

The theme of
isolation in 'the god of
small things' and 'the
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Both of Roy's novels explore with the isolation of individual characters from each other, from society as well as from the overall narrative arch. The use of varying narrative form furthers this theme by isolating readers from the fragmented stories. Isolation is seen as almost essential in Roy's novels, where characters must transcend the harshness of Indian society to become truly free- where the transgression of boundaries is thresholds into isolation.

Isolation, in both novels, is presented as something organic and inevitable, that allows marginalised characters to find sanctuary in their solitude. Roy presents Estha's isolation as an 'octopus' that 'enfolded him...like a foetal heartbeat', The imagery of the 'octopus' and the 'heartbeat' alludes to the organicism of Estha's isolation. This suggests that his alienation works as part of an ecosystem, where his isolation is something that, though, marginalises him from society, at the same time it allows him to become unified with the natural world. The fact that quietness 'spread' inside him is, in itself, paradoxical, as the silence, despite being the absence of something, becomes a symbol of growth. This is furthered by Estha's isolation, despite being seen as a 'dry season' or absence of life, is symbolised by nature. The natural image is contrasted with the stark image of the 'squirted inky tranquilliser on his past'. The permanency of ink mirrors the permanency of the trauma and guilt of the deaths of Ammu, Sofie-Mol and Velutha, where the idea of the organic contrasts the sterile and non-fading ink. Furthermore, the fact that Estha is described as 'inanimate' and 'numb' yet has animated 'tentacles inching along (his) insides' demonstrating the contrast of the internal movement, as the organic versus the external stillness, as the

isolation. Similarly, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's isolation can be symbolised by the graveyard that she calls 'Jannat', where she 'lives like a tree'. 'Jannat', meaning paradise, creates images of the Garden of Eden and everlasting vitality, yet this is contrasted to the reality of the death and decay of the graveyard, yet this is where Anjum finds a sense of belonging. The graveyard, being a similar image to the 'dry place' inside Estha, shouldn't naturally grow and nurture- yet both Anjum and Estha become symbols of the organic. Anjum, 'like a tree', becomes one with her surroundings, a part of the tree that is rooted within the place of her isolation. Roy incorporates nature and character allowing both Estha and Anjum to become more disconnected from society.

Interestingly, in *The God of Small Things*, this image of the river also creates a symbol for an isolated sanctuary from the weight of society. Ammu and Velutha's secret affair takes place right next to the river. Before Velutha meets Ammu, he is floating in the river, and as someone who has been rejected from Indian society, as an 'untouchable' caste. Roy presents Velutha as one with nature, he is a 'log' or 'serene crocodile', and just as many characters in both novels become a part of nature. The river provides escape for Ammu and Velutha during their inter-caste affair, allowing them to become isolated from the society that forbids their love. The natural world is, again, a paradise for the outcasts. During the affair, the river and the night are the only ones to witness the lovers' 'dance', the river reverses the feeling of isolation and becomes complicit in the affair. The lovers are almost reborn because of the 'holy' river alluding to the Ganges which, in the Indian tradition, provides holy cleansing. Similar to the river in *The God of Small*

Things that holds secrets of all the characters, in Ministry of Utmost Happiness, graveyard's resident dung beetle, Guih Kyom, is the all-seeing eye at the end of the novel who waits to 'save the world in case the heavens fell'. The exploration of nature as omniscient means that characters in both novels are never truly isolated from nature is like God in the sense that it provides constant sanctuary both internally and externally. However, the river eventually becomes a symbol of the corrupt, it 'smells of shit' and 'ferried garbage to the sea', the natural is effectively exploited by the secrets of the family (the death of Sofie-Mol and the lovers' affair) just as it is exploited by the industrialisation of India, and fails to provide the sanctuary that it once did.

The patchwork narrative of The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, where stories seemingly don't interlink until the end (through the variety of narrative styles i. e news clippings, diary entries and varying points of view) and allow for Anjum and Tilo's isolation from the other's narrative. Despite the two protagonists' separation, they are paralleled in the fact they are both the unconventional within Indian society: Tilo as a divorced activist who associates with Kashmiri militants and Anjum as a hermaphrodite. However, the isolation of the two storylines ends when they have interwoven through them both seeking sanctuary in the 'Jannat Guest House'- a place for the outcasts. The idea of the 'puzzle piece' narrative is evident in both novels, as Roy plays with the chronology of the stories, making incidents like Velutha's arrest or Sofie-Mol's funeral seem isolated from each other. The fact that these individual stories tie together in the larger narrative makes each ordinary moment becomes more heightened and poignant because it is

viewed through the complex lens of both past and present. Interestingly, the spiralling narrative in *The God of Small Things* mirrors the repetitive and spiralling nature of 'Kathakali', a south Asian dance that is a prominent motif in the novel, and rather than isolating each fragment of the narrative, the individual stories tie together as parts of the dance tie together.

