

# **The God of Small Things Study Guide**

## **The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy**

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## Plot Summary

The God of Small Things, the first novel of Indian writer Arundhati Roy, won the Booker Prize in 1997. The story is told from the point of view of Rahel and the now silent Estha, her brother. Rahel and Estha are fraternal twins. The action pivots mainly on two time periods, 1969 and 1993, moving back and forth from 1993 (the present) to the time of the twins' greatest trauma, which occurred upon the childhood visit of their cousin Sophie Mol.

Having been separated for twenty-three years with no contact, the Rahel and Estha are now adults. Their mother is no longer alive. Rahel had traveled to America, where she experienced a failed marriage. Estha's life has mostly stood still. He has gone mute willfully.

The twins have met now at their family home in Ayemenem, where the trauma that separated them occurred. During the course of the novel, Rahel unravels her memories of what happened to them and their family, while the perspective periodically moves into other family members' lives so as to open up an understanding of the family dissolution.

The story revolves around the way different family members' choices and attempts to escape their culture or class impacts them in tragedy and consequences. Abuse and betrayals are passed down from generation to generation, leading to the full destruction of any family connections or love. Each generation suffers from marital discord, abuse, and rejection by the family members from which they most need love. And through the course of this alienation, an innocent child and an innocent man are killed. As a result, the twins Rahel and Estha are torn apart for many years. They struggle to heal their pain, finding solace only with each other.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

The God of Small Things is a novel published by an Indian author, Arundhati Roy, in English in the mid-1990s. It is generally viewed as semi-autobiographical. It takes place in two time periods in the same small town in India, revolving between the "present" of 1993 and the summer of 1969. It revolves around the experiences of a pair of twins named Rahel and Estha.

Chapter 1 is titled "Paradise Pickles and Preserves." It is monsoon season in the town of Ayemenem, in India. Rahel has come to see Estha, her twin brother. When they were young Rahel and Estha were very close, even seeming to share each other's memories. Rahel feels that in their past, they were one person. Now, they are separate beings, because it has been many years since they have seen one another. They are now thirty-one years old, the same age as their mother when she died.

There is a flashback to Rahel and Estha's past memories and to their internal shared lives.

When the twins are age seven, their cousin Sophie Mol visits them from England. She is nearly nine years old, and she dies while she is in India. It is not revealed in this chapter how her death this occurs.. The twins attend her funeral. The family is Syrian Orthodox, a religious minority in India. The children notice that Sophie's mother, who is English, rejects Uncle Chacko's efforts to comfort her. At the funeral, their mother Ammu and the twins stand separately from the family, and no one looks at them. It is left unstated why this might be. Estha is sleepy from the heat, but Rahel is wide awake. She imagines that Sophie Mol is awake, too, and showing her Two Things. One is the inside of the dome of the church, which she has never seen. She imagines the dome's painter falling to the church floor dead. Thing Two is the baby bat climbing up Baby Kochamma's sari, which is then chased up into the dome. Rahel sees Sophie Mol do a "cartwheel in her coffin" in response. Rahel believes that Sophie Mol is still alive and is suffocated to death by her burial.

After the funeral, their mother takes them to the police station. This is the second day they've gone there. Ammu is trying to rectify a "terrible mistake" and asking to see Velutha. The police won't listen to her and call her a "veshya" which means slut or prostitute. The officer, Inspector Thomas Mathew, touches Ammu inappropriately and tells her to go home. Ammu is stunned and very upset, saying she has "killed him." They return by bus to Ayemenem.

Two weeks later, Estha is sent to be with his father in Calcutta.

Back in the present, Rahel and Estha haven't seen each other for twenty-three years. When their father leaves India, he sends Estha back to live in Ayemenem. Baby



Kochamma shows Rahel the letter from their father. The weather is oppressive, but Estha is out walking. He knows that Rahel has come to see him.

Estha gradually stopped talking at some point in his childhood. The family is unsure exactly when this happened. This has served to make him invisible. He had been an average student at the boys' school his father sent him to in Calcutta. Instead of going to college, he stayed home, took over the housework, and withdrew from the world. No one ever knew the reason for his silence. He has developed a habit of walking around the city.

