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**Whether Ethics are Universal or Contextual?:  
A Study of Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black***

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**Abstract:**

In Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black*, moral ambiguity is the principal theme, intricately carved into the narrative through the actions and motivations of its characters, particularly Byron Mallick and Max Gate. The novel explores the perplexity of ethical decision-making, the tension between self obedience and universal morality, also the blurred lines between good and evil. It is an analysis of how moral ambiguity holds up in the novel. It is the fifth novel, written by Gupta. The novel presents ethical ambiguity, drawing parallels to real-world ethical dilemmas. By situating the novel within postcolonial and ethical literary frameworks, the study shows that Gupta's work serves as a critique of organised power and the capitalized morality. It urges the readers to reconsider universal ethical standards in a culturally diverse world. It is a modern tragedy which explores the condition of human beings who establish their own values. There is no fixed morality in this world. Some affluent people invade the moral spheres of the society and some follow the market ethics and become the victims of vertical morality.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, vertical morality, ethical decision-making, market ethics.**Introduction:**

Ethical ambiguity refers to conditions where the ethical implications are unclear, often causes disagreement or confusion about what is good or evil. The term typically arises where conventional moral guidelines lack the clear-cut answers, or where there are competing moral perspectives, making it challenging to discern a straightforward moral stance. In such contexts, actions or decisions do not fit neatly into conventional categories of good or evil, right or wrong, often leading to complex ethical debates and dilemmas. Moral ambiguity is a key concept in various fields like philosophy, literature, and psychology, and

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plays an important role in discussions about ethics, character motivation, and the complexity of human nature.

In Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black* the central figure is Byron Mallick, a charismatic Bengali businessman is the embodiment of moral ambiguity. He says, "We Bengalis are not particularly skilled in tragedy" (Gupta 29). He is implicated in donating adulterated milk with chalk powder to an orphanage run by Damini, a passionate journalist. While he admits to this act, justifying it with the claim that "a little chalk in milk will not kill anyone and is better than no milk at all" (Gupta 10), the novel questions whether his intentions were altruistic or self-serving. His actions raise profound ethical questions: Is it justifiable to provide substandard aid if it serves a perceived greater good? Does the pursuit of charity liberate the harm caused by tainted generosity?

Byron is accused as the prime suspect in the death of Damini. It is because to prevent himself from the destruction of his fame in the society Byron could have involved in killing her. Damini, the investigative journalist, empowered by education, turned as fearless individual. She has got the proper time to challenge the corrupt ways of the businessmen like Byron. "She had a fire in her then, born out of some primordial sense of injustice which led her easily into situations where most would fear even lightly to tread" (Gupta 9).

#### **Literature Review:**

Literary quest of ethical ambiguity often serves as speculum of societal moral complexities which define ethical ambiguity where fair and unfair behaviours blur. The theme is prevalent in modern literature that plunges into moral relativism. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* drives both its protagonist, Marlow, and the reader to grapple with the moral complexities of human nature and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* forces the readers to confront the ethical implications of human cloning. These also probe moral ambiguity questioning the ethics of power and responsibility. Gupta's work tabulates this tradition, using narrative ambiguity to reflect the flow of moral judgments.

Postcolonial literature frequently interrogates ethical confrontations imposed by the legacy of colonization. In *So Good in Black*, Gupta places her critique within the postcolonial Bengal, where characters navigate tensions between Western and Indian ethical practices. Warren Hastings, the novel's allusion to a colonial governor, highlights this critique, showing the protagonist Mallick's actions as a modern echo of colonial ethical imperialism.

#### **Methodology:**

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of *So Good in Black*, focusing on narrative structure, character development, and thematic motifs. Key passages are analyzed to identify how Gupta constructs ethical ambiguity, supported by close readings of dialogue and narrative perspective. The analysis is informed by ethical philosophy, particularly Z. Bauman's *Postmodern ethics*, which emphasizes the uncertainty of moral choices, and postcolonial theory associates with the novel's cultural dynamics. Secondary sources, including literary reviews and ethical studies, provide a comparative framework.

### **Analysis:**

Gupta's fragmented narrative, characterized by Max Gate's fractional recollections, mirrors the elusive nature of ethical truth. The novel unfolds through a series of memories and conversations, with events presented out of chronological order. This structure bewilders the reader, paralleling Max's struggle to detect Mallick's guilt. For instance, Max's recounting of Ela's childhood alongside Damini's death blurs temporal boundaries, suggesting that ethical judgments are shaped by subjective memory rather than objective facts. "There is a resonance between ambiguities of moral practice and the quandary of ethics, the moral theory: moral crisis rebounds in an ethical one" (Bauman 21). As Gupta argues in her scientific work *Avoiding ambiguity* in language allows for deeper exploration of human experience, a principle reflected in the novel's narrative complexity.

The quandary is personal, intellectual and emotional based. "Absurdity challenges every ethics; but also the finished rationalization of the real would leave no room for ethics" (Simone 57). An affluent business tycoon Byron is struck in a serious crime. It is his acceptance of having mixed the chalk in milk supplying to the infants to get a profit. The women and children consumed the adulterated milk at Damini's shelter. Because of his constant reputation he kept his morality aside by surrendering himself. For instance his involvement in the crime in the novel remains in an ambiguous state. However, he denies his role in the murder. But some evidences clearly reflect his conspiracy. "How can I make you understand, Max? These children are already on the brink of starvation—what harm can a little bit of chalk do them? Choices are more complex, Max, when most of your customers live below the poverty line (Gupta 5).

Byron Mallick's acquired wealth, reputation, and social status. He owns good friends. He is sublime in charity. "But in the name of charity it has become a common practice where shoddy ethics are taken place on a wide range. Even the world famous Clinton Foundation was accused of donating shoddy trailers to the victims of Haiti" (Jacob 9). It is the moral downfall of the businessmen who have power with privilege and ethical fraud.

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This incident suggests that ethical ambiguity is universal, not confined to the “devil” figure of Mallick. Education brings a change in a person but in case of Byron education has not transformed him, instead his education directed him multiple ways of greediness and corruption.

Mallick’s moral ambiguity deepens with the suspicion that he may have masterminded Damini’s death to protect his reputation after she uncovered his scheme. He denies his involvement instead draws it as the similarity to the historical figure Warren Hastings, whose trial for corruption in colonial India. The impeachment of Hastings serves as a thematic backdrop. Mallick’s invocation of “geographical morality” the idea that moral standards vary by context, further complicates his character, positioning him as a figure that operates outside conventional ethical frameworks. Mallick’s reference of Warren Hastings as a philosophical role model localizes his actions within a colonial legacy. Power often justified moral dilemmas. Gupta quotes this “market of ethics,” where altruistic acts are commercialized for social capital, as seen in Mallick’s tainted milk donation. By contrast, Damini’s activism represents an indigenous ethical stance, yet her death suggests the vulnerability of such resistance in a postcolonial world dominated by institutionalized power. It also challenges readers to consider whether morality is absolute or relative, especially in a postcolonial setting where power dynamics and cultural differences shape ethical judgments.

Ethical ambiguity, it is the term used to express the consequences where a code of ethical behaviour is imposed on another community or society. Byron turned by the ethical imperialism. The powerful people with status learn to prevent it and never lead towards vulnerability. Damini is responsible for the women refugees and orphan children. She looks after their welfare and fortitude. She dives into the streaming needs with her values and beliefs. In the novel the two principal characters Byron and Damini are the two sides of a coin. One is hegemonic and other is independent. One’s priority is business and other’s social work. “He always looked so good in black, says Nikhilesh” (Gupta 287). The black and white photograph of Byron Mallick of 1960s represents his honesty, innocence and moral standards. Those days were wonderful, but the time and reputation in society has swollen his greedy nature, to safeguard his social status he corrupted himself morally. No one is intended to be corrupted or amoral, but circumstances and hunt for status in their life change them.

