

## Desire and Forbidden Love in *A Sin of Colour* by Sunetra Gupta

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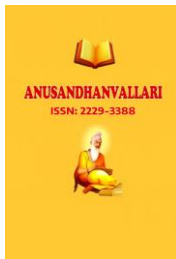
**Abstract:** This paper examines Sunetra Gupta's novel *A Sin of Colour* as a meditation on feminine desire, social repression, and forbidden love in a postcolonial Bengali context. By close-reading Gupta's narrative alongside feminist and postcolonial theory, the paper shows how the novel traces two intertwined love stories Debendranath's illicit passion for his brother's wife Reba, and his niece Niharika's affair with the married Englishman Daniel – each confined by strict social codes. Key texts include Gupta's novel itself, Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, and feminist theory by Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Spivak, and others. The analysis finds that the novel uses Gothic and symbolic motifs (the dilapidated house Mandalay, the river punt, the story of a freed pygmy) to illustrate how class, caste, and patriarchal norms constrict personal desire. Educated and modern as its heroine may be, Niharika remains bound by traditional expectations, resulting in psychological exile and tragedy. The study argues that Gupta's narrative highlights the emotional cost of silencing women's passions and invites readers to reconsider rigid gender norms.

**Keywords:** Bengali literature, feminist theory, postcolonialism, forbidden love, feminine desire, diaspora.

### Introduction

Sunetra Gupta's *A Sin of Colour* (1999) offers a nuanced exploration of how private desires collide with rigid social conventions in postcolonial India. The novel interlaces two generations: Debendranath Roy, who flees Calcutta in the 1950s because of his taboo love for his elder brother's wife Reba, and Debendranath's niece Niharika, who in the 1980s falls for the married Englishman Daniel Faraday while studying at Oxford. Although separated by over twenty years, both storylines culminate in literal or figurative death, as the lovers, unable to openly live their passion, ultimately choose self-exile. This paper argues that Gupta employs this double narrative to critique the patriarchal structures that label women's desire as a "sin" and relegate forbidden love to the shadows. By applying feminist theory to Gupta's text, this analysis demonstrates how the novel dramatizes feminine performativity, the erasure of female subjectivity, and the policing of sexuality. Crucial metaphors a haunted family home called Mandalay, the flowing river of Oxford, and the story of a caged pygmy symbolize the characters' emotional confinement and desperate yearning.

The broader issue under scrutiny is how postcolonial Bengali culture both inherits and resists patriarchal norms about marriage and sexuality. As Shoma Chatterji observes, "a heightening patriarchal preoccupation with marriage and sexuality placed the figure of the widow at the centre" of social debate in colonial Bengal. This historical legacy persists in the novel's world: even educated women like Niharika feel compelled to hide their loves, internalize shame, or disguise rebellion. Engaging feminist critics such as Butler (on gender as performance) and Irigaray (on phallogocentric culture) illuminates how Gupta's characters enact and sometimes



subtly subvert the scripts of femininity imposed upon them. In this way, *A Sin of Colour* can be read alongside earlier literary treatments of similar themes, such as Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, and with sensitivity to historical changes, including women's education and migration, as well as continuities like traditional gender roles in modern India.

### Historical Contextualization

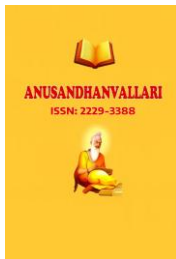
The Roy family and their dilemmas in *A Sin of Colour* are deeply rooted in Bengali social history. Colonial and early postcolonial Bengal was intensely patriarchal, especially regarding marriage and widowhood. As Chatterji notes, "a heightening patriarchal preoccupation with marriage and sexuality placed the figure of the widow at the centre" of social conflict in nineteenth-century Bengal. Even after the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, reformers and conservatives battled over widows' fate, and "the ubiquitous widow, draped in white, became a major social preoccupation." Simply being a widow carried stigma. This background explains Reba's life: as the first wife in a respectable family and later a widow, she occupies a delicate social position. Indranath Roy's reverence for her "angelic purity," feeling it "would be obscene to lay his hands upon her," reflects the idealization of womanhood under these norms. Reba's eventual death in pregnancy, and Indranath's pristine memory of her, exemplify the almost sanctified, yet repressive, status of married women in that era.

