

Cross-Cultural Human Relationships in Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black*

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Abstract

Sunetra Gupta who is an Indian immigrant living in England and working in Oxford University as a Professor of Zoology has written five novels. Her fifth novel, *So Good in Black* published in 2011 celebrates globalization and the free passage to western countries for Indians and for the westerners to India. Human relationship is the main crux of postmodern writings and Gupta also brings out the cross-cultural human relationship in *So Good in Black* with much details. At the backdrop of Kolkata, India, Gupta colourfully draws the human relationship especially man-woman relationship in this novel. As the values of life are at stake due to the materialistic advancement in the modern world, Gupta highlights the fact that human relationship always lies in dark and it is good to keep it in black. The characters namely Byron Mallick, Max Gate, Damini and Ela suffer as they from relationship with themselves and with others who are their kith and kin. The women characters namely, Damini, Ela and Barbara become victims in the hands of Byron and Max, as they try to form relationship among them. The cultural values of India and the West is comparatively discussed by the author in this novel to bring out the very nature of Indian woman like Ela

who gives importance to Indian culture and prefers it though she experiences cross-cultural human relationship.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, Victim, Immigrant, Diasporic Experience, Paraphernalia, and Philanthropist.

Introduction:

Sunetra Gupta who has been shortlisted for Crossword Award and longlisted for the Orange Prize for her literary endeavour in creative writing produced her fifth novel, *So Good in Black* after a long gap of more than a decade in 2011. Sunetra Gupta in this novel celebrates the cross-cultural human relationships against the back drop of India especially Kolkata. She proves her scientific acumen and her knowledge in history through this novel. She is a committed writer with precision of details. She has created characters in this novel in such a way that they are necessarily aristocratic and educated and never suffered from the pains of want for money.

Sunetra Gupta offers a fresh outlook and alternative perspective of diasporic experiences in the cross-cultural milieu in *So Good in Black*. The friendship between an American travel writer Max Gate and a flourished businessman Byron Mallick provide the paraphernalia of this novel. The several encounters of Byron Mallick and Max Gate and together their relationship with the other characters in these novel supplies scholarly insight and proves Sunetra Gupta as a postmodern writer in her outlook while discussing the diasporic experiences through the psycho-analytical lens. Published in 2011, Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black* as usual is receiving many audiences who have critical insights. Once again, Sunetra Gupta proves her story telling proficiency in this novel as stated by Amit Chaudhuri "Sunetra Gupta's work is generally challenging, rare and enriching.... The creator of a prose which is capable of the subtlest artistic resonance, she deserves the depth of response we accord to the very best writers." (Book cover)

Written in stream of consciousness technique the narration moves back and forth and narrated in Max Gate's point of view. Max Gate is a travel writer and friend to Byron Mallick. Both Max Gate and Byron Mallick provide the necessary ingredients to this novel. Max gate's association with Byron Mallick makes him to take the liberty of intruding into the life of Ela, Byron's god-daughter. Max Gate also gets the acquaintance of Damini, Ela's cousin through Ela. Damini is a fervent investigative journalist and the founder of a women's shelter in Darjeeling. Max Gate and Damini together assign a project and later Max Gate publishes the outcome inscribing his name alone. This infuriates Damini and she spits anger on Max Gate. Max Gate also develops an attraction towards Ela from the first day when he sighted at her. He makes love with her whenever possible. Max Gate's extramarital relationship with Ela makes Max' wife, Barbara O'Reilly to get betrayed and she goes to London back abandoning Max in Kolkata. Byron Mallick supplies adulterated milk to Damini's refugee quarter and when it is investigated by Damini, Byron kills her for the same reason. After a long trail he somehow exonerates from the trail and then he is consumed by TB and dies at the end due to heart attack. In between Damini's death to Byron's death Sunetra Gupta very artistically brings out the entire plot of the novel.

