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The Unbroken Chain of Communal Bonding Under the Ashes Of Partition: Its Retrospective  
Exploration in Sunanda Sikdar's Memoir *A Life Long Ago*

Abstract: India was partitioned into two political units - India and Pakistan in 1947. The people of both communities, Hindus and Muslims, were made the objects, in the words of Hamid Naficy, of “tragic paws in the power game” (*Home, Exile, Homeland-Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* 8) of politics. In both geopolitical fragments, the minority sector was disallowed and marked them as “others”, “forgotten or repressed”, according to Ania Loomba's, notion of the role of a nation propounded in her *Colonialism/Post Colonialism* (169). The Partition, therefore, caused the horrific communal atrocities, mass slaughter of both Hindus and Muslims, and a massive exodus of minorities in both units. This explicit sociological impact of Partition is focused in almost all Partition literature rather than the dream of unity and the emotional fusion of minds of the people of both communities. The paper, therefore, attempts to dig out the suppressed area of love and faith to each other that is reflected in the literary work of Sunanda Sikdar's *A Life Long Ago*. This area of communal **bondage** is revealed in this memoir by explaining Lalon Fokir's philosophy of

universal brotherhood and John Locke and David Hume's theories of memory that unravel the eternal nexus through memory.

Key Words: Partition, Displacement, Migration, Bonding, Humanity, Universal

### Brotherhood

The causes of Partition of India are explained through a range of multi-dimensional perspectives. A group of India historians like V.P Menon (*The Transfer of Power in India*, 20) M.J. Akhtar (*Riot After Riot* 21), Sumit Sarkar (*Modern India 1885-1947* 22), Bipan Chandra (*Modern India* 23) expound that Pakistan was the inevitable outcome of British diplomacy of "Divide and Rule". For British Chroniclers like Alan Campbell-Johnson (*Mission With Mountbatten* 24), H.V.Hodson (*Great Divide* 25) it was viewed as deplorable necessity and blamed primordial divisions among the Indians themselves for the fragmentations of India and bloodshed that marked the last days of the empire. The "Two-nation Theory", for another genre of historians as Aitzaz Ahsan (*The Indus Saga and the Making of Pakistan* 26) and Munir D. Ahmed (*Pakistan: The Dream of an Islamic State* 27) was the fundamental ideology of the fulfilment of Pakistan keeping distinct the lofty ideals of Islam from antagonistic culture of Hindu community. The Partition constituted demographic displacement leading forceful massive dislocation and the greatest exodus of refugees in human history from both sides of India and Pakistan and resulted in casualties between 200000 and 600000. Urvashi Butalia in her *The Other Side of Silence* has unburied the Partition history on human dimension and represented the painful voices of partition-sufferers behind the silence of the generality of Partition statistics. According to Butalia, twelve million people were forced to flee to "safer places", and Partition caused assassination of a million

people, and sexual savagery on about 75,000 women (Butalia 3). Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* have also unfolded the silent voices of abducted women during Partition and chronicled that more than eight million common people were forced to migrate and between two hundred thousand and two million people were killed (35). Rather differently, the elitist historians confined their history to only mathematical data rather than psychological area. The psychological bonding among Hindus and Muslims is almost kept silent in almost fictional literature and testimonials.

Sunil Gangopadhyay in his novel *Maner Manus* (Bengali) has explored the philosophy of universal brotherhood propounded by Lalon Fakir (saint), the eminent Bengali philosopher, Baul saint, mystic and social reformer. For Lalon Fakir, the root cause behind the conflict between Hindus and Muslims is the ignorance to each other:

Hindus and Muslims are living together in the same country for hundreds of years, yet they do not know much about each other's religion and social customs. From this ignorance, there is animosity and conflict.

For example, Muslims ignore Hindus to seeing the images of Hindus as worshipers. ... Again, the Hindus do not understand the urge of universal brotherhood of Islam (*Maner Manus* 164-165, translation mine).

Gangopadhyay reveals the Lalon's religion of humanity: "Lalon was religious but not biased in celebrating any particular religion. By breaking all ties he imposed humanity on the highest place (*Maner Manus* 197, translation mine). Lalon himself in his 'baul song' (folk-song) has discovered the only one form of caste, humanity:

All people ask what kind of caste is of Lalon.

Lalon affirms no different forms of caste he witnessed (*Maner Manus* 207, translation mine).

Kazi Nazrul Islam in the poem “Kandari Hoosiyar” of his poetry *Sanchita* has also focused on the same philosophy of humanity based on inseparable emotional human bonding between Hindu and Muslim raising the question:

“Are they Hindus or Muslims?” who dare to ask?

Savoir! Tell, people are sinking; they are my mother’s children! (*Sanchita* 60, translation mine).

