Appendix II. A Review of Sunetra Gupta’s *So Good in Black*

Sunetra Gupta’s new novel, *So Good in Black*, is an exploration of the human condition and an exposition of a modern tragedy. Like a Greek tragic hero, the refined Bengali businessman Byron (Bankim) Mallick is a victim of *hamartia* and yet he is very modern. Byron’s world is populated by an eclectic mix of characters. There is Byron’s American friend Max Gate, who is a travel writer. There is Max’s brother-in-law Piers O’Reilly, who is a food critic. In London there is Piers’s mother Mary O’Reilly, who is patronized by Byron. There is Byron’s childhood friend Nikhilesh, who has spent a part of his life lecturing in African universities. Byron is the godfather of Nikhilesh’s daughter Ela, who is a classical dancer and is married to Arjun Mitra. There is also the loyal butler Vargas. And then there is the crusading journalist Damini.

It is Damini’s unnatural death that precipitates the crisis when Byron is accused of murdering her because she had discovered that the infant milk formula supplied from Byron’s factory to the refugee camp in Darjeeling, run by Damini, is adulterated with chalk. Arjun Mitra, having retrieved valuable clues from Damini’s computer, is hot on Byron’s heels to prove the charges of murder. Max returns to Calcutta, after a decade since his affair with Ela had ruined his marriage with Barbara, to attend Damini’s funeral. With Byron’s arrest being imminent, in a dramatic episode at Byron’s retreat in Digha, Max and Piers confront him to divulge the truth. Although Byron admits to adulteration of the milk, he avoids stating any involvement in the murder. The narrator, Max, sees the nature of the incidents as incredulous and as much as he wants to believe Byron he finds Byron’s arguments circling bespoke ethics.
In a sense the novel continues with the dichotomy between crime and sin that was explored by Sunetra Gupta in her previous novel *A Sin of Colour* about ten years ago. But in the earlier novel the motive impulse of the writer was to depict the freedom of choice whereas in the current novel it is the problem of creation of values that has the writer’s concentration. Sunetra Gupta’s novels are seeped in her preoccupation with existential philosophy. Existentialism demands of human beings to create their own values because there is no fixed morality in the world. In this endeavour the human conscience is the only guide. Byron Mallick does the same except that in doing so he encroaches upon Damini’s ethical sphere. Damini’s accidental death exposes Byron to the moral standards of the world and brings to test the platitudes of love and loyalty. Everyone loves Byron but most are found wanting in loyalty. And yet it is Max, the one who could never bring love and loyalty together in hisanguished relationship with Ela, who finds himself in an ambivalent state of loyalty to Byron.

The novel traverses a wide space from Digha to Calcutta to London to New York. It starts with the transit of Venus in 2004 and goes back and forth in time, a favourite technique of the writer. It incorporates resonant pieces from Tagore’s lyrics with anecdotes from the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings in 1787 and Edmund Burke’s condemnation of the Governor General of British India. The language of this novel is not as complex as that of Sunetra Gupta’s earlier works like *Memories of Rain* or *The Glassblower’s Breath* and yet it is striking. It has the capacity to evoke the images of Karna from *The Mahabharata* as well as Beelzebub from *Paradise Lost* with equal subtlety. Even though the writer seems self absorbed in her task of telling the story there is no over indulgence.
In the end it is memory that brings about redemption from all ambiguities of morality, loyalty, and love. Remembered knowledge is not a tool of authenticity here because it can purport unreliable narration. Nikhilesh recalls Eklavya, instead of Aswathama, as Dronacharya’s son, while narrating a parable from *The Mahabharata* to Ela’s daughter Adrija (Riju). But it is apt because it is Nikhilesh’s memory that fails due to old age. Moreover, it is not necessarily authenticity that redeems. Long ago Byron had promised Nikhilesh’s brother Sandipan to observe the transit of Venus and, even after Sandipan’s death, he keeps the solemnity of his promise by observing the phenomenon. In the same way, even after Byron’s death, Nikhilesh keeps his promise made to Byron to write about their childhood memories. It is this solemnity that redeems.

Publication details: