

Engaging with the Partition Canon: Gastro-political narratives in Anchita Ghatak's translation of Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* into *A Life Long Ago*

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Abstract

The gendered experience of the Partition of 1947 has been a focal point of revalidation in the discussion of the mutilated bodies, the voices and the traumatic deferral of identities as Urvashi Butalia would point out in her *The Other Side of Silence*. The canon of Partition studies however has subjugated the diversity of the cultural borders by making the traumatic perception a central argument for the gendered identity. In this light, the paper seeks to challenge the 'canon' in the Partition memory as cultural theorist Jan Assmann would say, and attempt to reorient the narrative of the gendered experience of the Partition to produce the gastro-political sites of intersection. The patterns established of food consumption practices, of the production of food induces a tension that exists primarily on the margins of the Partition narrative and can only be intercepted by the translation, but the essence of the vernacular remains with words, and emotions that remain beyond translation. The paper examines the gastro-political notion of belonging and exclusion as it conceives the culinary language employed by Ghatak to surpass the local of the vernacular and through translation cement its position vis-à-vis national identity politics.

Keywords: Partition, Gastro-Politics, Food, Nation, Identity, Gender, Translation.

"Would life feel richer if she could always speak her own language, eat the foods she had grown up with, hear the sounds, inhale the air and see the colours of her native land?" (Banerji 10)

In the above excerpt, Chitrita Banerji's protagonist Uma is torn between her desires to belong to the newly created nation of Bangladesh to which her husband belonged, and at the same time to Calcutta in India where her grandmother Sunayani lived and also in America where she spent her adolescent years studying. Uma, struggles to remember the homes she has lost through the taste of the food she ate as a child in Calcutta and wanted to recreate the same when inviting guests in her home in a different Bengal, separated now by an international border. What Banerji's narrative dexterously does is put Uma in a tangential relation with her culinary roots, as she barely has time to

cook and hires a help and at the same time takes an interest in duplicating the dishes that she had grown up eating by giving her cook directions.

Almost like a reversal of Uma's movement, Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyee* or Daya as she is fondly called has had to leave her home in East Bengal and had married and settled in West Bengal. Daya too remembers her village Dighpait, as it was torn by the Partition, the political line that rent Bengal into two different territories, and it is her remembering that cooks up a language, a taste of the home lost, that is at once difficult to translate and at the same time potent enough to contest the centrality of the Partition canon. The translation of Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* into Anchita Ghatak's *A Life Long Ago* that will be the mainstay of this study forges its way into the re-writing of the canon of Partition literature and Partition studies through its examination of the gendered sphere of gastro-political belonging, borrowing the term 'gastro-politics' from Arjun Appadurai's take on the culinary politics of South Asia. Appadurai's essay "Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia" defines the term 'gastro-politics' as the "conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources" that seem to appear "in social transactions around food" (Appadurai 495) and it is this very transaction that Daya would remember and reproduce through her cultural memory of the land and the home that was her home, upended by the line of Partition.

Cultural Memory and the Canon:

The Partition and the events leading up to it and its aftermath have been seminal in the articulation, in the silences but overall the construction of the empire of cultural memory through literary and cultural texts and multifarious modes of performances and communication. The cultural memory as Jan Assmann is a filtered version of the past which "exists, if it can be said to exist at all, in a double form: as a sedimentation of relics, traces, and personal memories and as a social construction." (Assmann 15) Assmann also points out that memory is a "specifically human faculty" as it allows the individual "to construe an image or narrative of the past and, by the same process, to develop an image and narrative of ourselves." (Assmann 15)

With the historical event of the Partition, it is not only the physical repositories like the museums and archives that hold memory, but as Jan Assmann has indicated in his notion of the 'cultural memory' that cultural devices like the "[d]ishes, feasts, rites" (Assmann 17) too can be the containers. When speaking of 'cultural memory', Jan Assmann reminds us that it is an "institution" and that "[h]uman memory is embodied, and it requires a brain as the material carrier of its embodiment" just as "it requires social and cultural frames for its embedment." (Assmann 17) When the human mind exists only in a constant interaction and exchange with "outward symbols", Assmann coins the terms the "remembering mind" and the "reminding object" and the notion of cultural memory then should be inclusive of both. (Assmann 17-18)