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 also unleashed demographic fragmentation and physical displacement of mass populace from each Bengal, East and West. But the bonding of these exiled people with their neighbours of primordial world remains alive through their memory. Memory has a very important role for the psychological identity of forcefully exiled people. It is the perceptual power of the mind by which facts are encoded, stored, and the past action is retrieved. It is a special faculty of the human mind which is a storehouse of experiences that are not shattered by the atrocities of Partition. The philosopher John Locke propounds the "memory theory of personal identity" in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* determining that one’s personal identity extends only so far as one’s consciousness. His view of consciousness can be equated with memory. Memory is therefore, according to Locke, an elementary determinant Locke states that:

... personal identity, that is, the sameness of a rational being, consists in consciousness [memory] alone, as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person. So that whatever hath the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they belong (275-276).

Locke views that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity. The philosopher David Hume in his Book 1, Part 1 and Section 3 of his *A Treatise of Human Nature* defines memory:

“when any impression has been present with the mind, [with] a considerable degree of its first vivacity ... in the first manner, is call'd the MEMORY” (Hume 1).

Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *A Life Long Ago* which unfolds the psychological domain of the refugees in the post-migratory stage is centred on the nostalgic memories of the protagonist Dayamoyee (Sunanda), who spent her life in her village Dighpait of East Bengal for ten years before her migration to West Bengal. The memoir focuses on the multi-layers of society in the post-colonial East and West Bengal: the trauma of leaving ancestral home, the strong bonding between Hindu and Muslim neighbours: "Muslims and Hindus are neighbours and held together by strong bonds of affection" (*A Life Long Ago*, Translator's Note viii). Dayamoyee became devastated when she left her homeland, her playmates, neighbours and especially their family retainer Majam Sheikh, whom she regarded as Dada [older brother]. The leaving of her village put the psychological scars in her mind.

The political leaders instrumented the “ignorance ... about each other's religion and social customs” and so “there is animosity and conflict” (*Maner Manus* 164) between Hindus and Muslims. Lalon's this view of communal atrocities is applicable to the situation of the Partition of Bengal that also unleashed communal riots and physical displacement. According to Ian Talbot, “violence resulted from the manipulation of simple people by the power-hungry to serve their selfish ends” (“Literature and the Human Drama of the 1947 Partition” 41). Talbot is very right to the situation of the communal distrust and violence which was engendered during the Partition of India along with Bengal. The political “power-hungry” was fulfilled by manipulating the common people of Hindu and Muslims who were aggravated to commit violence against each other and by

fragmenting the country which also caused forceful massive migration. Dayamoyee, her family and lots of Hindu minorities of East Bengal became the victims of Bengal Partition.

The weapon of violence steered by the political leaders immediately loosened the communal bonding but it could not be able to divide their minds permanently. Lalon's religion of humanity where there is no communal division among people -

All people ask what kind of caste is of Lalon.

Lalon affirms no different forms of caste he witnessed (*Maner Manus 207*, translation mine) - ultimately excels over selfish ends of politically created violence and the ever bonding wins over communal hatred caused by the Partition. If Lalon's philosophy on religion of humanity is applied to the thematic contents of *A Life Long Ago*, it can be discovered that the religion of humanity is placed over devastation of Partition of Bengal. Majam Sheikh was a Muslim and Dayamoyee's family belonged to caste Hindu. When Majam fasted during Ramzan, Dayamoyee accompanied him. She loved the ritual of fasting of Muslim. She also joined in the Muslims' offering of namaz even though she did not know the prayer and offered her prayer to Allah for the welfare of everyone irrespective of Hindus and Muslims:

Keep everyone well and happy, give people food when they are hungry, get rid of the hassle of passports and visas, and do end quarrels and fights (Sikdar 103).

This bonding parallels the affinity of close relationship revealed in Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*. In the village of the protagonist Sutara Datta, both the Hindus and Muslims celebrated each other's festivals:

One community celebrated its pujas ... in which Muslim drummers participated. The other group too exchanged good wishes at Id, Muharram, Id-ul Fitr (Devi 52-53).

Partition unleashed the social fragmentation temporarily but ultimately the traditional emotional bonding between the two communities succeeds. The students of both communities celebrated the Saraswati Puja at the local Dighpait School. There were only two Hindu students - Kanu and Falu - in the school and all the teachers were Muslim. Yet the festival was celebrated. The Muslim students and teachers were very enthusiastic about worshipping the goddess Saraswati.

The character Madina Bhabi, Dayamoyee's neighbour sister-in-law, is the symbolic representative of communal bonding between the so-called antagonist communities Hindus and Muslims. Madina Bhabi later came to be known as "Crazy Modi" (Sikdar 81) because at some point, she went mad. When her beloved Hindu villagers left the village for Hindustan, she felt illness and behaved like a mad in mourn:

... Madina began showing signs of madness when people packed their bags, left the village forever and took the train to Hindustan. ... She fell ill because the people she loved left the village (81).