Discussion:

Sunetra Gupta's previous four novels namely *Memories of Rain*, *The Glassblower's Breath*, *Moonlight into Marzipan*, and *A Sin of Colour* faithfully reveal the diasporic angst. But her fifth novel, *So Good in Black* has a little pain of diasporic dislocation. Instead, it beautifully draws a picture of cross-cultural human relationship in the background of metropolitan Kolkata. The novel starts at the point when Max gate and Piers O'Reilly have come to attend the funeral of Damini at Kolkata. Max Gate ruminates over the past and his association with Byron Mallick, during the time when he attends Damini's funeral. Piers and

Max go to Byron's beach house which is in Digha, far away from the noisy Kolkata. There they find Byron Mallick, Nikhilesh, his friend and Ela's father and Ela's daughter, Adrija. Once upon a time the same house was a paradise to Max. However, Piers now says that it looks like a hell. He accuses Byron for having killed Damini. But Byron refuses the complaint dodged against him by saying that he is not the cause for the accident and the resultant death of Damini.

A little chalk in milk will not kill anyone, Max.

Then it's true, I reply despairingly.

Byron Mallick sighs.

What is true is that some of the inferior batches were sent from my factory to Damini's refugee camp. (5)

... An unfortunate coincidence, then....

That she should have been found a week ago flung from her bicycle down a mountainside? I'll say it is, Max. (6)

Max Gate does not believe in Piers' accusation of Byron Mallick for the death of Damini because Byron is a well educated, kind-hearted and very rich businessman. Moreover, Byron is a philanthropist. When Max Gate and his wife, Barbara decides to work in India, it is Byron Mallick who welcomes them. Even though he does not like Damini for the reason that she shares the love of his god-daughter, Ela, he readily accepts to help Damini in her new social service assignment of looking after the battered Tibetan women and children. Damini says to Max that

She had given up journalism, she told me....

She had procured funds to set up a shelter in Darjeeling for battered Tibetan women and their children, why this cause rather than any other I did not think to ask. Byron Mallick, she told me, had been very helpful to her, had given generously towards the

initial costs, and helped put in place a number of schemes that might lead to self-sufficiency, such as the manufacture of fruit preserves and handmade stationery, which he had arranged to market in European boutiques. He had also consented to supply, at cost price, the formula milk that his original pharmaceutical company in Bengal still manufactured, while agreeing with that breastfeeding was to be encouraged as the best means of nourishing an infant.

He has been extremely supportive, she said. (29)

Byron and Nikhilesh are good friends even from their school days. Byron and Nikhilesh were good at their studies. Byron showed interest in history and made his project on Warren Hastings. Later Byron developed interest in business and turned out to be a businessman. Now his business flourishes to receive the level of international customers. On the other hand, Nikhilesh becomes a professor of Ghandian University at Africa. His wife Ruby is very particular that their daughter Ela should be in Kolkata in order to imbibe the Indian culture. Nikhilesh asks his friend Byron to be Ela's god-father which he readily accepts. In fact, he plays an important role in shaping not only the career but also the life of Ela.

... so I asked her when she had started to dance, and she told me how even in the depth of Africa, her parents had found for her a teacher of *Bharat Natyam*, the South Indian style of temple dancing that her mother so adored. In Kolkata, Byron had found a teacher for her who had trained in *Odissi* style.... Her talent had burgeoned beyond all ordinary expectation and by the time she was in her mid-teens, she was already performing on stage. It was precisely at this time that her parents suddenly came to the decision that she needed to finish her education in England. They, who had sent her to be assimilated into their own culture, had now begun to fear that she might become trapped within it, and also that what she achieved in dance might be at

the expense of her academic progress. But she had come back, picked up where she had left off five years earlier, and with Byron's help reestablished herself as a dancer of promise. (66)

Byron Mallick has a good taste of life. Though he is busy in establishing his business, he allots time to fulfill his desire of getting a house in the beach of Kolkata. The new villa is in Digha which wonderfully faces the east coast of India. During the housewarming ceremony, he is very much pleased to say that this place Digha was called as Brighton of East by Warren Hastings. "The Brighton of the East he called it, Warren Hastings, in a letter to his wife, said Byron Mallick." (78) However, he has no interest in marriage. He is ready adopt a child - Ela, work hard to make his business to bulge in size, interest in receiving good friends in his life, and happy to keep a good company of women who are other men's wife but has no interest in marriage.