Now, in Ayemenem, he also takes frequent walks. He is greeted by Comrade Pillai, but he doesn't respond. Comrade Pillai feels no guilt about having been part of the incident that got Estha expelled from the town. He barely knows Estha, but when he hears of Rahel's return, he is curious about it.

Estha's internal peace has been disturbed by Rahel's return.

Rahel remembers that after Ammu died, she drifted from school to school. Her remaining family, Mammachi and Uncle Chacko, were grieving for Sophie Mol. They ignored her, and she ignored Baby Kochamma.

In the present, Mammachi is dead, and Chacko has left for Canada. The death of Sophie Mol still haunts them all.

Rahel remembers that she was kicked out of three schools, for misbehavior. She was known for being very polite and having no friends. She had no one to arrange a marriage for her, so she was free to make her own life. She went to college for architecture in Delhi, something she wasn't very interested in. She did not graduate, but she worked as a draftsman, remaining socially isolated.

She never went back to Ayemenem, not for Mammachi's funeral or when Chacko left. She married Larry McCaslin, an American. They loved each other, but Larry didn't understand why she looked at him the way she did, possibly because of cultural differences. He didn't understand that she was mourning for the loss of her brother and that her emptiness was a mirror of Estha's silence. This misunderstanding led to a divorce. Rahel then worked at menial jobs.

In Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma is pleased that Estha doesn't make an exception in his silence and speak to Rahel. Baby Kochamma thinks Estha is insane and doesn't recognize anyone. Rahel can feel and hear what Estha feels and hears. Baby Kochamma regrets having written to demand Rahel's return, though she doesn't want to have to take care of Estha herself. Rahel notices that Baby Kochamma is wearing all Mammachi's jewelry and too much makeup.

The perspective switches to Baby Kochamma and her past. When Baby Kochamma was a young girl, she fell in love with Father Mulligan, a young Jesuit priest. In response to her unrequited love, she became Roman Catholic and joined a nunnery, hoping this would bring her closer to her love. After a year she realized her mistake and left the



convent, though she stayed a Roman Catholic and never gave up her love. Her father sent her to the University of Rochester for an education in ornamental gardening. Afterward, she became very fat and created a renowned garden at her father's house. Years later, she discovered television and abandoned the garden. In the present, she loves her inherited house and furniture, but she has become fearful of threats against it, due to watching too much TV. She is diabetic, and Rahel has brought her insulin from America. Baby Kochamma doesn't trust the twins.

From the house, Rahel can see Paradise Pickles and Preserves, a factory her grandmother had owned long ago. They had made many foods there, including banana jam, which had been judged illegal because it was unclassifiable. Rahel sees this as a symbol of the family's inability to stay within the boundaries of what's accepted.

There is an ambiguous flashback memory to the time of Velutha's arrest, after the death of Sophie Mol. Baby Kochamma is the source of the idea to return Estha to his father. Sophie Mol's mother Margaret Kochamma is angry and slaps Estha frequently before she returns to England. Ammu thinks that perhaps Estha needs his father.

On the journey to live with his father, Estha is haunted by the memory of what has happened because he had said the words "Yes, it was him."

In the present, Rahel thinks that perhaps it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Or, alternatively, it was thousands of years ago, when the "Love Laws" were made.

## Analysis

The novel is told from the perspective of a grown up Rahel, for the most part, though it shifts frequently into the memories and minds of other people surrounding her as needed. These shifts in time and perspective are seamless and sometimes come without warning. This serves to make the novel read like a sleepy, humid dream.

The language is poetic and often childlike. Even though Rahel is an adult, the reader can see the child within the woman, the child that hasn't healed or grown up. It is said that when a child experiences a severe trauma, a good portion of her stays the age she was during the trauma until it is properly dealt with and healed, and this novel is a perfect example of that theory. Rahel's mind is both grown up and full of her memories, in part because she has returned to the place where her trauma occurred. An object or word can send her mind flying into the past. The mind and its half-memories are exposed, but not fully played out. Rahel's memories slowly circle around the source of her pain, and she doesn't immediately clarify exactly what it is that has happened.