Earlier Bengali literature had already probed such tensions. Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1903) is a canonical example: its young widow Binodini grapples with desire for a married man even as society forbids her a new life. Nasrin writes that Binodini "fulfills her sexual desires with Mahendra and later rejects his marriage proposal," knowing "conservative society will not allow widow-remarriage." In Tagore's novel, the widow is an outsider who must ultimately renounce love; similarly, Reba and Niharika in Gupta's work find only guilt and alienation. Early reformist voices like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for change through the Widow Remarriage Act, but nationalists often derided Western-style reforms. Chatterji points out that the conflict between reformers and nationalists entangled the widow's question in identity politics. By the time India achieved independence and partition in 1947, these old norms persisted even as society changed. Gupta's characters straddle eras: Mandalay house was built by a British owner, then inherited by the Roys, and while independence "robs them of some of their wealth, they remain in the house." This historical layering colonial legacy, patriarchal tradition, partition upheaval provides the backdrop for forbidden attachments.

From a cultural standpoint, the Roys represent Bengal's *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) elite: upper-caste, English-educated, landowning families. For such families, propriety was paramount. The family name (Roy is a traditional Kayastha name) and the stately mansion Mandalay signify status. Within this *bhadralok* class, daughters and daughters-in-law were expected to uphold virtue and manage the home. Literary historian Benoy Kumar Sarkar described how Bengali elites cultivated values of self-restraint and authority. In *A Sin of Colour*, Reba was "Indranath's clever but childlike young bride" who became the mistress of Mandalay, yet her personal desires are never voiced. Other Bengali works, such as Bankimchandra's *Pather Dabi*, similarly suggest that personal passions are subordinated to duty. Gupta's novel evokes a milieu where early twentieth-century norms arranged marriages, modesty, widow purity still hold sway. In sum, *A Sin of Colour* situates its tragic love within Bengal's patriarchal tradition and its early literary explorations of women's thwarted desire, showing how long-standing social mores render certain loves "forbidden" and fraught.

### Technological / Socio-Political Shift

While rooted in tradition, *A Sin of Colour* also acknowledges India's modern transformations. By the novel's 1980s setting, more Indian women had access to higher education and global mobility. Both protagonists are highly educated Bengalis abroad: Debendranath earns degrees at Oxford, and years later Niharika studies there. Their stories reflect the post-independence trend of English-medium education for elite families. However, numerous social surveys find that despite modernization, many Indians still endorse traditional gender roles.



For example, a 2022 Pew study found that about nine-in-ten Indians “agree with the notion that a wife must always obey her husband,” and eight-in-ten say that if jobs are scarce, men should be given priority for employment. This discrepancy between political acceptance of women leaders and persistent domestic conservatism is mirrored in the novel. Debendranath marries Jennifer in England and holds a modern worldview, yet his idea of fidelity and obedience remains strict, as he re-enters the punt rather than break marital vows. Likewise, Niharika can travel the world, but as an unmarried woman in traditional society, she quickly feels the weight of shame over her affair.

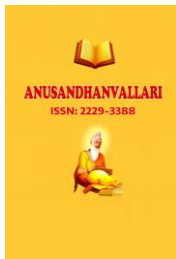
Gupta’s narrative also notes changing family expectations. Partition and economic shifts hollowed out many old estates. As a reviewer remarks, “the family’s fortunes fluctuate, and independence and partition rob them of some of their wealth, but they remain in the house.” This loss of wealth parallels many Bengali families whose businesses were divided across India and Bangladesh. The sons of Mandalay eventually “abandon it to ruin, making their own fortunes away from Calcutta,” reflecting younger generations migrating for opportunity. At the same time, the presence of a progressive doctor who “works with the poor” in Mandalay suggests some social awakening. Yet Gupta implies that neither diaspora nor education automatically frees individuals from tradition: physical distance from India does not erase the guilt they feel about love. Debendranath cannot cease to feel guilt, and Niharika claims the “wrongdoing” of her love even while in Oxford.

Moreover, the novel’s allusions emphasize global-cultural tensions. The house Mandalay itself is named after Kipling’s colonial poem, invoked twice in the story, suggesting a lingering imperial consciousness. Characters like Daniel Faraday, who is the son of an Indian lover and an English wife, and Morgan, a spiritual guru figure, embody East-West encounters. But ultimately, Gupta shows that technological connectivity and modern education have limits. India in the late twentieth century was still grappling with patriarchy: while women’s literacy has risen dramatically, social attitudes change more slowly than technology. In summary, the novel acknowledges shifts in gender roles and education in modern India but highlights the stubborn endurance of family expectations. The cosmopolitan heroine Niharika ends up reproducing the same constraints of caste and decorum as Reba, albeit in different clothes.