The announcement of Partition of the country into Hindustan and Pakistan became "a terrible blow for Modi" (83) and "It drove her mad" (83). When her neighbour Suresh Lahiri's family set for Hindustan, both Modi and Lahiris cried bitterly:

Modi wept and howled when she heard that the Lahiris were ready to leave for Hindustan. Everyone was moved to tears by her distress. ... The Lahiris too, were crying all the way and they boarded the train weeping (83-84).

Dayamoyee's Muslim neighbour Yadali kaka's [uncle] teaching of Goutam Buddha's lesson of equality and love for all human beings irrespective of religion and caste - "all human beings were equal and that religious divisions were created by people" (109) - hints the illusionary nature of

artificial communal division created by the Partition. Sobahan, the son of Yadali kaka also told Dayamoyee about Jesus Christ who talked to people about peace and love. Yadali kaka always helped others in times of their joy and grief irrespective of caste and religion even after the Partition of Bengal.

The other literary arts also discover that the communal relationship continues even in the violence and atrocities of Partition. In Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan*, Jugga Singh saved his Muslim beloved Nooran. The fictional character Jugga Singh risked his life to save Nooran (Talbot 43). The courage and humanity was thus witnessed among the horrors of the 1947 massacres. Chaman Nahal in his *Azadi* has fictionalized this unity in diversity experienced in Sialkot through the friendship between the protagonist Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhari Barkat Ali and the love of Arun, the son of Kanshi Ram and Nur, the daughter of Barkat. In Amit Majmudar's *Partitions*, the six-year-old twin brothers Shankar and Keshav, are torn from their mother in struggle to board the last train to Delhi. Ibrahim Masud, a Muslim doctor migrated from India to Pakistan and rediscovered his role as a healer. Jatin Bala in his story "The Two Ends of a Broken Bridge" has unfolded the unceasing bonding between the two so-called "antagonist" communities – Hindu and Muslim. The protagonist of the story Ratan Biswas who left his village Machna in East Bengal fifty years ago, met his mother's friend Fatima *amma* [mother] of his past neighbouring village Madhupur in the Bongaon-Sealdah local train in West Bengal and the wounded memories of Partition became "shadow" and arises the question of rationality of the superficial partition between Hindus and Muslims:

I [Ratan] suddenly felt that there was no difference between my motherland and my Fatima *amma*. My two mothers have fused and merged into one (Bala 87).

Fati *amma* also conveys the message regarding the rationale of Partition which physically uprooted lakhs of people of both communities, but it could not break the emotional bridge between them. Fati *amma* began to weep in her depth meeting Ratan:

Sobbing vehemently she said, “My child, I ne’er through I would ever see you again in this life. ....She kissed me [Ratan] repeatedly and appeared to be disconcerted time and again. ... Tears were flooding her chest (75).

.....In the folds of her wrinkled skin, drops of water were quivering, glistening as light shown on it (Bala 76).

Son, you are someone very close to my heart (87).

In the Bengali movie *Maati* directed by Saibal Banerjee and Leena Gangopadhyay, Satyabrata Chowdhury who migrated from the village Kutubdia in East Bengal, feels same old bonding when he meets Jiniya who has come from Kutubdia to study at Viswabharati University. The ‘bridge’ between Fati *amma* and Ratan; Satyabrata Chowdhury and his old villagers; Dayamoyee and Majam Sheikh and her old neighbours remain unbroken even after the violation of Partition.

According to John Locke’s “memory theory of personal identity”, memory is the fundamental constituent that determines one’s own identity. Dayamoyee’s identity, according to this theory, is determined through her “extended” (Lock 275) “consciousness” (Locke 276) of her past life in Dighpait. Her consciousness of the experiences of her past life revives with “a considerable degree of its first vivacity” (Hume 1). Thus, according to the application of Locke and Hume’s theory, Dayamoyee’s emotional attachment to Majam and her neighbours remain alive with the “considerable degree of its first vivacity” (Hume 1) even after her migration in West Bengal.

Partition unleashed its brutalities but it never becomes able to unbridge the bondages of the people who were victimized of Partition. Lalon's philosophy of universal brotherhood and the theoretical application of John Locke and David Hume's views justify Sunanda Sikdar's *A Life Long Ago* is a memoir which unravels the inseparable emotional human bonding between Hindu and Muslim even in the violence of Partition and reminds Kazi Nazrul Islam's question: "Are they Hindus or Muslims?" who dare to ask? (*Sanchita* 60, translation mine). This feeling of emotional fixation between Dayamoyee, a Hindu girl and Majam, a Muslim continues and they cannot escape from it. The unbroken communal bonding in the atrocities of Partition is, thus, explored in Sunanda Sikdar's Memoir a *Life Long Ago*.

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