

Unseen extract 5: *The God of Small Things*

Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy which was first published in 1997. The novel tells the story of one extended family in India in the late 1960s: twins Estha and Rahel, their mother Ammu; and their extended family in India in the late 1960s, their grandparents Mammachi and Pappachi, their uncle Chacko, his mother Baby Kochamma and his daughter Sophie Mol. Upon the death of their mother, the twins are separated from the age of seven before being reunited at the age of thirty-one years.

Sample question

Explore the significance of identity in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Roy shapes meanings.

Extract

After Ammu died (after the last time she came back to Ayemenem, swollen with cortisone and a rattle in her chest that sounded like a faraway man shouting), Rahel drifted. From school to school. She spent her holidays in Ayemenem, largely ignored by Chacko and Mammachi (grown soft with sorrow, slumped in their bereavement like a pair of drunks in a toddy bar) and largely ignoring Baby Kochamma. 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.

The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case. In the scabs of the sores on Chacko's shins that he constantly worried. In his slack, womanish legs.

It is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined. Over the years, as the memory of Sophie Mol (the seeker of small wisdoms: *Where do old birds go to die? Why don't dead ones fall like stones from the sky?* The harbinger of harsh reality: *You're both whole wogs and I'm a half one.* The guru of gore: *I've seen a man in an accident with his eyeball swinging on the end of a nerve, like a yo-yo*) slowly faded, the Loss of Sophie Mol grew robust and alive. It was always there. Like a fruit in season. Every season. As permanent as a Government job. It ushered Rahel through childhood (from school to school) into womanhood.

Rahel was first blacklisted in Nazareth Convent at the age of eleven, when she was caught outside her Housemistress's garden gate decorating a knob of fresh cowdung with small flowers. At Assembly the next morning she was made to look up *depravity* in the Oxford Dictionary and read aloud its meaning. '*The quality or condition of being depraved or corrupt,*' Rahel read, with a row of stern-mouthed nuns seated behind her and a sea of sniggering schoolgirl faces in front. '*Perverted quality: Moral perversion; The innate corruption of human nature due to original sin; Both the elect and the non-elect come into the world in a state of total d. and alienation from God, and can, of themselves do nothing but sin. J. H. Blunt.*'

Six months later she was expelled after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?

That was the first of three expulsions. The second for smoking. The third for setting fire to her Housemistress's false hair bun which, under duress, Rahel confessed to having stolen. In each of the schools she went to, the teachers noted that she:

- (a) was an extremely polite child.
- (b) had no friends.

It appeared to be a civil, solitary form of corruption. And for this very reason, they all agreed (savouring their teacherly disapproval, touching it with their tongues, sucking it like a sweet) – all the more serious.

It was, they whispered to each other, *as though she didn't know how to be a girl*. They weren't far off the mark.

Oddly, neglect seemed to have resulted in an accidental release of the spirit.

Rahel grew up without a brief. Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her. Without anybody who would pay her a dowry and therefore without an obligatory husband looming on her horizon.

So as long as she wasn't noisy about it, she remained free to make her own enquiries: into breasts and how much they hurt. Into false hair buns and how well they burned. Into life and how it ought to be lived.

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