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Rahel

A Study of Self-Image in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Introduction

The behaviour of literary characters can sometimes be both puzzling and thought-provoking. As they are creations, any strangeness or inconsistency could obviously be blamed on the author, but there is also the possibility that clues in the text have passed unnoticed due to the reader's lack of knowledge or experience. Therefore thorough analyses of characters may be rewarding. Apart from understanding novels better, new perspectives and important insights can be gained on other subjects during the process. In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* it may seem strange that the protagonist Rahel lets twenty-three years pass without contacting her brother as they are described not only as intimate, but as Siamese twin souls. Although this obscurity *per se* might not be of high significance, the attempt to explain it led to an exploration of self-image formation and its consequences. This topic becomes especially interesting if self-image is viewed not only as an outcome of arbitrary circumstances in an individual's life, but also as a consequence of societal structures.

In a study of self-image in relation to society, Rahel makes a fruitful object as her child perspective illuminates the process of social construction, making issues as gender, traditions and colonial heritage transparent, but despite this there is little written about Rahel. Indeed, most essays on Roy's novel concentrate on the liaison between Ammu and the untouchable Velutha, and its 'transgressive' nature. The main discussions concern whether the erotic scenes are politics or conventional elements to satisfy a Western audience, and whether the book does or does not give voice to marginalised groups such as untouchables and women. Other articles centre on trauma, the binaries of big God and small God and what they represent, or language and narrative techniques. This wide

variety of articles gives a hint about how multifaceted *The God of Small Things* is and previous work provides valuable and divergent perspectives on the novel. Something that becomes clear is that the interpretation depends largely on how the narrator and the narratee are perceived, which is by no means unequivocal due to Roy's style. As Elisha Cohn points out, Roy "differentiates between two modes: a public narrator who decries pollution and sardonically comments . . . and a private narrator who harmonizes with her characters" and the borders are sometimes unclear (162-63). Furthermore, Roy shifts perspective between various characters, although Rahel is the principal reflector. Nevertheless Rahel receives little attention in previous work and her self-image is not the main issue in any of the articles referred to in this essay, "Rahel"¹. However, some articles give clues to how Rahel is perceived. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham calls Rahel "a particular kind of child who became a particular kind of adult" and suggests that she "is represented as relatively unsocialized, . . . without friends and caring relatives whose concern would draw her into a network of social relations and the values that govern those relations" (381). Needham claims that Rahel represents "a consciousness relatively unhampered by (dominant) society's ideological determinants" and argues that this gives Rahel "relatively open access to, and sympathetic identification with, the subaltern . . ." (381). Needham's observations describe important narrative functions Rahel has in the novel, but when seeing Rahel as "a particular kind of child", Needham fails to acknowledge the reasons for Rahel's character and social situation. Needham portrays Rahel as someone who walks through life unaffected by society rather than someone who is formed by and almost destroyed by it, which is the stance "Rahel" will take. Symptomatically, articles dealing with trauma share the latter view of Rahel. Joanne

¹ To avoid misunderstandings this essay will hereafter be referred to as "Rahel".

Lipson Freed observes that the separation of the twins reinforces the trauma and contributes to their feelings of “complicity in Sophie Mol’s death and Velutha’s murder” and that “Rahel’s vacant eyes, serves as a continuing testimony to the personal damage that can be done by the social and political forces . . .” (225). Thus, Lipson Freed recognises society’s part in Rahel’s character. Furthermore, she stresses that Rahel and Estha feel rejected even before the tragedy and exemplifies this with *The Sound of Music* episode, where the twins measure themselves against their cousin and the children in the film (225). Amar Nath Prasad concurs with these views, going even further back: “They see the quarrels between their mother and father in Assam [and] in the Ayamenem house, they are treated as outsiders. [Baby Kochamma] constantly remind[s] them of their isolation, their sinfulness etc” (188). Like Lipson Freed and Prasad, “Rahel” will look at a wider context than merely the tragedy and its aftermaths. The latter dominates the articles of Elizabeth Outka and L. Chris Fox. However, Outka and Fox certainly contribute to significant observations. Outka claims that although Rahel is more functional than her brother, she is still “haunted by recurring memories [and t]he ‘Loss’ is alive for Rahel at every moment, following her – and even chasing her . . . from school to school, from childhood to womanhood . . .” (27). Also Fox notices that Rahel is more functional than Estha and assumes that “[m]ost criticism focuses on the effects of trauma that Estha displays because his complete silence is the more dramatic deviation from societal norms of ‘healthy’ behaviour” (54). Furthermore, Fox analyses Rahel’s actions at school and deduces that “Rahel is an ‘acting out’ sort of traumatized person” and he states that the “‘emptiness,’ that impoverishes her intimate relationship with her husband

. . . is also typical of trauma” (55). Hopefully, “Rahel” with a focus on Rahel’s self-image can contribute to a more developed picture of what previous work has already observed.