Herbert Grabes in "Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon" points out that canons are "objectifications of values, either individual or shared" (Grabes 311) and in this light it is the shared historical, social and cultural experience of the Partition, its memory, the inter-generational transfer

of the Partition all of which have together sustained to make the Partition canon. Grabes further states that “canons are constructed in order to last, and the history of canon formation shows that, against all odds, they quite often possess an extraordinary degree of longevity” and attributes this sustenance to its role in the “shaping and sustenance of cultural memory.” (Grabes 311)

Acknowledging the gravity of Grabes’s words on the formation of the canon, that it defines how select memories are preserved and sustain the trysts of time, one can draw from Urvashi Butalia’s seminal work *The Other Side of Silence* as she proposes to reorder and revise the canon too, the canon of Partition literature and Partition studies. Butalia scripts the aftermath of the Partition and then proposes to question the role of history, memory and the canon formation as she writes in her book:

And a series of events accompanied and followed it [Partition]: violence, mass migration, refugeeism, rehabilitation. But the ‘history’ of Partition seemed to lie only in the political developments that had led up to it. These other aspects — what had happened to the millions of people who had to live through this time, what we might call the ‘human dimensions’ of this history — somehow seemed to have a ‘lesser’ status in it. Perhaps this was because they had to do with difficult things: loss and sharing, friendship and enmity, grief and joy, with a painful regret and nostalgia for loss of home, country and friends, and with an equally strong determination to create them afresh. These were difficult things to capture ‘factually’. Yet, could it really be that they had no place in the history of Partition? Why then did they live on so vividly in individual and collective memory? (Butalia 6-7)

Anchita Ghatak’s translation of Sunanda Sikdar’s work:

Sunanda Sikdar, the author was born in 1951 in East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh, and she came to stay in India aged ten. Her experiences of the first decade of her life in East Pakistan were then published in 2008 as *Dayamoyeer Katha*. This work of Sikdar’s was subsequently translated in English by Anchita Ghatak, published in 2012 as *A Life Long Ago*, a Zubaan and Penguin Book collaboration. Ghatak is in the professional sphere working from Kolkata, India on various issues of women’s rights. She acknowledges her connection and bond with “stories of India’s struggle for freedom and the Partition” (Ghatak x) among the others she has heard from her grandparents and dedicates the translation to her maternal grandparents for whom home had always meant Dhaka, in present day Bangladesh. Her connection with the rift in Bengal therefore has led her to discover “important questions about class, caste, community, religion and gender” (Ghatak ix) that she finds in Sikdar’s memoir and at the same time in the present day. Ghatak, in her “Translator’s Note”, preceding the translated work has acknowledged the polyvalent discourses that prevail in Sikdar’s book, which won both the Lila Puraskar awarded by the University of Calcutta in 2008 and the Ananda Puraskar in 2010 and was translated by Ghatak, with the permission of the author who she claims was “supportive, encouraging and enthusiastic” (Ghatak ix) about this project of translation.

Scholarship on the Sikdar’s work has seen the debates on national identity by Debjani Sengupta in her recent article “One Who Stayed Back: Sunanda Sikdar’s Partition Memoir *Dayamoyeer Katha*” (Sengupta) to that of pathological violence and the resultant trauma and displacement in Sayan Parial’s 2021 article “Remembering and Forgetting: Trauma in Sunanda Sikdar’s *Dayamoyeer*

Katha." (Parial) Curiously however, gender politics and gastronomy has not been part of any extensive study on Sikdar's memoir, and thus Anchita Ghatak's acknowledgement of Urvashi Butalia in her "Translator's Note" might mean greater things for the revision of the Partition canon.

