

# The detrimental impacts of colonialism in the god of small things

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With Roy deriving the reference of India as the Heart of Darkness from Joseph Conrad's novel titled as such, it is apparent that the God of Small Things mirrors Conrad's criticism on the detrimental and lasting impacts of colonialism. Sophie Mol, a clear metaphor of British powers, arrives at Ayemenem with the obsession of 'taming' the east, which is portrayed as inferior and backwards. Her drowning and subsequent death is thus symbolic of the British Empire's eventual failure to exert complete control over India when it regains independence in 1947. However, India's independence clearly comes at a price. Upon Sophie's death, the Ipe household, a metaphor for India, is left traumatised. The degree of their trauma is displayed through Roy's kaleidoscopic narrative that disrupts linear time with foreshadowing and flashbacks. The fragmented timeline mimics the psychological effects of victims of colonisation, as alluded by Ammu and the twins, who are haunted by their past. Ammu to her death, 'refused to acknowledge the passage of time' in order to deny the disintegration of her family; whilst the twins are rendered into 'frozen two-egg fossils' who have incestuous sex as a result of not being able to comprehend the depth of their trauma. It is evident that Roy actively condemns colonisation through the effects on the colonised. Interestingly, she also explores the resulting effects of colonisation on the coloniser. By bringing Sophie to India, Margaret Kochamma was 'haunted by that decision for as long as she lived.', which, given the strong criticism on colonisation and imperialism in contemporary society — guilt from the British government and general public — seems like a plausible reaction to the atrocities committed by the British Empire. Perhaps Sophie's death also directly expresses the literal truth in Rahel's

seemingly preposterous statement, ' If she gets dirty, she'll die'. Rahel's ' dirt' represents her ' Indianness', which the West actively discriminates against. Sophie's consequent death after mingling with Rahel hence serves as a hyperbolic form of karmic justice, that Roy employs to express the extent of her resentment. Although it is undeniable that Sophie's death is most directly caused by Estha, it is impossible to ignore the colonised's self-annihilation — Kari Saipu's suicide, when the Indian boy he was raping is taken away from him. The rape is no doubt a personification of the coloniser's exploitation of India's natural resources, and upon losing India as a colony, the British Empire was subjected to a massive economic decline. In this way, Roy presents colonisation as a double-edged sword — there are no winners or losers.

When Velutha is murdered in the History House, a symbol of the lasting effects of colonisation, Rahel's plastic wristwatch that has the ' time painted on it' reading ' ten to two' is abandoned in it. The watch's defiance of the passing of linear time communicates the permanence in the atrocities of colonialism: even though the History House has successfully transformed itself into a luxury hotel, the Meenachal River next to it — the river that took Sophie's life, was ' thick and toxic', implying the futility of appearance as the coloniser's impact on the former ' abandoned rubber estate' cannot be disguised. The passing on effect of the detriments of colonialism resembles a hereditary disease that plagues the land of the colonised, and its legacy is perpetuated through the indoctrination of ideals, such as White superiority, within family units through generations. Pappachi's insistence on imitating of the British, who he views as superior, is almost psychotic and absurd: ' until

the day he died, even in the stifling Ayemenem heat, every single day, Pappachi wore a well prepared three-piece suit and his gold pocket watch'. Although Chacko recognises him as an 'Anglophile', he is still affected by the residue effects of Pappachi's indoctrination of White superiority throughout his upbringing. Chacko's hyperbolic love for Margaret Kochamma, who 'he adored for not adoring him', exhibits the same streak of illogic inherited from Pappachi. Despite Margaret's mundanity, Chacko deemed her 'self-sufficiency' remarkable and spoke of her with a 'peculiar pride' after their divorce. He objectifies himself and justifies Margaret's 'trad[ing] in' of him for an average Englishman, who he considers 'better'. Despite subconsciously mimicking an English aristocrat ('he read classics. And rowed for Balliol.'), it is evident that he is still somewhat grounded in his traditional Indian outlook of marriage that operates on imbalanced power politics ('it was impossible for him even to consider making the bed... didn't apologise for the cigarette burns in the new sofa.') The irony in the subsequent breakdown of Chacko's marriage illustrates the 'man of two worlds' theory, proving the truth in its claim that 'no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them'. Interestingly, Kari Saipu proves the theory also works in reverse: although he 'spoke Malayalam and wore mundus', the colonised clearly does not think he has integrated himself into their culture, which is evident in the sarcasm of his nickname, 'The Black Sahib'. Roy's comical insertion of quotation marks in 'The Englishman who had "gone native"' highlights language and dress as a superficial, rather than intrinsic understanding of culture.