In a study of Rahel, it is hard to neglect the controversial incest scene. Besides, this scene can be related to Rahel’s self-image. However, the majority of critics concentrates on the transgression of social rules and links the incest to Ammu’s sexual relationship with Velutha. Although most critics perceive a sense of healing, only some attribute that to the reunion of the Siamese twin souls, either as the lost parts being found, or as a metaphor for the union of body and soul. Brinda Bose argues that Rahel “offer[s] Estha] her body as an unnameable balm” (59). These interpretations are challenged by Outka and Laura G. Eldred. Outka claims that Roy “records the permanent damage caused by trauma and asks the reader to face – and to bear witness to – this destruction . . .” (37). Eldred suggests that the incest is the result of the child’s “balancing between family and individual identity” and the wish to eliminate these tensions “through a return to origins”, but since a return is not possible, incest is only destructive (61). She rejects any interpretations involving the Siamese twin souls, claiming that Estha and Rahel have separate identities (71). “Rahel” will question Outka’s and Eldred’s conclusions and show that the incest is not only a balm for Estha, but therapy for Rahel as well.

However, although this essay will analyse the incest scene, it will mainly focus on Rahel’s self-image and the separation of the twins. The definition that will be used for ‘self-image’ is: “the idea that you have of yourself, especially of your abilities, character, and appearance” (“Self-image”). As self-image is created in a social context, which in this case is postcolonial India, postcolonial theory will be the theoretical basis.

Postcolonial theory specifically looks at countries that are or have been colonised by Europeans and despite its name “it addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1). While stressing cultural differences, postcolonial theory also identifies common phenomena emerging from the colonial situation, such as hybrid identities, cross-cultural interactions and ambivalence regarding language. Furthermore, it questions the Eurocentric universalism, which takes for granted that European norms are superior and valid independent of context; norms against which every individual, society or culture can be measured (Barry 185-86). Colonialism caused rupture (Hall 435) and it is impossible to recreate pre-colonial cultures after independence since the effects of colonial domination cannot be ignored (Tiffin 99). The colonisers controlled the colonised via the education system, imposing language and culture on the children, hence alienating them from their family and community as explained by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o: “Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition” (197). In Roy’s novel the ‘colonial children’ are the older generations, but the ‘damage’ lingers. This damage made Ngũgĩ reject English (198), but other writers have chosen to subvert it (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 261). Roy, for example, is praised for her revival and “decolonization of the English language . . . shattering all linguistic orthodoxies at the levels of phonology, morphology and syntax” (Kunhi 3). Thus, Roy displays that “English is no longer the exclusive language of the men who live in England”, but also belongs to people of other nationalities and what they “do with it is their own business”

(Lamming 17). However, Roy also exposes the negative effects of the colonisers' language policy in her novel. Another negative effect of colonialism is described by Frantz Fanon:

The Antillean does not possess a personal value of his own and is always dependent on the presence of 'the Other.' The question is always whether he is less intelligent than I, blacker than I, or less good than I. Every self-positioning or self-fixation maintains a relationship of dependency on the collapse of the other. It's on the ruins of my entourage that I build my virility. (185)

This self-positioning seems to be reflected in several of Roy's characters, most notably in Baby Kochamma. Finally, as Charles Larson emphasises when challenging the idea of universality in literature, there are various ways to interpret novels and "when we read a piece of non-Western literature we [should] realize that the interpretation we make of it may be widely different from what the artist intended" (79). "Rahel" can necessarily only be a European's attempt to understand the influence of colonialism on self-image.

During this attempt the following postcolonial theoretical terms will be used: 'Eurocentrism' as defined above; 'cross-cultural interactions' which refers to different cultures interacting with each other, for example how the Hindu caste system interacted with Christianity resulting in one church for touchables and another for untouchables (Roy 74); 'hybrid identity', which can be defined as an identity consisting of several cultures fused together, for example an identity that is neither purely traditionally Indian

nor English, but something in between. Roy allegorises 'hybridity' in the novel, letting the Food Products Organization ban the family production of banana jam "because according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly, and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (30). Many postcolonial authors and critics celebrate hybridity, but Roy stresses the problems it causes. In Rahel's case, as Silima Nanda observes, the hybrid identity is further complicated by ethnicity and religion as Rahel's father is Hindu and Bengali while her mother is Syrian Christian and Keralite (4). Society's view on this mixture is something that contributes to shape Rahel's self-image. However, self-image creation can also be understood as psychological processes. Consequently, and analogous with the hybrid identity of the novel's postcolonial characters, "Rahel" might appear to have a hybrid identity of post-theory; thus, "neither jam nor jelly".