Moreover, the non-linear timelines make both novels jarring, and this often makes the reader feel disconnected from a narrative as they are being forced to jump through time and space in both novels, giving the reader a sense of displacement and isolation from the stories, mirroring the characters' sense of displacement from their society. Roy describes her novel as 'spherical'¹ and suggests that readers inhabit every time frame of the novel. Perhaps, rather than feeling displacement, by 'blurring the dividing line between author and reader'² Roy invites the reader to put the pieces of the novel jigsaw back together. This is again shown in Tilo's awareness of the fragmentation of the novel that she is in, where she asks 'How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything', again Roy invites readers into the world of the novel by breaking the wall between reader and narrator. This allows the novel to adopt a theme of universality, where pieces of the 'shattered story' have to be told through the lens of 'everything'. This idea is resonated in *The God of Small Things* where the narrator laments the fact that it is 'so easy to shatter a story'. Though in one sense this could uproot the reader from the plot of the novel, however it could also allow reader to more receptive to the painful questions that Roy asks (e. g. about caste and gender prejudice)

because they can scrutinise small fragments of the novel and therefore ultimately feel more 'immersed' in the world of the novel.

Roy's novels contrast in their use of setting, where in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* the setting reinforces the notion of isolation and disconnection, where in *The God of Small Things* the setting is a unifying force. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the fragmentation of settings, moving from Delhi to the broken state of Kashmir makes the reader disconnected from the space of the novel. This is epitomised in the use of the 'flyover' motif that symbolises the rapid urbanisation and 'towers of glass and steel', while underneath seethes the "unpaved, unlined, unlit, unregulated, wild and dangerous" city of the destitute. In many ways the isolated underground world of Delhi represents the inner disposition of many of the characters, where the materiality of the road and the boundaries that it represents, overarches and oppresses the chaos of the uncharted underground, symbolising the disconnected psyche of individuals. The vastness and ruralness of Kashmir contrasts the denseness of Delhi. On the other hand, there are parallels between the teeming and crowded streets of Delhi to the vast valley of Kashmir. As mentioned before, the graveyard in Delhi is seen as 'Jannat', similarly, Kashmiri warzone is 'heavenly beauty', references to how death and paradise are interlinked heighten the theme of poignancy, and this illustrates how despite the external setting, isolation is inescapable. These parallels create a sense of relation and familiarity between the two starkly dichotomous settings. In *The God of Small Things*, the denseness of Ayenanman where 'thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks', and the days are 'hot' and 'brooding', engulfs the reader into the setting and

the 'humid(ity)' of the climate steeps the whole novel, and this pathetic fallacy implies the total immersion of the reader into the novel, as if they've sunk into the setting. Not only the reader, but the characters are almost bonded together by the humidity of the air. Here we see tangible 'boundaries blur(ing) as tapioca fences take root and bloom', creating a sense of cohesion as opposed to isolation. Mistry argues that the tradition of the postcolonial Indian novel is a preoccupation with past traumas, especially Partition of 1947. Yet, despite this, Roy chooses to set her first novel far away from the northern lines of partition, whereas her second, is set in the very thick of disputed partition borders: Kashmir. This reveals the contrast between the two settings; the southern Kerala town of Ayemenam that epitomises cohesion and oneness, and the Northern Kashmiri valley that symbolises fragmentation and isolation.