Sikdar's writing and Ghatak's translation confirm what the authors of "Literary sentiments in the Vernacular: Gender and Genre in Modern South Asia" see in the "literary expressions", which they consider as multiple discourses connected along the lines of "gender, caste, class, religion, nation and ethnicity, which help in articulating, disciplining and locating identities." (Gupta, Brueck and Harder 804) Anchita Ghatak's translation of Sikdar's work into English therefore is seminal in the re-writing of the Partition canon as the vernacular to the English assists in its wider readership. This translation would then foreground what appeared to be primarily a local conflict into a dialogue of national rhetoric and national identities.

Dayamoyee shortened to Daya, the narrator of Sikdar's text speaks about her childhood from memory. Daya navigates through her memory, the territory of the border that divides the two Bengals, one that belongs to India and the other to Pakistan. Daya's narrative however is different because it colours her retelling through the 'human dimension' that Urvashi Butalia spoke of. Daya's Dighpait, the village from East Pakistan, what later became Bangladesh, would be revealed in this paper to be the site of multitudes of gastro-political encounters that contest the strict territorial division of the Bengal region into West Bengal that remained with India, and East Pakistan that became a part of the newly formed nation of Pakistan. Dighpait then locates the framings of the Hindu household- Kayastha, Brahmin and the Shudra as well as Muslim households- both native and refugee. Through the notions of purity and pollution attached to food consumption practices and the exchange of land that was occasioned by the Partition as a means of food production, and the feast as a primary site of food distribution, this paper provides a commentary on how the culinary language and gastro-political encounters between the social actors of Dighpait writes back to the canon of Partition scholarship exploiting the silences of being given what Butalia calls the "lesser status" (Butalia 7) and still promises to communicate through the culinary language.

Daya's culinary language then designs not only the social composition of Dighpait, but it also obliquely comments on how the strict borders between communities existent within the village get interrupted by the Partition. The subsequent turmoil and the upsetting of the peaceful cohabitation of the Dighpait inhabitants then is subsumed within Daya's memory of what she ate, how she ate, where she ate, with whom she ate, and also an address of what others around her were eating or not eating. This translation from the vernacular to English would then endow the text with what Appadurai would call the "two diametrically opposite semiotic functions." (Appadurai 496) Appadurai's semiotic functions "can serve to indicate and construct social relations characterized by equality, intimacy, or solidarity; or, it can serve to sustain relations characterized by rank, distance, or segmentation." (Appadurai 496) Incidentally, Daya's remembering of her childhood home in Dighpait exposes the human relationships that work along both the axes that Appadurai has mentioned.

When Daya describes how her beloved Majam Dada, ate “panta” and she quickly proceeds to describe it as “boiled rice soaked overnight in water” and establishes the difference of their grains by naming them the one they consume as “fine-grained kalojeera rice” and what plump hanskhol rice. Dada would mix red chillies in the rice with great care and eat it with pleasure. Watching him eat, I felt that hanskhol rice must indeed be a delicacy. One day, my mother cooked some for me and I found it tasted awful!” (Sikdar 6) The socio-political distinction of identities that comes with the consumption of a particular variety of rice enables Daya’s narrative to engender the domestic space and its role in the problematizing of the borders and to reiterate the problem of the distance manufactured in the gastropolitical appropriation of space within Dighpait. The post-partition memory of Daya’s home then rests on the position of rice to “encode gastro-political messages” as Appadurai reads in the context where one ends up “manipulating the food itself (in terms of quantity or quality)” (Appadurai 501) and the difference in the two varieties of rice therefore holds significance beyond the local community.