The essay will start by looking at Rahel's self-image before the tragedy, how it is formed mainly by postcolonial phenomena, but also by abuse, other dysfunctional relationships and some psychological phenomena. Then it will look at the special relationship between Estha and Rahel; thereafter continue with the tragedy and its consequences. After that, it will discuss and discard some theories of the long duration of the separation. Finally, it will put all pieces together and show that it is Rahel's negative self-image, her loss of self-worth that is the real barrier to the reunion of the twins and that when the reunion finally takes place; it opens up for a change of this self-image from someone who is unlovable to someone who can and deserves to be loved.

Rahel's Self-Image before the Tragedy

To understand Rahel's self-image it is necessary to look at her family members, who are all marked by dysfunctional relationships, hybrid identity and cross-cultural interactions. One of the most influential characters in Rahel's life is Baby Kochamma, her grandaunt, who is unmarried. Marriage is regarded as the 'natural' purpose for women in India and traditionally women move to their husbands' house after marriage. Thereby, "their responsibilities and obligations are transferred to their husbands' families" (Bose and South 998). As women are expected to get married and leave their natal family, daughters' right to inherit parents is as recent as the 1950s (Banerjee 92). Consequently, Baby Kochamma's brother and later her sister-in-law inherit the house and everything with it. Thus, Baby Kochamma is economically dependent on her brother and in addition to that has to suffer the stigma of being unmarried. However, being divorced like Ammu, is even more stigmatising (Bose and South 998). Baby Kochamma

was keen for [the twins] to realize that they (like herself) lived on sufferance in the Ayemenem House, their maternal grandmother's house, where they really had no right to be. . . .

She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. (Roy 45)

The right to divorce was introduced by the British colonisers, although it was foreign to Indian culture (Banerjee 3). Unlike unmarried women, who have always existed to some extent, divorced women did not fit in anywhere in the existing social hierarchy and still today “divorce is a rare event” (Smits and Monden 476). This cross-cultural interaction led to stigmatisation, which explains “the commonly held view” and Baby Kochamma’s attitude. Furthermore, Baby Kochamma is aware of her own weak position and uses every opportunity to remind everyone that the twins’ and their mother’s position is inferior to hers. According to Bhikhu Parekh this is a common phenomenon in India: “Indian self-consciousness is informed by a deep sense of status or hierarchy. . . . Individuals judge their self-worth and define their self-respect in terms of their place in a hierarchy and their distance from others. One is nobody unless one is somebody, and one is somebody only if one is above someone” (321). This echoes Fanon’s description from the Antilles, although the hierarchical Hindu caste system probably is involved too, perhaps reinforcing the effect. Baby Kochamma also points out that the children are “Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry” to further weaken their position and distance herself from them (Roy 45). As Baby Kochamma adores anything that is Western, the novel implies that society views certain hybridities as more desirable than others. Mixtures within the Indian society, whether it concerns caste, religion or ethnicity, are unacceptable and should be banned like the banana jam, while adapting to Western customs on the contrary can give higher status. At least this is the attitude that Baby Kochamma transfers to Rahel and that affects Rahel’s self-image negatively. In addition, Baby Kochamma frequently and deliberately gets Ammu and the twins into trouble so that she can condemn them and strengthen her own

position vis-à-vis theirs. To sum up, the cross-cultural interaction between Indian traditions and Western traditions imposed by the colonial power causes new situations and new sources for stigmatisation in colonial and postcolonial India. Although Rahel is unaware of this position manoeuvring, she is nevertheless affected by it and recognises Baby Kochamma as her enemy. Hence, when Rahel “walk[s] across to the old well where there [are] usually some [red] ants to kill”, it is tempting to see this as a part of the novel’s constant playing with the English language (185). *Ant* may be a displacement for *aunt*. It is not clear if the ants are naturally red or if it is an effect of Rahel’s red-lens sunglasses, which make the world “Angry-coloured”, but there seems to be a connection between anger/strong feelings and the killing of the ants (185). The killing seems to be the only way available for Rahel to release her repressed feelings, since every time she protests against the adults, they threaten to send her away (148) or tell her that it makes “people love [her] a little less” (112). This scolding contributes to Rahel’s self-image as someone who may not be lovable. Moreover, it is significant that Rahel imagines that the ants are going to church as the grandaunt also seems to represent oppressive religion. Wherever the Christian God is mentioned it is as a threat. God is never referred to as someone who loves Rahel despite her imperfections, but as someone who condemns her. It is also the grandaunt’s Australian missionary friend, Miss Mitten, who complains about the twins’ backward-reading habits and says “that she [has] seen Satan in their eyes” (60). This phrase is repeated in the book as if Rahel affirms that she is bad by nature. Thus, both the grandaunt and her friend contribute to Rahel’s self-image as unwanted and unlovable. However, there are other important characters that form Rahel’s self-image too and the focus will now shift from Baby Kochamma to her brother Pappachi.