It was always a dream of mine to own a house by the sea, he said to me.

You are a very lucky man, Byron.

And you, Max. Lucky to have Barbara_ the kind of luck I have never had.

And for the first time I began to wonder why he had not married, Byron Mallick, with his splendid good looks and regal bearing, I had seen him very much at ease in the company of women, mostly other men's wives, but seen him also subtly shake them off like gauzy insects that one might let rest, out of a certain fascination, on one's clothes, but only for a while. (79-80)

Byron Mallick has good knowledge of judging people for their talents. He finds the wonderful talent of dancing spirit in Ela and helps her to develop the talent to become a famous performer. While Barbara and Piers are trying to kindle the creative genius of Max to write fictions, it is Byron who judges the talent of Max and says that Max is fit to write

travelogue and not fictions. This advice of Byron sounds good to Max and he starts writing travelogue.

Because if I were you, I would try my hand at something that is not fiction.

Like?

Like travel writing, for instance.

Travel writing?... (84).

Byron Mallick had not fixed his penetrating gaze upon me that evening in Kolkata and said to me – Fiction is not your natural home, Max.

How do you know? I asked him.

You hardly read any fiction, he pointed out.

That was true, but I had never associated the reading of novels with writing of them.

(86)

However, Byron Mallick suffers from the guilt of Piers' accusation. He is sure that he has adulterated the milk with little chalk power and that won't do any harm to the children. But after Damini's death he is accused for two crimes - adulteration of milk with chalk power and the murder Damini for the same reason. Damini received a bundle of shocks while she came to know that the milk supplied by Byron Mallick was adulterated. She even went to a state of threatening Byron saying that she would reveal the matter to the press and media. At this juncture, Byron resolved to kill Damini. Unfortunately, after Damini's death all this truth is detected by Arjun Mitra, Ela's husband and a fervent journalist.

I assure that it is Arjun Mitra who is at the bottom of this? He asks.

He is making his way back from Darjeeling as we speak, says Piers.

With the evidence?

With the evidence, Piers reassures him. ...

Am I to be given the chance to defend myself? He asks.

Probably not, says Piers.

And why?

Because you have a strange habit of wriggling out of difficult situations, Piers replies.

(141)

So I am not to be given the chance to defend myself? Repeats Byron.

Most definitely not, replies Piers this time. ...

Just imagine, he says, just imagine what havoc this might create if you were to air your suspicions in public. Just imagine the sidress to the family, the future trauma to the child....

There is a price for every truth – but this is not the one we intend to pay says Piers.

So what is your solution then? Asks Byron

I think your best option is to quietly disappear, say Piers with a charming grin. (143)

Piers charges Byron for the murder of Damini. He and Arjun Mitra like detectives search for evidences to trap Byron in this matter. Piers says that the email sent by Byron which is found in thrash is the strong evidence to confirm the truth that Byron is the culprit. Still Byron like an innocent being denies the charges. Byron states that he is immaculate which infuriates Piers and so he says that one cannot escape from the clutches of law.

Don't worry, Ela, everyone is safe, I hear Piers say to her.

Then why are you here, Piers? She asks in voice leaking a different kind of despair.

And then I hear Byron's voice, he is here to accuse me of the murder, he says perfectly pleasantly.

Murder?

He thinks it was I who was behind Damini's death, he explains.

What do you mean? She enquiries shakily.

It appears that some of the baby milk produced by my factory in Jalpaiguri was found a few years ago to be a little bit impure, he says apologetically.

Impure? She repeats.

It was withdrawn immediately from the market, of course, Byron reassures her.

So then what has it to do with anything? She asks, still bewildered.

Somehow the failed batches were sent to Damini's shelter, he says, with a small cough.

Instead of being destroyed?

It was a donation, of course, says Byron Mallick.

.....

It is true, says Byron, that I had some correspondence with Damini on this matter, but we agreed in the end that it was in neither of our interests for this to find its way into the newspaper.

Damini was going to break that promise, says Piers.

I have a copy of the article she was about to send by electronic mail to her old newspaper – except, of course, she was never able to....

But she gave me her assurance that nothing would appear in the press, says Byron.

Are you suggesting that you knew nothing about this article?

Nothing at all, says Byron.

Then how is it that it was recovered from her "Sent Items" folder marked to you? asks Piers.

I never received it, insists Byron.

You never received it? says Piers, disbelief uncurling like a lizard's tongue out of every uttered word.

Even if I had, says Byron, I would not have reacted by arranging to have her ‘eliminated’ – if that’s the word you would like me to use.

That’s for you to believe and the courts to find out, says Piers with a smile. (172 – 174)

Ela, could not believe in the charges meted against Byron. She thinks that a kind-hearted man like Byron could not go to the extent of killing a woman who is a close relative to her. Ela is really shocked hearing the news. “Do you believe any of this Max? asks Ela” (180). Ela later feels happy when Byron Mallick is exonerated from all the charges. She then strongly believes that the case and the related formalities have killed the spirit of Byron. She says to Max that Byron is expecting his end when he is admitted in the hospital for the treatment as the doctors suspect that Byron is caught with TB.

Byron feels very much offended. He could not bear the pain of charges even though he had done the deed in dark thinking that the matter would not be known to anyone. Unfortunately, now Byron is suspected for the crime of murdering Damini even by his close peers. He feels sick and heart-broken. So, he wants to commit suicide but fails in his attempt. Max informs “Byron has hurt himself”. (182) hence Ela, Piers and Nikhilesh, all rush to the shore to find Byron. They find Byron twisting his arms. He says thus:

Now I am broken – physically, at least, he says.

Just a sprained ankle, says Piers.

Ela takes his hand and begins very softly to cry.

Now, now, says Byron, it’s not that bad. (183)

Byron now pleads everyone for their forgiveness. He wants their forgiveness due to the good that he has done to them. He says to Ela that he looked after her when she was young. He also reveals the truth that Max and Ela have affairs and that broke the marital-bond between Max and Barbara. Byron is such a menial fellow falling from the height of

angelic glory to save himself from the accusation of murder. Byron now resembles Satan in his attitudes. In fact, Byron is both a sinner and a man who induces to commit sins:

All these years that I looked after you.... says Byron.

One is never beholden to a sinner, Piers reminds him.

All this time I have protected you, says Byron to Ela.

That does not mean she has to defend you, says Piers.

You and Max, says Byron, ignoring Piers.

What are you talking about? asks Piers.

Do you not know? says Byron. Are you not aware of the grand passion between these two? It wrecked Max's life for sure, and almost destroyed your sister's do you not know any of this, Piers. (187)

Byron regrets for the deed that he had done to Damini. His conscience starts pricking him every minute only after he was charged for the murder by Piers and Arjun Mitra. He feels that there is no meaning in living after the matter gets worse. He realizes that all his reputation has gone in this matter and of course, he does not want to renew his reputation and acquaintance with others in the society. He feels that his very long friend, Nikhilesh and his family, Max Gate and Vargas are enough for him to spend his remaining life. He says "I am finished, Max, even if they are proven wrong as they no doubt will be, I am forever damaged" (201)

Nikhilesh also thinks that Byron would be responsible for Damini's death. Nikhilesh remembers the accident that they caused during their childhood and Byron's indifferent attitude to that accident makes Nikhilesh to think strongly that Byron would be responsible for Damini's death. Once Byron and Nikhilesh were rushing to school to give their examination, on the way to the school the bullock cart driver unfortunately hit an old man. The cart driver was about to stop and enquire but Byron insisted the driver to drive fast

without any heed of the old man and to rush to the school to give the examination. But after the examination, Byron erased the trace of the accident that has occurred. This really shocked the young Nikhilesh. Byron is such a fellow who is ready to cause any harm to other for his advancement.