### Central Narrative Device or Metaphor

Sunetra Gupta’s novel is rich in symbolic structures that encode desire and repression. A dominant motif is the family mansion, Mandalay, in Calcutta. Reviewers call Mandalay the story’s “real hero”; it embodies family history and stasis. Gupta fills it with Gothic presence. The decaying rooms “are suffused with memories of the past” and populated by a faithful old gatekeeper. The first wife Reba, though dead, looms over the house like a ghost: Debendranath returns expecting Mandalay “as he left it,” but instead “finds ghosts of his past.” Critics note the novel’s clear echoes of du Maurier’s *Rebecca*: Reba, described by her husband in “angelic” terms, has “finally taken over all of Mandalay,” displacing the new wife, Neerupama. When Reba’s memory re-enters the house, Neerupama’s sanity fractures in a classic ‘madwoman-in-the-attic’ style. In this way, Mandalay functions as an extension of identity: to live in its rooms is to live under the weight of tradition.

Another key metaphor is the river, specifically Oxford’s Cherwell, and the punt Debendranath and later Niharika use. Water in the novel symbolizes both freedom and oblivion. For Niharika, the punt and the running stream are imbued with meaning: aided by Daniel, she “settled on the stream of the waters, a sign of the universe of movement, migration, change, and never-ending process of self-definition.” The river is both a space of escape and of no return. Indeed, the moment of final escape is literal: Debendranath disappears by stepping into the punt and drifting away, and years later Niharika and Daniel follow him into the punt and “enter a punt on the Cherwell... never to return.” In these images, the river carries away the past but also erases identity. A critic points out that Niharika’s research subject a pygmy who “eventually was released but then had committed suicide” after his freedom is a pointed metaphor. Like the orphaned pygmy freed from his cage only to kill himself, the novel’s characters attempt physical liberation but cannot live mentally outside their “cages.”



Visual and artistic motifs also recur. Gupta famously quotes Kipling's "On the road to Mandalay" twice, linking art and memory. Mirrors and paintings in the house often reflect locked gazes, as in *Rebecca* parallels, though these are implied in the narrative. The slowly decaying decor of Mandalay—"long second-hand furniture, old-fashioned carpets"—contrasts sharply with Oxford's clean college hallways. This contrast of East and West settings is painted vividly: Oxford's Cherwell, dreaming college quads, and Niharika's modern home in England come to life, just as "the slowly decaying house in Calcutta" does. The stark imagery of crumbling walls and lush Oxford greens underscores the themes of time and transformation. In sum, Gupta uses the mansion, the river, and their artistic echoes as narrative devices that externalize her characters' inner conflicts: the desire to break boundaries is always confronted by symbols of home, duty, and inescapable history.

### Identity, Shame, and Legal Structures

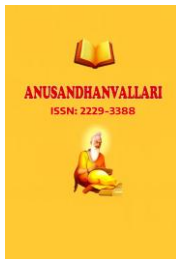
The characters' struggles also invoke larger issues of identity and the ways power and law constrain personal desire. Foucault's insights on power relations are relevant: he emphasizes that power permeates everyday interactions, noting that "between every point of a social body... between every one who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power." In *A Sin of Colour*, this is evident in the power dynamics of family and caste: Indranath holds authority over his household, and age hierarchy grants a married patriarch undue sway. Foucault also warns that power is not merely coercive but productive; it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse." The social norms around marriage and fidelity in the novel do precisely this: they produce guilt and shame as "knowledge" that certain loves are deviant. For example, Niharika internalizes social condemnation to the extent that she labels her love as "wrongdoing," demonstrating how power has been accepted and embodied.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern underscores that marginalized voices, such as those of women under patriarchy, are often unheard. In Gupta's novel, Reba and Niharika have virtually no public voice of their own: their feelings are narrated by men (Debendranath or Daniel) or kept in private journals. Spivak famously asks, *Can the subaltern speak?* In this case, the answer appears negative until the very end. The law in India also historically reflected male dominance: until 2018, adultery was a criminal offense under IPC Section 497, effectively branding a married woman's infidelity as a crime to be policed by her husband's consent. Although Gupta's novel predates 2018, the cultural residue remains visible. The legal invisibility of women's consent (Niharika could not legally marry Daniel without his divorce) parallels Spivak's point that women in patriarchies are "doubly colonized."

Thus, identity in the novel is shaped by external judgment: Niharika and Debendranath feel they must conceal or punish their true desires. The pressure of family and law "banishes" them from normal roles. Indranath's memories of Reba as "aloof" and "pure" suggest he learned to value inexpressiveness. The younger generation internalizes that mute shame: Niharika cannot publicly claim her love without destroying her identity. In sum, Gupta's novel dramatizes the Foucault-Spivak dynamic in which institutions and discourse create "wrongful" desires, and marginalized lovers must either disappear themselves or submit.