Although deceased, Rahel's grandfather Pappachi influences the whole family, indirectly including Rahel, since he has formed them through his abuse. This is apparently a family secret as Pappachi

was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped just short of fawning on them if they happened to be white. . . . He worked hard on his public profile as a sophisticated, generous, moral man. But alone with his wife and children he turned into a monstrous, suspicious bully, with a streak of vicious cunning. They were beaten, humiliated and then made to suffer the envy of friends and relations for having such a wonderful husband and father. (180)

Mammachi has visible scars from the abuse and Ammu and Chacko have invisible ones, which directly or indirectly contribute to their failed matrimonies. Ammu, who has learnt neither to love nor to trust anyone since terror can hide behind the facade, is frightened by her children's "willingness to love people who didn't really love them . . . and [it] sometimes made her want to hurt them – just as an education, a protection" (43). Ammu's distrust of other people teaches Rahel that love is nothing to take for granted, that it is something conditional and limited, thus leaving Rahel with insecurity and anxiety, which will be discussed more later on.

Furthermore, the description of Pappachi displays his reverence towards white people, which is imposed on and absorbed by the rest of the family. Consequently, it is a pride for the family that Chacko has studied in Oxford, and when his British ex-wife and

daughter come for a visit, he leads them “triumphantly up the nine red steps like a pair of tennis trophies that he had recently won” (173). Nothing is seen of the stigma usually associated with divorce as discussed above. On the contrary, Chacko’s marriage is a source for admiration and pride despite the divorce. Although, Chacko participates in this reverence of the White, he also shows awareness of its origin when he compares history with a house and colonialism with war:

[H]istory [is] like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside.

‘To understand history,’ Chacko said, ‘we have to go inside and listen to what they’re saying. . . .

But we can’t go in,’ Chacko explained, ‘because we’ve been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. . . . The very worst kind of war. . . . A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves. . . .

We’re prisoners of War . . . We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. (52-53)

In this scene, Chacko philosophises on some of the consequences of colonialism: the impossibility to go back to pre-colonial time, “the locked house of history”, the lost history and culture that can neither be fully recovered nor understood since the mind of

the people have changed and been formed, “been invaded”, by colonialism. This invasion has caused deep-rooted feelings of inferiority, making the Indians “adore [their] conquerors and despise [themselves]”. Furthermore, he expresses the complication of hybrid identity, the sense of ‘rootlessness’, of not belonging anywhere, of being “unanchored”. At this moment, of course, Chacko is talking over the head of the seven-year-old Rahel. Nevertheless, these feelings that form the adults around Rahel will also affect her self-image. From their acting and attitudes, Rahel will draw her own conclusions. Not only will she deduce that white skin is superior to brown and that a British granddaughter (Sophie Mol) is superior to an Indian granddaughter (Rahel), but also that the English language is superior to her mother tongue, Malayalam.

Rahel learns the pre-eminence of English during the week prior to her cousin’s arrival:

It had been the *What Will Sophie Mol Think?* Week. That whole week Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins’ private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines – ‘impositions’ she called them – *I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each. . . .

They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation. (36)

This passage is a typical example of ‘linguicism’ which, according to Robert Phillipson, refers “to ideologies and structures where language is the means for effecting or maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources” (55). Baby Kochamma uses the same strategy of linguicism as the colonial powers use against the colonised, namely stigmatising the mother tongue and imposing the favoured language through punishment. Furthermore, the grandaunt stigmatises the twins’ accent as she thinks that they do not “form the words properly”. English has a special history in India, which is relevant here. Lord Macaulay intended to give English education to some Indians to form ““a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”” (qtd. in Phillipson 110). Later, these Indians were given preference to government posts and consequently English became a status marker (Phillipson 111). Pappachi was one of those who got an English education and worked for the Empire. And Baby Kochamma has studied in America. Thus, Rahel and her family have English as a second language and it is important for their social status. Nevertheless, Baby Kochamma consciously uses Rahel’s language deficit to state Rahel’s inferiority, making Rahel experience yet another shortcoming.