Daya had noticed further that her Dada had stopped eating his meals at their house and would rather take his food home. This change in behaviour is visibly noticed by Daya as it becomes a manifestation of the Partition of the two Bengals, and how the eastern side of it went under the newly created state of Pakistan, whereas its western counterpart remained with India. He brought along an earthen dish in which to carry the food, that was known as “shanki” and the vessel itself was “apparently impure” for the Hindu who were “forbidden to eat off them.” (Sikdar 6) Daya’s mother would not “serve” him his meal but rather “pour” (Sikdar 6) it to him from a certain height, keeping the distance between her ladle and his earthen plate. Eating in a Hindu household then, becomes a site of anxiety for Majam Dada and vice-versa as accidentally touching his earthen plate would spell disastrous for Daya’s home. The hanskhol rice that Majam Dada eats and his earthen plate then become the tools of facilitating a comfortable distance in the gastro-political identity of the members of two different religious communities. When Appadurai speaks of the “specific semiotic outcome” born of a “matter of the particular food substance” (Appadurai 496), Daya’s dalliance with the memory of the variants of rice and rice consumption, draws the borders of her home, is found to seemingly flirt with the invisible communal lines that sunder the village. The exchange between Majam Dada and a Hindu household, or rather the lack of exchange because of the Partition establishes a striking resemblance to Appadurai’s examination of gastro-politics in a Tamil Brahmin household. Appadurai strictly states that gastro-political tension in the household could also be the resultant of an interaction with its “[r]ecipients, dependents, guests and subordinates” (Appadurai 501) and Majam Dada is not the “manager of the hearth” but his presence and actions can still facilitate that communal tension that was absent before the Partition. The particular method in which Daya’s foster mother is seen ‘serving’ food to Majam Dada, a Muslim man who regularly visits the household tells us about the way her actions differ from the usual, and Appadurai tells us that within the context of the household, the gastro-political anxiety can be manifest “[f]rom the point of view of those who control the cooking and the serving process.” (Appadurai 501)

Daya herself is forbidden to eat in a Muslim home and although she is friends with Achia, the daughter of Samsheer chacha, she never eats with her. Sometimes Daya would visit her friend Phalani,

and on these occasions she would eat with them. The lower caste Hindu family consisted of Phalani, her parents and her aunt and uncle. The family was poor and to Daya's amazement she finds the family not consuming rice all throughout the year like the usual practice at her home. This was because despite living within an agrarian community whose primary cultivation was of rice and then of other grains, these people could not afford to buy grains for themselves. They therefore resorted to eating supplements, like greens and onion and chillies, but also at times cooking "pigeon meat" and a "curry made of rat" (Sikdar 18) and tortoise as well. Daya too had eaten what she would not be conventionally served at home by her mother, and she feels guilty for betraying her mother, who had forbidden her to eat cooked food in any other home than the Hindu Kayastha. Her repentance of her act of eating with Phalani's family is manifest in her writing the name of the Hindu God "Lord Narayan a hundred and eight times." (Sikdar 19) There would be times in the year when Phalani's family would be eating rice, because the women in the family were employed in the threshing and pounding of the grain, and they were paid with a share of the rice. This "measure of rice as wages" (Sikdar 21) similarly speaks of how the community uses the grain as currency, and the gastro-political encoding noticeable in the residents of Dighpait ensures participation in the national economy through its production of rice.

Daya's memory of Dighpait of 1951 saw a metaphorical and invisible rent between the inhabitants extends even to the conversion of the ownership of agricultural lands, moving from the hands of Hindu owners to that of Muslim owners. And the immediate effect of this exchange is felt by the farm hands, people like Majam Dada and his brother Ajam, who lose out on opportunities to cultivate the land because the new landowners can do it themselves. When Daya witnesses the new entrants to the village, the "ripuchi" or the refugee, her mother has taught her a new register, one that requires her to address an older uncle as "chacha" instead of the traditional "kaka". (Sikdar 12) Daya's Majam Dada and his family, and many of the sharecroppers in Dighpait then begin to suffer, as they would have been otherwise paid for their services rendered by a portion of the grain cultivated. However, these sharecroppers are now denied their grain because the Muslim landowners can do what the "Hindus can't", cultivate their own lands, because the latter thinks of their "standing in society." (Sikdar 9) When Appadurai speaks of the "semiotic outcome" his focus extends beyond the choice of a particular food to include the presence of "the actors involved in the transaction, and the context and audience of their transaction." (Appadurai 496) The social context of the time and the presence of the Muslim landowners as 'audience' would then gastro-politicise the identities of the Hindu and the Muslim, establishing difference through the social actors connected to food production.

A separate occasion that Daya tells us about Dighpait was the going away of the eldest brother in the family of the "Ghoshes of Chhaitani" (Sikdar 126) who had arranged a feast to celebrate their last days in Dighpait, as they were heading for the Hindu majority nation, Hindustan. It was not uncommon for Hindu men to move to West Bengal, leaving behind their homes in the Muslim-majority nation East Pakistan, but few would throw a lavish party, a final get-together before departure. This man, the eldest of the Ghosh brothers, could afford to arrange for a feast for had made a lot of profit from his supply of milk and milk products. The reason as to why he was ready to move

to Hindustan was primarily because his daughter would settle with her in-laws there and he wanted to remain close to her, and the secondary reason being a disease that he had contracted, for which he wanted to spend the last days with her, offering prayers to the Goddess Kali in two famous temples of West Bengal.

The celebration and the feast went on for three days, as Daya gives us details of what happened on each specific day. The first day of the celebration saw the performers dramatizing portions of the life of the Hindu God Krishna, and the presence of the Hindu deity meant that people ate only what was offered in prayer to the Gods. This offering consisted of “fruit and milk products like chhana” (Sikdar 128), vegetarian fare. The second day was the main day of the feast where all the people invited were given what had previously been offered to the gods, “rice, pulao, luchi and khichuri” and followed it with vegetable preparations, “labra, chhanar torkari and ambol” ending the meal with serving the guests “yoghurt, chhana, sugar and batashas” brought specially for the guests. (Sikdar 128-29) The second day saw among the turnout the upper class Brahmins along with the lower caste Shudras, and the warrior caste Kayasthas amid the two ends of the spectrum. Each of these were seated separately and served food.

But it is the third and final day of the feast that seems interesting as it becomes a crucial site as Appadurai pointed out in terms of the social function of feasting, which revolves around “establishing roles, relationships, and statuses in traditional societies” (Appadurai 502) like the one in Dighpait and in Chhaitani. While Appadurai comments on the Tamil Brahmin marriage feast, this feast too shall find its space within the gastro-political discourses of local and national identities. Daya speaks of how the elder Ghosh never felt compelled to invite the Muslims in the village and around it, but he nevertheless asked them to be a part of the celebration. The Muslims he had invited had accepted his invitation, but they had settled on visiting the Ghosh household a day after the main celebration, and consenting to eat “various milk products.” (Sikdar 127) Not only is their absence on the day of the actual celebration and their presence in his home a day after significant, but also their desire to feed only on milk products, as it addresses the gastro-political tension in their participation and consumption of food with the Hindu families. While this tension is sustained and mitigated by the feast, what it does is confirm the role of this public gathering in the acknowledging of the role of food in drawing lines that can ensure division and segmentation of the population, and blurring lines where necessary to unite them. If the invitation of the Brahmin, Kayastha and Shudra on one particular day of the feast attempts to temporarily distinguish the Hindu identity from the non-Hindu category, it also divides this same Hindu unity by talking about the separate seating arrangements made for each group, thereby erasing any possibility of a unitary whole. Although Appadurai was writing about the marriage feast, this feast that is organized by the eldest Ghosh, is done also in an attempt that people remember it in times to come, and the very requirement for making it a memorable fare makes it similar to the marriage feast, in all its attributes- “public, formal, extended and extraordinary.” (Appadurai 502)

While the third and final day of the feast saw the invited Muslim families become a part of the final get-together, there was Ajar chacha, a refugee, who felt left out, not because he was a refugee,

but because he was not a wealthy one. He grumbles and expresses his discontent over not being invited even though another refugee, Anar Mian was. Anar Mian was educated and he also had money, which is why Ajgar chacha's complains seem fair. The respect that Anar Mian already drew was doubled by this invitation at the Ghosh household, whereas Ajgar chacha remains a mere "ripuchi" (Sikdar 129) and in his own words, perceived to be in a lowly position. Therefore, the feast, eating together or not together becomes a "quintessentially gastro-political arena" (Appadurai 502) where class, religion, citizenship, and social status all matter.