But Nikhilesh is always haunted by the memory of that accident and when his wife and unborn son laid in a critical condition in West African hospital, he connected this situation to that of the accident that occurred long years back and so he confessed his guilt to the eight-year-old daughter, Ela. Now Nikhilesh thinks that Byron is very much unsympathetic and for his benefit he can go to the extent of killing anyone. He will have no redemption for the sin he has committed. Nikhilesh thinks that there will be no escape for Byron from the punishment:

There is very little I can do to help him now it seems, Nikhilesh replies.

Or later, says Piers.

There will no doubt be a trail, says Nikhilesh.

And you will stand by him then?

If I think it is right thing to do.

And if you do not think it is the right thing to do?

Then I will have to let him go to hell, says, Nikhilesh. (224)

Max gate once again visits Byron Mallick after celebrating Christmas with Mary O' Reilly. The trail of Byron Mallick was over by the time when Max visits Byron Mallick at Kolkata. Max takes pity on Byron when he finds Byron in his broken health. Byron's most part of the wealth has been spent to face the trails. Still, he has huge part of wealth with him. He looks very much aged and philosophical. The bright eyes once attracted Max, have now become dry and fail to lure people around him. Byron Mallick spends his left portion of money for charity in an act of atonement for the sin he has committed. He does not want to

mingle with the society to reestablish his aristocratic acquaintance. He wants himself to be secluded. The self-infliction starts in Byron after the trial as Max says:

... I am shocked to see how he has aged, particularly his eyes, the gaze that once pinned my entire existence onto a bed of dry wax, where within those watery depths will I find it now? Why do I long to find it again? What did it ever bring me but chaos and harm?

Being acquitted has restored my reputation Max, but not my health, he says, noticing how I look at him.

I'm sorry, Byron. (287)

... No, the only thing I can do without arousing suspicion these days is charity work. I have been spending a lot of time up at the shares in Darjeeling, Arjun – naturally – thinks it is some twisted form of atonement but Ela believes that I want to actually achieve something, which I do, and it is really the only arena where I can. (290-91)

Even though Byron Mallick is exonerated from all the charges meted against him, he feels all his reputation has gone. His health has been deteriorating day by day. And at last, to fulfill the prophecy of Ela, Byron is found dead on his bed in the hospital one day. The doctor could not find the reason though the medicine worked well in Byron. Max Gate strongly believes that Byron died off heart attack though his death is criticized as suicide by Arunavo. Max Says that Byron is not such a coward and stupid fellow to commit suicide. He tells:

Arunavo shakes his head in disbelief, how did it happen? he asks.

Probably a heart attack, I reply.

We heard that he had attempted suicide, says his wife.

.....

Byron would never take his own life. I tell both of them ...

Not even after this disgrace? says Arunavo.

He was acquitted, if you remember.

Only because he had all the judges in his pocket laughs Arunavo.

You must not speak ill of a dead man, Archana (his wife) chastises. (347-48)

Max Gate is an American travel writer. He settled in England always in a mind to go back to his home, New Jersey but he could not make it possible because he was deserted by his wife, Barbara when she came about his affair with Ela. However, Ela is not ready to go with Max Gate saying that she is already married and got a child. Thus, Max's relationship with his wife and Ela makes him adrift. Yet he always aches for a settled life. He never cares other's feeling and opinion. He is a self-centered man. Max parents wanted him to pursue medicine but he informed his parents that he was not interested in medical school instead he wanted to procure a research degree in biochemistry, for which Max' parents withdrew all their financial support. He somehow managed the financial needs with the help of his roommate Piers O'Reilly at Princeton Inn College. Later, Piers became his brother-in-law.