This sense of not being good enough is further reinforced by the family’s preference for European culture. The family, “English in taste”, reads Western classics like Shakespeare, Conrad and Kipling, where Eurocentric norms are imposed on them. Rahel confuses her inability to fulfil the norms with being unlovable. According to Janet Thormann, this can be explained by Jacques Lacan’s theories of ego construction, where the ego-ideal plays an important part: “The ego-ideal is based on traits given by the Other. When race or gender or class privilege marks the master signifiers of the Other,

the subject who is discordant with those signifiers will see itself as inferior, unworthy, and unlovable; the ego-ideal will take form as lacking the desirable traits” (302). This process is demonstrated when the twins watch *The Sound of Music*:

[Captain von Clapp-Trapp] pretended not to love them, but he did. He loved them. He loved her (Julie Andrews), she loved him, they loved the children, the children loved them. They all loved each other. They were clean, white children . . .

Captain von Trapp, could you love the little fellow . . .

And his twin sister? . . . Could you love her too?

Captain von Trapp had some questions of his own.

(a) *Are they clean white children?*

No. (*But Sophie Mol is.*)

(b) *Do they blow spit-bubbles?*

Yes. (*But Sophie Mol doesn't.*)

(c) *Do they shiver their legs? Like clerks?*

Yes. (*But Sophie Mol doesn't.*) . . .

‘Then I’m sorry,’ Captain von Clapp-Trapp said. ‘It’s out of the question. I cannot love them. I cannot be their Baba. Oh no.’ (Roy 105-6)

Thormann’s interpretation of this scene is that “[t]he ideal [the twins’] western cousin, Sophie Mol, represents cannot apply to them, and the movie seduces the children into a fantasy that motivates self-hatred” (303). However, without contradicting Thormann,

more things can be pulled out of this scene. Firstly, knowing that Captain von Clapp-Trapp is Chacko's name for Captain von Trapp and that Baba means father, this passage reveals Rahel's desire for Chacko to be her step-father and that she perceives Sophie as a threat. As Rahel has not yet met Sophie, she cannot really know if Sophie shivers her legs or blows spit-bubbles. But in Rahel's mind, Sophie is someone who fulfils all ideals; she is "Loved from the Beginning", while Rahel needs to deserve love (Roy 186). Furthermore, the spit-bubbles and leg-shivering as criteria for being lovable are interesting as these behaviours are related to Ammu rather than Chacko. When Ammu complains about Rahel's spit-bubbles, Chacko actually defends Rahel (85). This indicates that Rahel is also insecure about having Ammu's love, which is further confirmed later on in a dialogue between Rahel and Chacko:

‘Chacko, for example,’ Rahel said. ‘Just for *example*, is it possible that Ammu can love Sophie Mol more than me and Estha? Or for you to love me more than Sophie Mol, for *example*?’

‘Anything's possible in Human Nature,’ Chacko said in his Reading Aloud voice. (118)

What Rahel seeks is reassurance, but as "Reading Aloud voice" indicates, Chacko fails to understand this and instead deals with it as an adult philosophical question, involuntarily adding to his niece's anxiety. Furthermore, the quotation displays that Rahel measures love in quantity. In summary, it seems that Rahel's ego-ideal is based on the Eurocentric norms as pictorially idealised in Western books and films mixed up with her mother's

explicit ideals. Rahel's discordance with her ego-ideal results in a fear of not being loved and even worse, not being loveable.

This fear of not being loved is constantly reflected in Rahel's character and her eagerness to receive punishments can be seen as a prolongation of this. "‘Ammu,’ Rahel said, ‘shall I miss dinner as my punishment?’ She was keen to exchange punishments. No dinner, in exchange for Ammu loving her the same as before" (114). When Ammu does not give her any punishment, Rahel is distressed and does not eat, "hoping that if she could somehow effect her own punishment, Ammu would rescind hers" (115). Thus, what Rahel uses is a strategy called guilt-induced self-punishment. Research has shown that this behaviour can reduce feelings of guilt. It also has a social function through showing remorse. Although self-punishment is more common in the presence of the 'victim', some people also use it as an emotion-regulation strategy when they are alone, (Nelissen 139, 142). In Rahel's case it seems that punishment is meant to outbalance the committed 'sin' and thus restore status quo, that is that Ammu loves Rahel "the same as before". This further strengthens the earlier statement that Rahel is insecure about having Ammu's love. Moreover, the fact that Rahel uses self-punishment, although Ammu is not present, and hopes that the effect will be the same implies 'magical thinking'. Rahel's view on punishment and self-punishment affects how she handles her feelings of guilt after the tragedy and contributes to the long separation of the twins. Magical thinking is another psychological phenomenon that affects Rahel's perception of events and this phenomenon can also be related to guilt.

"Magical thinking typically involves attribution of causal effects on real events by either thought or an action that is physically unconnected to the events" (Bolton et al

479). A clear example of when Rahel uses magical thinking is when the family is in a hurry to see *The Sound of Music* and “the railway level-crossing gate [goes] down. Rahel [knows] that this [has] happened because she [has] been hoping that it wouldn’t. She [hasn’t] learned to control her Hopes yet” (Roy 58). This episode displays that Rahel thinks her feelings and thoughts can affect the world. Thus, it also leaves her sensitive to feeling guilty when she should not. This could even affect Rahel as an adolescent and adult as research indicates that magical thinking is common in all ages, not only in children as previously believed (Bolton et al 479). Neither Rahel’s tendency for self-punishment nor her use of magical thinking appears to have attracted any attention from previous critics, although these factors seem significant for the effects of the tragedy. However, before investigating the tragedy, Rahel’s relationship with Estha will be discussed as it clarifies both the impact of the separation and why an earlier reunion might have been expected.

Estha and Rahel as Siamese Twin Souls

Estha and Rahel are described as having Siamese twin souls. They “thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities” (Roy 2). Ordinary Siamese twins have joint body parts, to which extent may vary. Consequently Siamese twin souls should be seen as overlapping identities, where the border is blurred, rather than that they are the same identity. Thus, an interpretation of the incest scene involving the Siamese souls does not contradict seeing the twins as separate identities as Eldred purports. Furthermore, identity is not a ‘fact’, but how individuals perceive

themselves and others. The text shows that Rahel does perceive herself as linked to Estha. Just a few days before the separation Ammu says: “‘Promise me you’ll always love each other,’ . . . ‘Promise,’ Estha and Rahel would say. Not finding words with which to tell her that for them there *was* no Each, no Other” (225). Also after the separation this perception of joint identities is stated. Rahel never writes to Estha, her explanation being: “[t]here are things that you can’t do – like writing letters to a part of yourself. To your feet or hair. Or heart” (163-64). Firstly, this intertwined identity and perception of unity is central for understanding the immensity of the separation of the twins. For them it is like having a limb cut off, “or heart”, and the following quote shows that Rahel perceives the separation as a punishment: “It had been decided that one twin could stay in Ayemenem. Not both. Together they were trouble. *nataS ni rieht seye*. They had to be separated” (302). Clearly, Baby Kochamma manages to put the blame on the twins, although her motivation is to hide the truth about Velutha rather than to punish the children (31-32, 321-22). Secondly, the comprehension of the twins’ very special relationship can shed light on the frequently discussed incest scene. As previously mentioned, the majority of critics perceive a healing quality of the incest, although they do not always relate it to the Siamese souls or only regards it as Rahel’s attempt to heal her brother. However, if the feelings of guilt and negative self-image of Rahel and her brother are taken into account in combination with their Siamese souls, there is an opening for an alternative or additional interpretation. Estha and Rahel do not make love to each other; “for them there [*is*] no Each, no Other.” Instead, they are learning to love themselves. That would be the healing quality of the incest. As this is the last chronological event in the novel, no one knows what will happen to the twins, but there

appears to be hope for a change. It is an opening rather than an end. Outka claims that the trauma will not vanish, but nevertheless, in learning to love themselves, the twins may find a way to refuse the trauma to determine their whole lives. Thereby, they also reject the “Love Laws[’]” right to decide who deserves to be loved (33). Thus, it seems the long separation between Estha and Rahel is finally over. In the next section, the cause for the separation, the death of Sophie Mol, will be in focus. Rahel’s involvement in the tragedy and how it contributes to her feelings of guilt and negative self-image will be examined.

The Tragedy and its Consequences

Rahel plays a part in the tragedy, although not as big as she believes, or is led to believe. In the following passage the police inspector has found out that Baby Kochamma’s testimony is false and Baby Kochamma needs to convince the twins of their guilt so that they will stick to her lie and testify against Velutha:

‘It’s a terrible thing to take a person’s life,’ Baby Kochamma said.

‘It’s the worst thing that anyone can ever do. Even *God* doesn’t forgive that. You know that, don’t you?’

Two heads nodded twice.

‘And yet –’ she looked sadly at them, ‘you did it.’ She looked them in the eye. ‘You are murderers.’ She waited for this to sink in.

‘You know that I know that it wasn’t an accident. I know how jealous of her you were. . . .

‘I’ll have to tell [the judge] how it was strictly against the Rules for you to go alone to the river. How you forced her to go with you although you knew that she couldn’t swim. How you pushed her out of the boat in the middle of the river. It wasn’t an accident, was it?’ (316-17)

Even though the text does not say that Rahel feels guilty, neither does it say that she denies the story. She is not trying to defend herself or protest against Baby Kochamma’s version, although it is clear it is invented. Apart from the fact that Rahel is in shock after losing her cousin and seeing Velutha abused, it could be that Rahel feels guilty. The children have broken promises and rules. Furthermore, Rahel has been jealous of Sophie and warned that “[j]ealous people go straight to hell” (185). Considering how Rahel uses magical thinking, it is not as far-fetched as it may initially appear that Rahel thinks her jealous thoughts and feelings have caused, or contributed to her cousin’s death. The guilt Rahel feels for betraying Velutha is certainly more evident and straightforward. Through the betrayal, as Tracy Lemaster argues, “Roy makes Rahel and Estha not just the witnesses to cruel and unjust policing but an indirect party to it . . .” (807). In the future, Rahel and Estha will return to the same question: “Had they been deceived into doing what they did?” and their answer will be: “In a way, yes. But it wasn’t as simple as that. They both knew that they had been given a choice. And how quick they had been in the choosing! . . . ‘Save Ammu.’ Save us” (Roy 318-19). Rahel feels both guilty and ashamed of what they did and surely it contributes to her already negative self-image. Whether Rahel as a child understands that their running away indirectly has caused the death of Velutha is not clear, but it is certainly something she will be aware of when

growing older. Thus, Rahel's sinfully jealous thoughts and disobedience have led both to the death of her cousin and the death of Velutha. Furthermore, she has betrayed Velutha in order to save herself and Ammu. However, it will turn out that Rahel cannot save Ammu. In fact, Rahel will betray her too.

The aftermath of the tragedy leads to a complicated relationship between Rahel and her mother, which further adds to Rahel's guilt burden. "At Sophie Mol's funeral [where Ammu and the twins were made to stand apart from the rest of the family] and in the days before Estha was Returned, they saw her swollen eyes, and with the self-centredness of children, held themselves wholly culpable for her grief" (324). Although Rahel will eventually learn what part Ammu has played in the tragedy, she does not know it at the time when Ammu is thrown out of the Ayemenem House. Thus, Rahel is almost bound to hold herself "wholly culpable" for that as well. Ammu only lives four more years. Just before their final meeting, Rahel has been expelled from her convent school, because she is innately depraved and perverted according to the nuns (16,159). Thus, the nuns confirm what Rahel already believes, that there is something wrong with her. When she meets Ammu for the last time, Rahel is repelled by her mother's infirmity. Shortly afterwards Ammu dies. On the way to the crematorium, Rahel thinks about Ammu dying alone without Estha (161), not without her children, but without Estha. It is as if Rahel thinks she would not have counted; that only Estha could have alleviated Ammu's pain. Rahel might also believe that her thoughts and feelings after their last meeting: "She hated her mother then. *Hated* her" (161) have provoked Ammu's death. Furthermore, Rahel knows it is wrong to hate her mother. Thus, having these feelings confirms to Rahel her innate depravity and makes her unworthy of Ammu's love and contributes to

her strong self-hatred. Ammu's body is wrapped in a sheet. "Rahel thought she looked like a Roman Senator. *Et tu, Ammu!*" (162). Although, Rahel refers to a game Estha played, the hatred and the "Et tu, Ammu" imply that Rahel feels that Ammu has let her down. Rahel is left alone in a house struck by grief: "In matters related to the raising of Rahel, Chacko and Mammachi tried, but couldn't. They provided the care (food, clothes, fees), but withdrew the concern" (15). Rahel has lost her mother, brother and the two strongest candidates for surrogate fathers, Chacko and Velutha. Furthermore, Rahel seems to feel that she has let Ammu down too. She could not prevent Ammu from being thrown out of the house or her death. Rahel could not even prevent her own feelings of disgust, hatred and disappointment. In summary, Rahel's self-image is extremely negative, not only due to unfortunate circumstances and magical thinking, but even more due to the postcolonial society, which has left the Indians culturally unanchored, leading up to the terrible tragedy. A person with negative self-image tends to ignore positively-valenced information and instead absorb information that is compatible with the negative view of the self (Winter and Kuiper 804-05). It seems that Rahel is trapped in this negative pattern, all the time finding more 'proofs' with which she confirms her self-image as unlovable and unworthy. Before turning to the first part of the thesis statement, how Rahel's self-image prevents her from seeking Estha, some other possible explanations for the long separation will be discussed.

Theories of the Long Duration of the Separation

No articles seem to have treated the long duration of the separation before and undoubtedly there are alternatives to the interpretation that it is Rahel's self-image that

has prevented a reunion. Firstly, one obvious possibility is that Rahel is trying to repress the trauma of Sophie Mol's and Velutha's deaths and that seeing Estha would remind her of it. However, it does not seem very plausible as she does remember anyway. Rahel and her brother "replay this scene [where they betray Velutha] in their heads. As children. As teenagers. As adults" (318). Furthermore, certain smells and sounds associated with the trauma repeatedly indicate Rahel's recollections (Outka 30). Then, it does not seem that meeting Estha again would make any (negative) difference. Secondly, Rahel is described as drifting. She seems quite indifferent to what happens to her. Yet, she does prepare some sketches and take an entrance exam for an architecture course in Delhi. "It wasn't the outcome of any serious interest in Architecture. Not even, in fact, of a superficial one" (Roy 17). Apparently, she could have applied to any course, anywhere, but she does not try in Calcutta, where she knows Estha lives. Thus, it seems as though Rahel is avoiding Estha, consciously or unconsciously. The explanation could of course be that she is afraid of meeting Estha after all this time. She might fear what he has become as she seems aware of his silence and that he is regarded as mad. However, fear does not appear to be the reason either. When Rahel receives Baby Kochamma's letter she "[gives] up her job... and [leaves] America gladly. To return to Ayemenem. To Estha in the rain" (20). There is no reference to the content of the letter, apart from "Estha ha[s] been re-Returned", but by now it should be quite clear from Baby Kochamma's character that the letter is not written just to make Rahel happy (20). It is more likely that Baby Kochamma implies, or even states openly, that Rahel needs to take care of her brother. This assumption has some support in the novel as Baby Kochamma later on asks Rahel "what she [plans] to do about Estha" (188). The crucial point, however, is that Rahel

gladly leaves America. She does not express any worries or doubts about meeting her brother. On the contrary, she seems to look forward to it, which makes it even more puzzling why she has not contacted him before. It is almost as if Rahel takes the letter as a sign or as if she needs someone else to command her to reunite with Estha. If all these pieces of information and clues that this essay has dealt with are put together, there is at least one plausible picture that emerges. Rahel's self-image is the main hindrance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rahel has a negative self-image even before the tragedy. She feels inferior and constantly doubts her lovability, in high degree due to phenomena occurring in postcolonial societies. The surrounding adults all suffer from hybrid identities, dysfunctional relationships and the effects of cross-cultural interactions so they are not able to give Rahel the reassurance she needs. Instead they transfer their own insecurity and rootlessness to Rahel. In the tragedy Rahel loses her cousin and sees a man she loves be beaten to death, which certainly are traumas in themselves. After the tragedy, Rahel experiences enormous feelings of guilt, for what she has done, for what she thinks she has done and for what she could not do. Furthermore, her practice of magical thinking makes her feel guilty for thoughts and feelings she could not control. Another factor that contributes to Rahel's acting (or lack of acting) is her belief that punishments can outbalance sins. Although, the separation of the twins was not primarily meant as a punishment, this is nevertheless how Rahel perceives it. Thus, Rahel has been given the worst possible punishment, namely the separation from her Siamese twin soul, Estha, whom she sees as a part of herself. Losing Estha is for Rahel like having a limb cut off,

or heart. It leaves Rahel drifting, unanchored, and new guilt is added to the old one when Ammu dies. In addition, school confirms that Rahel is innately depraved. Rahel despises herself and grows to believe that she is unlovable and unworthy, that she is someone who cannot and does not deserve to be loved. Instead she believes she deserves to be punished and she has a habit of using self-punishment as an emotion-regulation strategy. Thus, when Rahel is old enough to take her own decisions, when the separation is no longer imposed by adults, her self-image is so poor that it hinders her from seeking contact with Estha. She is trapped in a negative pattern she cannot break herself. She needs a sign or an outer force commanding her to reunite herself with Estha, which with some irony happens to be the letter from Baby Kochamma, her worst oppressor. Rahel and Estha become once more 'We' and 'Us'. Hence, they have found themselves. The lost parts are united. The incest scene can be seen as an act of learning to love oneself, which gives the novel a hopeful ending, or rather an opening. Thus, the conclusion is that Rahel's negative self-image, her loss of self-worth is what has kept the twins separated for so long. But when the reunion finally takes place, there is hope for Rahel to change her self-image as unlovable into someone who can and deserves to be loved.

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