
**Diasporic Discomfort: Identity and Belonging in Sunetra Gupta's
'A Sin of Color'**

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Abstract:

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* delves deeply into diasporic discomfort via issues of identity, belonging, and cultural alienation. This *novel* explores the lives of people dealing with emotional and cultural crises, contrasting their ties to their home cultures with the alienation they experience in their new environments. The struggles of unrequited love, family expectations, and the difficulties of self-exile faced by main characters like Debendranath Roy and Niharika highlight the profound effects of nostalgia and desire on diasporic life. The story alternates between Oxford and Calcutta, symbolizing the characters' conflicting personal and cultural identities. This study explores how diasporic people resolve their fractured selves while addressing the more general issues of hybrid identities, cultural assimilation, and the irresistible pull of home. Ultimately, *A Sin of Colour* depicts the complex network of diasporic life, highlighting the significant impact of cultural memory and the quest for identity on people who are separated from their own countries. Gupta's complex story prompts readers to consider the universal difficulties of belonging and the transformational potential of cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Belonging, Nostalgia, Cultural dislocation, Alienation, Assimilation, Hybridity, Exile, Tradition

Introduction:

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* intricately examines the issues of diasporic discomfort, identity, and belonging, offering a comprehensive investigation of cultural displacement and emotional exile. The story depicts individuals' conflict between their origins in Calcutta and their new existence in Oxford, highlighting the emotional distress and identity challenges inherent in the diasporic experience. Gupta illustrates the dichotomy of diasporic living by exploring unmet dreams, cultural hybridity, and the persistent allure of nostalgia, offering a tale that is both beautiful and heartbreaking.

The novel's protagonists, Debendranath Roy and Niharika exemplify the intricacies of the diasporic identity. Gupta eloquently states, "And there he was now, distant, instructing himself to appreciate without suffering what little he possessed of her" (Gupta 25). This underscores that diasporic pain often arises from unresolved emotional connections and yearning for home, elements of work. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" is pertinent here, as the characters experience estrangement from both their physical country and their interior identities.

Calcutta's environment significantly influences the characters' personalities and recollections. It symbolizes the cultural heritage and family connections, grounding the characters in their history as they adapt to their new lives overseas. Niharika's trip to Oxford is characterized by her attempt to harmonize her contemporary ambitions with the traditions of her childhood. The story depicts her departure from Calcutta as an emotional turmoil: "She endeavors to retain the memory of her companions like a basket of sparks, something that would perpetually expand in a new environment" (Gupta 85). Stuart Hall's claim that cultural identity involves both 'becoming' and 'being' resonates with Niharika's experience as she navigates the competing pressures of tradition and modernity in her diasporic life.

Critics have praised Gupta's examination of diasporic issues, especially her skills in portraying her characters' internal difficulties. Gupta's works frequently expose "a sensitive feeling of loneliness" that afflicts diasporic individuals, who are divided between the familiarity of their homeland and the alienation of the host country, as per Kaptan Singh (Singh 37). The conflict is seen in Debendranath's symbolic act of "drowning" in the Cherwell River, representing his struggle to reconcile his love for Reba with the moral and cultural imperatives of his past. Critics such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall have observed that the diasporic existence involves a continual negotiation of identity and belonging, issues that Gupta adeptly integrates into her tale.

Analysis

Navigating Longing and Identity

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* delicately explores issues of identity crisis, nostalgia, and cultural hybridity, providing a significant reflection on the emotional

and psychological challenges faced by diasporic persons. The protagonists, Debendranath Roy, and Niharika, represent the conflict between family obligations, cultural customs, and individual freedom, underscoring the intricacies of diasporic life. Gupta's narratives depict themes of dislocation and yearning, where the past and present consistently converge, forming a complex tapestry of memory and identity.

Debendranath and Niharika's experiences are fundamentally centered on an identity dilemma. Debendranath's unreciprocated affection for Reba, his brother's spouse, serves as a metaphor for his overarching battle with self-identity. Conflicted by his obligations to family traditions and his aspirations, he opts for exile at Oxford to alleviate his inner strife. Nonetheless, this physical separation does not alleviate his internal turmoil, as Gupta eloquently articulates: "He fled, seeking solace in academia, yet the specter of Mandalay pursued him, its walls imbued with a love he could never attain" (Gupta 47). This depiction highlights the psychological burden of being in a transitional state when neither the native place nor the host nation offers comfort. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "unhomely" effectively encapsulates the condition in which the diasporic person experiences alienation from both their roots and their current surroundings, resulting in a disjointed identity.

Niharika contends with the conflicting pressures of tradition and independence. Her choice to pursue overseas education represents her aspiration to liberate herself from the limitations of her cultural background. Nonetheless, her experiences at Oxford were imbued with a profound longing for Calcutta, highlighting the persistent influence of her background. Gupta exemplifies this dilemma as Niharika contemplates, "Despite departing from Calcutta, she bore its memories akin to a tapestry interlaced with threads of yearning and affection, a testament to her identity and the inescapable remnants of her past" (Gupta 85). Stuart Hall's claim that identity involves both 'becoming' and 'being' aligns with Niharika's experience as she navigates the intricacies of cultural integration while striving to maintain her self-identification.