... that they had set out for me by an Irishman named Piers O'Reilly, my first roommate at Princeton, later to become my brother-in-law and always to remain my friend. He and I have arrived there by very different routes- I having strenuously distinguished myself from the hordes of applicants from the state of New Jersey, by spectacular test scores and a number of victories at national chess championships – while, he, oh he, Piers O'Reilly – this is more what I imagine than what I know to be the circumstances that led him there.... (70-71)

Max was ready to marry Barbara, Piers O'Reilly's sister to manage his financial requirement and also, he was attracted by the blue eyes of Barbara. He and Barbara lived a life happily until he met Ela. Even in Kolkata they were happy and lived together many years. But Max's attraction towards Ela made Barbara to become more silent. She found a job at the British Council library. There she developed friendly relationship with Arunavo, a student of

Physics at Presidency College and discussed many matters of interest with him. That too failed to add fresh energy in Barbara's life. So, she took a bold decision of abandoning Max. Max Gate could not understand Barbara's indifferent attitude and he did nothing to stop her. Instead, he was in the memory of Ela.

Max Gate is a selfish and backbone-less fellow. He uses the opportunity for his selfish purpose. He does not possess the quality of being true to his friend, Damini, his wife, Barbara, and his love, Ela. He exploits his relationship with these three ladies for appeasing his intellectual, financial and erotic appetite. He even went to the filthy level of stealing the works done by Damini and publishes the book in his name alone, though the project has been studied and done by both of them. This act of Max wounds Damini and she spurns the friendship existing between them.

... such an original impression ever in our long companionship, and yet, bitter, so bitter that I had woven without her permission our many journeys together into the wilds of West Bengal into a book,...

I had no idea how deeply it would offend her, how she would make a great public outcry about how I had so easily pillaged those extraordinary encounters and precious truth filled moments, exploited the dispossessed, the subjects of her own tireless investigations and incisional reporting.... That was five years ago, and the main price I paid for it was the loss of our friendship, for the censure that it received only augmented my book sales, set me up well enough anyway to live the life I live, and write some others. (25)

In this regard, it is apt to quote a review from the Washington Times which later appears in the internet source:

Sunetra Gupta writes of ambiguities brilliantly. Her language swoops from evocative reconstruction of memories and landscapes to sharply focused depictions of social

encounters. She is as much at ease describing the seashore and gardens of Bengal or the streets of Kolkata as she is describing Christmas in a country house in Ireland. She also layers events so they reflect on one another. If Byron Mallick betrayed Damini, then so too did Max, when he used her in his books. What is more significant, she raises the history of Warren Hastings, governor-general of India from 1773 to 1785, a figure who fascinates Mallick and whose history suggests parallels to his own. Hastings was a fine administrator and, like Mallick, fabulously wealthy, a friend to learning and a patron of the arts.

(<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/jun/17/book-review-so-good-in-black/>)

Max loves Ela as he set his eye on Ela for the first time when he was introduced to her by Byron Mallick at his flat. He appreciates her beauty, the big and wild eyes and her talent in various dancing movements. He falls unrequited dream of putting Ela on a high pedestal and that becomes a mirage when Ela refuses the idea saying that she is more concerned as a mother to Adrija than a lady-love to him. Still Max exploits the situation and makes love with Ela whenever they are happened to be together in Kolkata and also during her visit to London for her dance performance.

I remember, said Damini, how hopelessly you were in love with her.

That was a long time ago, I said.

Why did you not pursue it? asked Damini.

She was already married. I reminded her.