However, the importance of language in perpetuating the erosion of the colonised's identity as a result of colonisation cannot be downplayed. The modern definition of 'Anglophile' is a lover of the English, yet during the late 60s, it was 'Person well disposed to the English'. The passivity in 'well disposed' speaks nothing of 'love', but rather promotes the colonised to internalise the oppression they face and serve the British. The contradiction in meanings alludes to the subjugation of the colonised under colonial power upon being imposed with a language that they do not have a thorough understanding of, hence enabling colonisers to create history and alter interpretations to their own will. Chacko extends the belief that 'planting the language of empire in a new place — remains the most potent instrument of cultural control' to include history, which colonisers erode due to the colonised's incomplete understanding of the imported language. For history to be understood, one has to 'go inside' — however, the juxtaposition of 'go inside' and 'trapped outside' suggests that this is impossible as 'their footprints had been swept away'. Without access to one's history, the colonised like Pappachi are 'brought into a state' of Anglophilia. The passivity 'brought' exudes signifies a lack of choice and forced understanding in the colonised, which echoes Rahel's love for Sophie as '[they're] firstcousins. So [they] have to', despite this love's baselessness and absurdity as she just met her.

Sophie's 'reject[ion] outright and extremely rudely, all of Baby Kochamma's advances and small seductions', illustrate the colonised's lack of self awareness and internalised racism that fuels their fruitless idolisation of the

coloniser. Some, like Kochu Maria, are deluded into thinking the English love them back. She makes unwitting remarks like ‘ When she grows up, she’ll be our Kochamma, and she’ll raise our salaries’, when in reality the English underpaid them to accelerate the growth of the British economy, through retardation of India’s capital formation. Kochu’s lack of education perhaps contributed to her internalised racism, for instance, the first comment she made of Sophie Mol is ‘ She has her mother’s colour’, reflecting the obsession and awe with whiteness, which is associated with purity. Despite Pappachi’s Anglophilia, his job as an Imperial Entomologist subjects him as an instrument in the colonial machine that alienates Indians from their own environment and culture. Roy invokes the study and classification of insects as metaphorical to the colonisers’ scrutiny and systematic definition of the colonised’s land, making it understood on their terms. Similarly, Baby’s ornamental garden cultivated through botanical knowledge acquired from the University of Rochester, subjects her as a tool to colonial attempts in taming and controlling Indian environment. Unsurprisingly, she is not only oblivious to her own circumstances, but is also obsessed with pleasing the English. This is demonstrated through her constant, yet rather embarrassing attempts, such as questioning seven year old Sophie on Shakespeare’s *Tempest* and making the twins ‘ rehearse’ an English car song ‘ all week long’.

Although ‘ a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe’s presence and position in their native land with the intellectual weapons of Europe itself’, Chacko and Ammu’s situation

prove this futile. Chacko preaches and recognises that they are ‘ Prisoners of War’ that ‘ adore our conquerers and despise ourselves’, yet he chooses to ‘ Marry our conquerers’. He also turns a blind eye to the struggles back home, ignoring Mammachi’s detailed letters on ‘ her sordid squabbles with her husband and her worries about Ammu’s future’, as he was besotted with ‘ the long back white girl that waited for him’. Upon Ammu’s outburst, ‘ must we behave like some damn Godforsaken tribe that’s just been discovered’, at Margaret’s racial insensitivity, he immediately comes to Margaret’s defence and asks Ammu to apologise. Chacko’s paradoxical nature sheds light onto the deep indoctrination he has been subjected to, although he is consciously aware of the colonised as the oppressed, he subconsciously subjects himself to the coloniser. This perpetuates Ammu’s futility in protesting against racial injustice, proving ‘ Native women occup[y] the residual and unspecified category of the Other’. The alienation, or ‘ Otherness’, that native women are subjected to is also reflected in Kochu’s deprivation of education, which renders her illiterate with no chance of upward social mobility, thus giving recognition to denial of spoken and written word as an active tool of oppression. Arguably, India’s reluctance to progress in some ways, such as its endorsement of warped gender politics, may produce impacts as detrimental as those of colonisation. Prominent female figures within a community, namely Mammachi, unknowingly abuse her power by supporting India’s backwards sexual politics that regulated female sexuality, consequently perpetuating the low social status native women occupy. She dismisses Chacko’s sexual liaisons as ‘ Men’s Needs’, yet demonises Ammu’s sexual desires and validates their physical and familial punishment to her as

a consequence. On a wider scale, the general public also actively contributes to strengthening the defines between different social strata by continuing the practise of the Caste system, although it was outlawed in 1950. Through endorsing and normalising sexual discrimination and classism within society, Indians are in fact further enabling themselves to be ethnically discriminated against by the colonisers, which paradoxically, the educated, like Chacko, so condemn.

Although Roy presents the impacts of colonialism as most potent and direct, which is seen through the lasting trauma of the Ipe family, it is undeniable that India's backwards social and sexual politics contributed in perpetuating these detriments. However, despite their difference in terms of influence, they all operate on the power of generational indoctrination, which the book's sequel, *The Ministry of Upmost Happiness* confirms. The sequel's hauntingly similar depiction of its characters' constant battle towards self-assertion in a society held in thrall to the taxonomy of class and Caste, appears to be a mere continuation of that in *The God of Small Things*. Perhaps even Roy herself is not convinced by her repetitive statement, 'Things can change in a day', after all.