Gupta articulates this effectively: "The Rivers of Mandalay flowed through his veins, an unbroken stream of memory that no distance could sever" (Gupta 123). This need transcends a simple geographical location, including the emotional and cultural ties that shape his identity. Kaptan Singh notes that diasporic writing often conveys "a sensitive feeling of loneliness, where the homeland becomes a sanctuary of the heart, eternally unattainable yet deeply present" (Singh 38). Debendranath's eventual return to Calcutta, albeit under terrible circumstances, underscores the inescapable allure of home to address the existential challenges faced by the diasporic person.

Niharika's nostalgia is intricately linked to her feelings of belonging. Her experiences at Oxford are characterized by a longing for the familiar comforts of Calcutta despite her efforts to embrace the opportunities presented by her new

surroundings. Gupta used striking imagery to illustrate this duality: "She envisioned her recollections of Calcutta as orchids flourishing in a hothouse, delicate yet vivid, sustained by the warmth of her yearning" (Gupta 108). This metaphor embodies the diasporic experience whereby people retain elements of their country as a source of resilience and identity while confronting the difficulties of cultural dislocation.

Cultural hybridity serves as a distinguishing trait of Gupta's diasporic characters who navigate the confluence of Indian and Western ideals. This hybridity is most apparent in the relationships that they establish, which often embody the tensions and potentialities of cross-cultural connections. Debendranath's union with Jennifer, an Englishwoman, provides a framework for analyzing these relationships. Marriage represents a fusion of cultures; however, it also underscores the difficulties of assimilation. Gupta illustrates Jennifer's difficulty in acclimating: "Jennifer wore a sari with the elegance of a bride, yet her heart longed for the refreshing breezes of her English moors, a quiet reminder of her displacement" (Gupta 131). This representation highlights the intricacies of cultural integration, whereby seeming harmony conceals a profound inner discord.

Niharika's relationship with Daniel Faraday, an Englishman, embodies the attraction and challenges of cultural hybridity. Their relationship, characterized by mutual respect and compassion, finally succumbs to cultural and emotional disparities. Gupta states, "The river separating them was not solely composed of water but represented divergent worlds, a divide neither could traverse without relinquishing aspects of their identities" (Gupta 139). This metaphor illustrates the inherent challenges of reconciling many cultural identities, where the desire for connection often conflicts with the necessity of maintaining individuality.

Critics have observed that Gupta's depiction of cultural hybridity is both intricate and indicative of broader diasporic experiences. Suzan Ilcan states, "For diasporic individuals, the journey of belonging is fraught with risks, as they navigate unfamiliar spaces while bearing the burden of memories and cultural expectations" (Ilcan 46). This insight corresponds with the challenges encountered by Gupta's characters, who endeavored to forge new identities while contending with the remnants of their past. Homi Bhabha rightly asserts, "The recesses Of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (Bhabha 13), a notion that reverberates throughout Gupta's depiction of diasporic existence. The novel's lasting significance is in its capacity to convey the emotional realities of the diaspora, providing readers with a painful reflection on the intricacies of home, identity, and belonging.

Characters and Settings

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* brilliantly depicts the linked lives of its protagonists, Debendranath Roy and Niharika, set against the symbolic backdrops of Calcutta and Oxford. Through these people and locales, Gupta delves into the issues

of unfulfilled love, emotional exile, and the duality of diasporic life, shedding light on the intricacies of identity and belonging.

Debendranath Roy's unrequited love for his sister-in-law, Reba, is the emotional center of his story. His strong passion, which he defines as "a love he could never confess, never act upon," becomes an excruciating weight, propelling him into self-imposed exile (Gupta 6). This psychological torture drives him to leave his ancestral home, Mandalay, and migrate to Oxford, trying to relieve the ache of unmet dreams. However, even amid Oxford's intellectual constraints, Debendranath stays linked to Reba and Mandalay's memories, implying that physical distance cannot break emotional links from the past. His final drowning, symbolized by his departure into the Cherwell River, signifies his complete surrender to the weight of his internal struggles. Critics such as Kaptan Singh have praised Gupta's ability to "use symbolic acts to convey the emotional devastation of diasporic lives," as seen by Debendranath's terrible destiny (Singh 40).

By contrast, Niharika represents the hardships of a contemporary diaspora woman divided between tradition and freedom. Her choice to leave Calcutta for Oxford represents her goals for intellectual and personal development. However, her trip is plagued by the challenge of balancing her cultural history with her desire for autonomy. Gupta depicts this battle via Niharika's thoughts: "She carried Calcutta with her, in memories of monsoons and music, a part of her that refused to be silenced by the grandeur of Oxford" (Gupta 85). While she strives to establish a new identity in the West, her devotion to her motherland is a distinguishing feature of her personality. Stuart Hall's concept of identity as a continual process of "being" and "becoming" is consistent with Niharika's perspective as she navigates the intersection of her history and present (Hall 223).