You were always a coward, said Damini pleasantly. (30-31)

Max Gate decides to go back to London and not to New York when his life becomes monotonous in Kolkata. He wants to elevate Ela to an unimaginable height by taking her with him to New York and that has become a shattered-dream when Ela refuses his proposal of

going to New York. He of course, wants to free her from the daily chorus of life. But Ela feels that her only solace in her life with Arjun Mitra is to perform dance programmes and to take care of her only daughter Adrija. In fact, she fails to pour new foliage to her talent in dance after her marriage. Byron Mallick also painfully sighs when Ela's interest in dance performance vanes out day by day:

... I told her I had decided to cut short my contract and leave Kolkata, move to New York and try again to be a writer. Would she come with me? I asked her.

I can't, she said.

I had always expected the moment to be perforated with anguish, and yet there was only an extreme tenderness, and a certain sense of liberty that we were not to be tethered forever to our passion, or to have to make excuses for its absence after it had faded.

She lifted open the lid of her desk and extracted from it a frail book – some sort of Victorian primer. She opened it to a page and read – *Curlylocks curlylocks, with thou be mine. Thou shalt not wash dishes, nor feed the swine. But sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam. And feed upon strawberries, sugar and cream.*

Is that how you would like to keep me? she asked.

Yes, upon a velvet cushion, I said smiling. Upon a velvet cushion, for all my life.

(118-19)

That is questionable, says Byron. It is true that Arjun adores her, but he ahs also managed to reduce her to nothing but a glorified housewife. He ahs never nurtured her spirit, never attempted to prevent her from retreating from all that had once mattered to her, giving over her attentions to rescuing the garden – which of course had once been splendid – of the Mitra mansion, and keeping the house in reasonable condition.

(236)

Ela wholeheartedly accepts Max into her life. Still, she has a hesitation of going with him to New York, leaving her family behind in Kolkata. She clearly knows that the Indian culture and her husband and his family members will not forgive her when she goes to New York with Max. At the same time, she thinks that Max has not ruined her life by coming into her life knowing that she is already married. Instead, Ela thinks that Max has added new energy to her life to make it pleasant forever with the memory of their relationship. But Max clearly knows that he is going to suffer without Ela in his life. He gives her goodbye kisses and also wants to remember that precious moment in his life until its end.

A few weeks later, I kissed her goodbye between packed boxes.... And the knowledge that we were unlikely to meet again. I could not stop kissing her, nor she prevent herself from returning my kisses. Finally, we had found a way to segregate our desire from our past and our future but we did not make love, perhaps because we played by a different set of rules then, or perhaps because of the everlong aftertaste of ecstasy already upon our lips. All that was left to do was to kiss and kiss and rejoice in the salt of each others' tears. (120)

Fate is highly powerful and that breaks the man's proposals. But in Max' life fate once again brings new blossoms. Both Max and Ela feel that their lives have become more and more mechanical when they are apart. Byron, one fine morning informs Max that Ela is going to come to London to give performance. The message gives immense pleasure to Max. He receives her and takes her wherever she wants to go. Soon this happiness declines when Ela stop coming to London for performance. Max receives the news of Manini's death and so he decides to go to Kolkata. There he meets Ela in a hotel after seven years and they share their love. Ela reveals the truth that she had aborted Max's child when she came to know that she was carrying Max's seed in her womb. She feels sorry for it and at the same time she

says that she is not ready to carry any more child in her womb besides Adrija. She wants to keep her relationship with Max in dark. She strongly believes that Max has become adrift due to her indifferent attitude towards him:

You realize, do you not, that my life has been robbed of all meaning for not being with you?

Not quite as much as mine, she answered.

More meaning there to be robbed, I conceded. ...

Have you been happy, Max, she asked me.

I gave that up long ago- the desire to be happy, I told her. ...

Do you fear that you might not forgive me?

No, that is not the reason.

I need you to tell me I did the right thing, she said.