It is evident that in both novels, that the individual ostracisation of characters is represented through boundaries. The 'hijra' community, in Ministry of Utmost Happiness, describes this as 'The riot is inside us. The war is inside us. Indo-Pak is inside us'. Roy uses the metaphor of political upheaval of the world around the characters to parallel the same notions of violence, war and tearing apart within the psyche of the 'hijra' community. It's interesting how Roy uses the boundaries of 'Indo-Pak' to represent the tearing apart of identity and the cause of psychological turmoil, as the identity struggles of the hijra community are reflected in the religious boundaries created because of Partition. The displacement of individuals because of the boundaries forced upon them is a recurring theme in both novels. The fact that Tilo's ostracisation led her to the Kashmir Valley, the

site of an unending conflict between the Indian military and Kashmiri insurgents, again, shows the physical political boundary of Kashmir becomes a symbol for Tilo's transgression into isolation. The Cochin airport becomes another physical boundary or 'iron railing' that separates 'the Meeters from the Met, and the Greeters from the Gret'. The repetition of 'cement' to reference every part of the building highlights the bureaucracy and repressiveness felt by the weight of international borders, the same border that isolates

Rahel and Estha from one another in their years of estrangement. In Roy's novels, boundaries exist to be transgressed but though transgressions seem like they free characters from 'imprison(ment) within the laws and rules' of society '5, yet these very transgressions can be seen as the thing that governs their isolation. The way in which character's come together at the end of each novel symbolises the desperate need for closeness and end of isolation. The twins' making love is described as 'quietness and emptiness fitting together like stacked spoons', where rather than the incest being an image of the grotesque, it becomes a beautiful union of two halves coming together. The twins have been through 'hideous grief' and the encounter is an implication of the sharing of grief and attempts at mitigating their trauma, and not about the sexuality. 'Quietness' and 'emptiness' are both 'hollow' yet when the two come together, they create something whole. It is almost essential that their need for closeness had to be physical, as the physicality of their bodies seems to be the only things that they have left, as their shared psyche has been eroded by their past, and it no longer fits as they used to in their youth. The motif of 'small things', such as 'stacked

spoons' and 'small creatures', come to represent the bigger things, such as trauma or a 'brutal, damaged world'. Roy often uses juxtaposition between the physical and the abstract to heighten the theme of isolation and poignancy as readers forced to examine minute details of the physical, yet these details are almost metaphysical in what they represent. Furthermore, through incest, Rahel and Estha break the 'love laws' that govern 'who should be loved and how and how much', and this suggests Roy's commentary about how love should be fluid. These aforementioned, physical boundaries, in this case of the 'love laws' is the very thing that breaks relationships apart, but the crossing of these stark lines seems to help characters find sanctuary in their isolation. Similarly, in Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Tilo and Musa's union is described as 'the smoke of her into the solidness of him...The quietness of her into the quietness of him.' Again the 'quietness' of individuals represents the harrowing effects of trauma, where characters have literally been silenced by their isolation. Roy uses the same metaphors of the tactile e. g. 'solid' and the surreal e. g. 'smoke' in both novels to explore how isolation can be both real and abstract, illustrating the all-consuming nature this theme.

Transience is another theme that highlights isolation in both novels. This is seen through Tilo being a 'paper boat on a boisterous sea, completely alone' creating an image of her being a vagrant, her always being on a journey and displaced from society. Tilo is often characterised by her transience, and she's often 'unreachably alone' or a 'camel through the desert', and this creates a sense of impermanence, as she is never rooted in one situation, resulting in her isolation from time, space and reality as she's in a bubble.

This is mirrored in the character of Musa who's 'ties to his old life were gradually and deliberately erased'. Musa and Tilo reflect each other's 'emptiness'. Roy's two most isolated characters are the ones that become transients and are eventually buried in 'unmarked graves', making them not only impermanent in life, but also in death. Furthermore, In The God of Small Things, Velutha is used to represent transience, he carries 'no luggage' from 'boyhood' and is characterised as being in a 'cocoon' creating images of change and fleetingness. However, arguably, the weight of the 'untouchable' stratification, though isolates Velutha, it also weighs him down by the sheer importance placed on his caste- preventing him from being transient as he is never truly freed of these social titles. Interestingly, to contrast this, Ammu and Velutha's affair is in fact characterised by transience, where they look to 'Naaley' or 'tomorrow' for their next encounter, and the only faith they have is the prospect of another fleeting encounter. This suggests that when the two are together, they break the caste lines or 'Love Laws' that dictate their lives, and by doing so transcend the harsh regimentation of society, and find sanctuary in their transience and isolation.

Overall, Roy's use of isolation as a result of transgression, trauma and political upheaval characterises the two novels and intensifies the poignancy of the stories. Isolation is presented as essential for individuals to transcend the tragedies of the narrative, and for readers to resonate with and feel catharsis for the fragmentation of these 'shattered' stories.

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