Diasporic Discomfort and "Unhomely" Spaces

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* examines the emotional and psychological upheaval faced by diasporic people, notably through the prism of Homi Bhabha's idea of the "unhomely." According to Bhabha, this idea depicts a place where the lines separating home and the outside world converge, leaving people living in different cultures feeling incredibly lost and dissonant (Bhabha 13). Debendranath Roy and Niharika, Gupta's protagonists, exemplify this condition of uneasiness as they traverse the intricacies of belonging and identity at the intersections of their hometown, Calcutta, and their diasporic lives overseas.

Gupta states: "He fled to Oxford, but the walls of Mandalay followed him, casting shadows over the quiet of the Cherwell" (Gupta 56). In one passage, The dissonance of being in a setting that neither feels like home nor gives a feeling of belonging exemplifies Bhabha's diasporic discomfort, in which "the private and the public become part of each other" (Bhabha 13).

Niharika also feels "unhomely" as she tries to balance her cultural

background with the benefits and hardships of her diasporic existence in Oxford. Despite her academic endeavors, she stays connected to memories of Calcutta, which Gupta describes as "a city that breathed within her, its rhythms of rain and music haunting her steps through Oxford's cobbled streets" (Gupta 85). Her failure to completely immerse herself in her new surroundings exemplifies Bhabha's concept of cultural in-between, in which the diasporic person exists in a state of constant transition and cannot fully align with either culture.

Critics such as Suzan Ilcan argue that diasporic discomfort is exacerbated by the "risks of longing and belonging, where displacement becomes a site of memory and loss" (Ilcan 46).

Navigating Identity and Belonging

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* is a thorough investigation of the complexity of diasporic life, with a nuanced representation of people stuck between two opposing cultures. Gupta's protagonists, Debendranath Roy and Niharika, reflect the emotional and psychological disorientation that typically comes with the diasporic experience. The novel's complicated storyline sheds light on how these people strive to find a feeling of belonging while balancing their cultural history with the demands of their new, sometimes alien environment. The characters, notably Debendranath and Niharika, are always in flux as they try to reconcile their emotional connection to Calcutta with their experiences at Oxford. Debendranath finds intellectual fulfillment at Oxford, but his love for Reba and memories of his ancestral home, Mandalay, torment him. According to Gupta, "Oxford, for all its opportunities, felt like a cold stone against the warmth of memories he carried" (123). Her inability to cut emotional links with his past highlights the dichotomy of diasporic living, in which the past and present are intimately intertwined, and the person must navigate between two opposing cultural contexts.

A conflict between tradition and freedom also characterizes Niharika's path. Her choice to study abroad reflects her desire for personal fulfillment and emancipation from family and cultural obligations. However, as Gupta notes, "No matter how far she traveled, the call of Calcutta echoed in her heart" (85). This persistent tug of the past emphasizes the challenge of genuinely belonging to one place, as Niharika is torn between the contemporary Western ideals represented by Oxford and the deeply established cultural traditions she brings from Calcutta.

The novel's thematic contributions focus on the role of nostalgia and memory in molding the diasporic experience. The protagonists' longing for their country is more than just a desire for a geographical location; it is also an emotional connection with their cultural background. As Niharika observes, "In every street of Oxford, I find fragments of my old life, pieces of Calcutta scattered in the winds of this foreign city" (Gupta 90). According to Suzan Ilcan, "For diasporic individuals, home is not just a place but a memory, a space where belonging is constantly renegotiated" (Ilcan

46). This idea is echoed in Gupta's depiction of characters who continually navigate the interaction between memory and current reality as they seek a place where they may experience a feeling of belonging.

According to critics such as Kaptan Singh, "the tension between modernity and tradition in diasporic literature often reflects the struggles of individuals torn between the demands of the past and the promises of the future" (37). Gupta's depiction of these problems in *A Sin of Color* is a moving analysis of the moral and emotional quandaries that affect the lives of persons in the diaspora.

A Sin of Color is a nuanced and multilayered investigation of diasporic discomfort, highlighting the intricacies of belonging, memory, and identity. Gupta's subtle depiction of the dichotomy of diasporic living, along with his examination of how people manage cultural frameworks, gives profound insight into the emotional and moral issues confronting those stuck between two cultures. Gupta's evocative characterizations and thematic contributions shed light on the common problems of diaspora, providing readers with a riveting meditation on the complexities of belonging in a fractured, globalized society.

Conclusion

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Color* delves into the complexity of diasporic living, integrating themes of identity, belonging, nostalgia, and cultural hybridity into an emotionally charged drama. Gupta depicts the struggle between personal aspirations and cultural expectations via the characters Debendranath Roy and Niharika, illuminating the internal tensions that diasporic people experience. Both characters represent the difficulties of combining their cultural history with the demands of contemporary life, emphasizing the displacement, desire, and emotional upheaval that comes with living in two worlds. The novel's investigation of memory and nostalgia emphasizes the long-term influence of one's hometown on identity, as well as the emotional and moral quandaries that people confront while negotiating the junction of modernity and tradition. Finally, *A Sin of Color* is a moving meditation on the fluidity of identity and the ongoing search for home in the diasporic experience.

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