#### **Max Gate’s Moral Dilemmas:**

Thomas Max Million Gate, the travel writer of America and narrator, is the prism through which the novel examines moral ambiguity. His return to Bengal for Damini’s funeral forces him to confront his own ethical quandary. Max is torn between loyalty to his

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friend Mallick and the need to find the truth about Mallick's actions. His personal history—particularly his affair with Ela, Damini's cousin and Mallick's god daughter, ends up with his marriage. This adds layers of guilt and introspection. Max's moral struggle is not just about judging Mallick but also about reconstructing his own failures, such as his betrayal of Damini by misrepresenting their collaborative work in his book.

Max's narrative voice, described as "vulnerable" and reflective, points out his attempt to construct a moral code that is both rigid enough to guide him and flexible enough to accommodate his weaknesses. His nostalgia for a more innocent past contrasts with the novel's present, where he faces the closing of metaphorical "doors" and a meditation on loss and evil. This internal conflict highlights the novel's exploration of how personal relationships and emotions, such as love and loyalty, can distort moral clarity.

Gupta explores the "market of ethics" where acts of charity are often tainted by self-interest or systemic corruption. Mallick's donation of adulterated milk is framed as a humanitarian gesture, but it masks a shady business transaction like selling damaged goods at cost price under the guise of philanthropy. This reflects real-world examples, such as the Clinton Foundation's donation of moldy, formaldehyde-laced trailers to post-earthquake Haiti, which the novel implicitly references to focus the prevalence of compromised ethics on a global scale. Gupta challenges readers to question whether individuals or institutions can ever act with pure intentions, or if ethical compromises are inevitable in a world driven by power and profit. The novel also traces the parallels to the prosecution of Warren Hastings, where British colonial morality was debated. Mallick's admiration for Hastings reflects his belief in a situational morality, where actions in one context (e.g., colonial India) are judged differently than in another (e.g., Britain). This historical allusion enriches the novel's exploration of how moral ambiguity is shaped by cultural and historical contexts.

Gupta's nonlinear, impressionistic narrative style enhances the theme of moral ambiguity. The story unfolds through Max's fragmented memories and snippets of conversation, creating a "dreamlike" effect that resists clear resolutions. The absence of a formal trial for Mallick within the novel, coupled with Max's failure to "conventionally" lay out a story, suggests a deliberate avoidance of definitive judgment. "Morality resides in the painfulness of on indefinite questioning" (Simone 57). This narrative choice reflects the novel's central question: Can humans dispense ethically sound judgments on their peers when truth and morality are so elusive?

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The novel's structure also invites readers to piece together the truth, much like Max does, forcing engagement with the "tantalizing ambiguities" of the characters' pasts. By prioritizing philosophical debates and emotional layers over a straightforward plot, Gupta underscores that morality is not a fixed construct but a dynamic, often contradictory interplay of perspectives. *So Good in Black* challenges readers to reflect on their own ethical compromises. It is a philosophical exploration of the limits of friendship and atrocity which turns the readers to introspect their sense of loyalty as a part of society. It scoops into dark and unseen corners of human relationships. It asks whether it is fair to condemn Mallick for alternating between moral codes when everyday actions like donating stale food or unwanted clothing reveal ethical compromises. It also explores the moral dislocations caused by passion, as seen in Max's obsessive love for Ela and his loyalty to Mallick. Gupta's portrayal of these tensions suggests that moral ambiguity is an inherent part of human experience, particularly in relationships marked by power, privilege, and cultural difference.

**Conclusion:**

Sunetra Gupta's *So Good in Black* beautifully explores moral ambiguity through the complex characters of Byron Mallick and Max Gate, the critique of institutionalized ethics, and a narrative structure that resists easy answers. By juxtaposing personal betrayals with systemic corruption and drawing on historical parallels, Gupta invites readers to question the nature of morality itself. Whether it is universal or contextual? Can good intentions justify harmful outcomes? These questions linger, making the novel a profound introspection on the elusive nature of ethical ambiguity.

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