring at a much later stage implies that her memoir does not intend to amass power in exchange of gratifying refugee sentiments.

As a final point, she cannot unbridle all the psychological reservations through her act of writing. To cite an instance, there is no vivid description of emotional outbursts at the point she and her Maa prepare to migrate to India. Maa actually witnesses the dismantling of her paternal house before her eyes, as in her presence, all the furniture and even parts of the house are sold, and she is literally left to stay back in the skeleton of her home. For a woman who has spent an entire life taking care of the household, Maa's preparation for departure begins with the difficult recognition that her everyday domestic objects need to be sorted out in terms of "useful" and "not useful"—some of them to be taken to India, whereas others are to be abandoned (134). Even as Doya recounts the entire village having assembled in their courtyard to bid them farewell and crying (134-135), Maa and her own pathos is not vividly described. All that Sikdar says is that the cooked rice remains untouched, as no one is able to eat. In the mutual pact of silence tacitly agreed between Maa and Doya on the topic of Dighpait, after they had quit their *desh* forever (135), a minimalized expression of trauma maximizes the intensity of pain.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have referred to two types of mainstream scholarship that are pervasively supported and cited vis-à-vis the partition of Bengal—nationalistic history and the idealistic writings principally sponsored by the upper echelons of the Bengali immigrant community. While these two genres appear to be different, they also greatly draw on one another, especially in terms of attending to selective experiences and ideas. I argue that Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *Doyamoyeer Katha* does not subscribe to these widely used elitist scholarly models. Doyamoyee's different style of narration is not only a break-off from the official history and canons, but in the process of throwing light on traditionally unacceptable issues, helps to develop a more multifaceted perspective on the pre- and post-Partition situations of immigrants. Doya's discomfort upon being artificially inserted into the urbane Calcuttan culture lays bare the randomness and absurdity of the administrative decision about Partition. Superficially adapting to the mannerisms of *bhadramahila* yet permanently carrying within her the bewildered child Doyamoyee, the writer Sunanda Sikdar's torn-apart personality seems to have hardly overcome or accepted the shock of Partition afterlife. Yet, her writing does not resort to compromising her inner sufferings for the service of predictable memory-formations. In this, Doya as a narrator retains discipline with respect to the easy

tropes of affect and nostalgia by not replicating a fabricated ideal of Dighpait for power appropriation.

Notes

1. *Bhadramahila* refers to the mothers, wives and daughters of the English-educated *bhadralok*.

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