### Futurity and Global Transformation

What future does *A Sin of Colour* imagine for liberated desire or changing gender roles? The novel is largely pessimistic. Both love stories end in erasure rather than the possibility of open happiness. Debendranath never reunites with Reba or divorces to remarry, and Niharika dies before any social change can vindicate her. There is little sign of societal transformation: Mandalay remains locked in memory, and even the young doctor in Calcutta, though sympathetic, is a marginal figure. The only small hints of progress appear in secondary characters. For instance, the doctor's concern for the poor suggests compassion beyond class, but these elements do not meaningfully affect the protagonists' fates.



In theoretical terms, the novel fails to project a liberated utopia. Unlike some postcolonial fictions that offer reconciliation or the birth of a new hybrid culture, Gupta's world remains conflicted. Perhaps this is intentional: the novel demonstrates that even in globalized times, local constraints endure. The brief gatherings of Oxford bohemians Daniel, Niharika, Morgan suggest a counterculture, but ultimately the dominant narrative prevails. Future-oriented readings might note that the story insists on remembrance and mourning: Reba and Niharika are gone, but "ghosts" linger. In that way, the novel's structure moving backward through secrets and memory emphasizes historical continuity over future rupture.

One might also interpret the ending as a form of ultimate resistance: by escaping the rules entirely, the characters refuse the limited roles offered to them. Yet ethically, this is a bleak "solution." For readers, the absence of a happy ending compels reflection: it raises the question of how society should change to allow love and difference. In a global sense, Gupta's narrative suggests that the journey toward gender justice remains incomplete. New generations in Indian society would need to reckon with the ghosts of traditions, just as the reader is asked to reckon with the tragedy presented.

### Philosophical Deepening

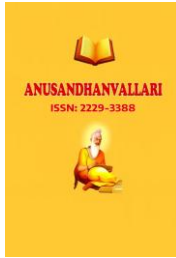
The moral tone of *A Sin of Colour* encourages reflective judgment. It does not assert a simple moral. On one hand, love traditionally deemed illicit here an uncle's passion for his sister-in-law, a niece's love for a married man is shown with compassion and complexity. On the other, the novel does not wholly absolve these desires, as it portrays consequences starkly. The title itself *A Sin of Colour* invites philosophical reading. It may suggest "sin" as something taboo, and "colour" possibly referencing the faded walls of Mandalay or the metaphorical "color" of social staining, such as tainting caste lines. In any case, the novel blurs right-and-wrong boundaries: the lovers feel guilty but also believe that their love is genuine and transcendent. This dissonance reflects a postcolonial ethics that questions blanket judgments.

Philosophically, the story challenges utilitarian or duty-based ethics that might unambiguously condemn adultery. Instead, it leans toward a virtue ethics or care perspective: the reader is asked to care about individual suffering. Gupta subtly aligns the reader's sympathies with Niharika and Debendranath, who must navigate between desire, an "ambassador of life," and duty, the law of their world. By not depicting any character as wholly villainous even Daniel Faraday is portrayed as compassionate though trapped by marriage the novel prompts readers to reconsider whether societal prohibitions are just. In effect, it places moral responsibility on readers: can these lovers be indicted, or must the norms that made their love "sinful" be critiqued? This provokes conceptual reconsideration of concepts such as "crime," "family honor," and "woman's virtue." Thus, the narrative itself becomes a space for ethical reflection rather than moral preaching.

### Conclusion

In *A Sin of Colour*, Sunetra Gupta has crafted a rich, multi-layered narrative that interrogates how feminine desire is constrained by social forces. Through the dual tales of Debendranath and Niharika, she demonstrates that love, even when true and deep, can become fatal when clashing with patriarchal norms, class prerogatives, and cultural shame. Using feminist-theoretical lenses, this analysis has shown how Gupta's work resonates with Butler's concept of gender as performance, Irigaray's critique of the absent female subject, and Foucault and Spivak's insights on power and silence. The novel's central metaphors a haunted house, a flowing river, and the story of a caged animal vividly embody the characters' inner conflicts. Historically grounded in Bengali traditions and postcolonial realities, the story ultimately remains stark: neither spiritual nor political change is guaranteed, and the future of liberated desire remains more a question than an answer.

Nevertheless, *A Sin of Colour* conveys a clear ethical message: it asks readers to empathize with those who love against the rules. Gupta's prose, suffused with memory and loss, insists that Reba and Niharika be seen as full persons, not moral aberrations. The tragedy on the Cherwell is not a romantic fantasy but a social indictment.



In conclusion, the novel argues that the true 'sin' lies in a society that colors love as forbidden. By blending postcolonial context with feminist theory, this analysis has shown how Gupta's narrative challenges readers to reconsider the line between duty and desire, calling into question the justice of the norms that forced her characters into self-exile. It reminds readers that what is forbidden by social colour may still be fundamental to the human heart.

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