Anchita Ghatak's translation of Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* into *A Life Long Ago* therefore makes accessible what is apparently local into the larger framework of national politics. The gastro-political encoding of the social actors in Dighpait witnesses the uninhibited performance and maintenance of social, caste-based and gendered identities in the aftermath of the Partition, and the refugee movement across borders and the problem of settlement and rehabilitation. The translation project undertaken by Ghatak then has promised to re-write the "meanings, experiences and practices surrounding literary expressions in local, regional and national contexts" from a "vernacular world of sentiments" into an arena where it can facilitate in "theorising the very nature of literary writings in South Asian contexts." (Gupta, Brueck and Harder 804) Ghatak's focus in the translation of Sikdar's text has remained on the experiences and even in the food preparations, dishes that have been perceived as emotions in the vernacular language, that immediately succeeded by a description of the dish.

Conclusion:

Jan Assmann writes: "What counts is not the past as it is investigated and reconstructed by archaeologists and historians but only the past as it is remembered" (Assmann 19) and the onus then is on the individual who remembers and therefore reproduces not 'the' past, but 'a' past through his or her memory. What brings together the problem of translation of the text and its original in this particular circumstance then comes from the specific position and disposition of the author of the vernacular Sunanda Sikdar, and how her text is a clear vision of what Assmann would call the "temporal horizon" of an articulated past and how Daya would then be "reclaiming" the past as 'hers'. The translation by Anchita Ghatak then problematizes the cultural memory of Dighpait as she ties the local gastro-political tensions within the text to the larger discourses of the nation and the national identity. It is also this privileging of the gastro-political in her translation that enables a revision of the canonicity of Partition scholarship.

In *A Companion to Translation Studies*, Theo Hermans in the chapter titled 'Literary Translation' would write about how scholars have analyzed "translation as an instrument of domination and of information control: the metaphors speak of complicity and resistance rather than enrichment, of appropriation rather than transmission or transfer." (Hermans 90) In theory there seems to be a parallel drawn between the way gender and postcolonial scholars renegade their similar designs on translation studies as a discipline. In conflating gender and translation studies therefore the translator is assumed to communicate "as part of a non-masculine community under constant pressure from a

predominantly masculine world.” (Hermans 90) Translation of Sikdar’s text by Anchita Ghatak into *A Life Long Ago*, draws no comparison with the original, no opportunity to check whether it is a ‘transfer’ or a ‘transmission’ but opens up the text to a larger readership and scholarship, that can potentially draw from beyond the vernacular bindings of the text. These grave charges against the translator are invoked by Hermans as he considers the “culturally-hybrid writing of postcolonial authors” in whose translations, “the memory of other tongues is always inscribed, whether as the multilingual legacy of colonialism or through the migrant’s lost speech.” (Hermans 90) But regardless of a translation into English by Ghatak, that is the language inherited by the subcontinent from their colonial encounter with the European master, this translation acknowledges in the work of the Ghatak “not single but complex, polymorphous, uprooted identities” (Hermans 91) that necessitates the revision of the Partition canon.

Luise Von Flotow in the book chapter “Gender and Translation” highlights how the “[w]omen’s representation in language, through language, and across languages” (Flotow 92) has been a primary domain of investigation for the translation studies scholars, addressing issues of gender within. And in the same vein Ghatak’s appreciation of Sikdar’s text, has led to the re-writing of the Partition canon to include the gastro-political sites of turbulence, difference, belonging and identities in the aftermath of the division of Bengal into West Bengal and East Pakistan following the Partition of 1947.

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