By not bringing a child of ours into this world?...

I feel as if I am adrift without her, said Ela. ... (150-52)

Max pleads Ela to start a new life with him. But Ela is head-strong in this matter, saying that she does not want to ruin the lives of her husband and Adrija. She is very much balanced in taking decision and at the same time value the family system found in Indian culture. So, she knows very well that when she abandons Arjun Mitra and Adrija that will ruin their lives. Max as an American and abandoned by his wife always ache for a life with his dream-girl and which is not fulfilled when Ela denies Max' proposal. He really could not understand the value system of India. He is too selfish and menial who is ready to do anything for he wants Ela to accompany him:

... I leaned over her and said- I want us to be together, Ela, perhaps not exactly now but eventually, I'd do anything to make that happen.

You know that can never be, she replied.

But why not? I asked.

Because neither you nor I are prepared to ruin other people's lives, she said firmly.

We would not ruin anybody's lives. I assured her.

Be sensible, Max, she said.... (159-60)

A review critically brings out Max' character:

Max's nostalgia fuels this novel. He looks back to his past, when he was more hopeful, more innocent, more capable of infatuation, admiration and love. Doors opened for him. At the end of the novel, doors are closing, the mood is sad as Sunetra Gupta's meditation on loss and evil draws to a close. Long after the last page has been conned and the book set aside, readers will continue to reflect on this meditative and often fascinating work.

(<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/jun/17/book-review-so-good-in-black/>)

Max, later realizes that not only he but also Piers and Byron betray Ela in the name of lover, friend, and god-father in one way or the other. Max takes pity on Ela for her condition as a housewife and mother. He feels that Ela is like a goodly flower that withers before spreading its fragrance. He wonders whether this is the fate of many such women in India. He wants to keep Ela on a velvet-cushion of life. But Ela denies his proposal. Max does not feel contempt for Ela. Instead, he takes pity on her. Above all, the friendly-relationship that Max maintains with Byron is so thick and so he does not want to attend the funeral of Byron. He books a ticket to London before the funeral. The love that Max showers on Ela and Byron alone is a good-part which is found in Max. Otherwise, he is very selfish and does not value other's feelings. Human relationship, in this novel flourishes and fades and that is found so good in dark.

And my return flight is booked for this evening, I tell Arjun and Nikhilesh.

And so no desire to be on it? asks Nikhilesh.

I have no desire to stay for the funeral, I tell them.

Arjun says nothing, but the contempt in his eyes is intense.

Even though you loved him so? Nikhilesh asks.

What has that got to do with it? I reply.

Nothing at all, I suppose, concedes Nikhilesh.

Loyalty was never love's most natural bedfellow, says Arjun.

Of that I am living proof, I admit to them both. (366)

Conclusion:

Sunetra Gupta brings out the theme of cross-cultural human relationship in all her novels. In *So Good in Black*, choosing Kolkata as a backdrop and bringing the Westerners like Max Gate and Barbara to Kolkata, makes the English character, Barbara suffers from diasporic angst. In forming and fading human relationship, the important characters like Byron and Max victimize women characters namely, Barbara, Damini and Ela. When Barbara comes to know about her husband, Max's extra-marital relationship with Ela, she gets shattered and goes back to her country. Max who could not bear the separation from Ela comes to India to persuade her to join him in New York. Ela values Indian culture which gives importance to husband-wife and family relationship and so she is not ready to go with Max to New York. Moreover, Max steals the project done by himself and Damini and publishes it in his name alone and this makes Damini to relinquish his friendly-relationship. Later Byron kills Damini when she finds that Byron has supplied adulterated milk to her refugee camp where many children died, after consuming the milk. Thus human-relationship especially man-woman relationship suffers in this novel due to man's self-centered attitude.

Reference

Gupta, Sunetra. *So Good in Black*. Interlink Publishing Group Incorporated, 2011.

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