Sophie Mol is dead, but how that occurred is not clear. Estha has been "Returned" and "Re-returned," though why he was sent away in the first place is left unexplained in this chapter. Ammu died at the age of thirty-one, though we don't know how. There are hints about these events, and foreshadowing is thrown out at every turn. The pain is so familiar to Rahel that she doesn't fully articulate its source. It is obviously significant,



however, because both Rahel and Estha exhibited severe behavior issues when they were children. Rahel is expelled from school several times in succession, and Estha stops speaking. As an adult, Rahel has a failed marriage, and Estha has withdrawn from the world.

Rahel and Estha are “two egg” twins, fraternal twins, and Rahel considered them to be one person when they were children. They have been ripped apart, and that trauma has caused their lives to be infused with pain. It isn’t just the unknown things that happened, but the separation itself that is painful.

The first occurrence of the phrase “the small things” comes on Page 5, referencing the sharing of memories and thoughts of Rahel and Estha. They aren’t just brother and sister, but one person sharing thoughts and memories without words. Rahel doesn’t need Estha to speak. She knows perfectly well the cause, if not the source, of why he won’t speak. It is for the same reason that she is in pain.

The use of the term “Returned” and “Re-returned” is childlike. It brings forward the idea that unwanted children develop and can be “returned,” as if they are defective merchandise.

The family is obviously fractured, by death and abandonment, and the only one who is left is Baby Kochamma who, along with her servant Kochu Maria, has descended into the fantasy of constant television watching. The home is completely decayed, the garden is overgrown, and all pride of place has gone away. When the reader is given a window into Baby Kochamma’s life, one sees a woman stunted emotionally, who has never had real love in her life or lived at all. She is revealed as the source of the major part of Rahel and Estha’s pain, since she is the one who suggested Estha be sent away. She is the source of the family’s fracture, but we don’t know the full extent of it yet.

We also know that the source of Estha’s silence is probably in guilt, because it is revealed that he left the family home burdened with the feeling he is responsible for what has happened to him, and that he has accused someone of something.

The reader is left to wonder about the “Love Laws.” What are they? They are thousands of years old, and so based strongly in tradition. This is a foreshadowing of the source of the family breaking apart. Love traditions typically have to do with marriage and family—what kinds of love are allowed and what are not. We know that they have been broken, but we don’t know how.

## Discussion Question 1

The reader is informed of some important experiences the twins have, but not about certain other very important details. What are the facts that the author leaves out? Why do you think the author chose to leave out those important facts? How do you think this might echo the way the mind responds to trauma?



## Discussion Question 2

What are some of the ways being twins affects Rahel and Estha's relationship? How are they like one person? How has their childhood trauma affected them in their lives? Why does Rahel call Estha's exile being Re-returned? When was he Returned? What are some examples of ways the adult Rahel thinks like a child? Why does Rahel's returning to Ayemenem disturb Estha's peace? What are some ways Baby Kochamma has changed over the years?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some examples in traditional society of "Love Laws"? What are some that have changed from previous generations to today? What are some that are still in effect? How do Love Laws impact society? How do they impact those who break them?

## Vocabulary

Dissolute, vacuously, sloth, amorphous, dhobi, permeated, monsoon, incinerated, dormancy, inanimate, coriander, fiefdom, perturb, harbinger, cajoled, mediocre, primacy, obeisance, cauterized, temerity, inured, deputation, effulgent, intrepid, tangible, futility, succulent, imbued.





## Chapter 2

### Summary

Chapter 2 takes place in December of 1969. Rahel, Estha, Ammu, Baby Kochamma, and Uncle Chacko are on their way to Cochin to see “The Sound of Music” for the third time. They will stay overnight in a hotel. The next day, they will pick up Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol from the airport. They are coming from England to spend Christmas with the family. Margaret has just lost her second husband in an accident, and her first husband Uncle Chacko has invited them. The children have never met Sophie Mol, but they have been thinking about her and practicing their English in anticipation.

Uncle Chacko was educated at Oxford and reads books. His intellectual eccentricity is accepted by the family.

Ammu is 27 years old, and she knows that her life is basically over because she married the wrong man. When she was 18, she had no dowry and wasn't permitted a higher education, so she chafed at the confinement of Ayemenem. Finally, Pappachi, her father, allowed her to spend the summer in Calcutta with an aunt. She met her future husband there, a 25-year-old assistant manager at a tea estate. He proposed to Ammu after five days of knowing her, and she accepted because she didn't want to return home. She wrote to her family, but they didn't respond. The couple had a big wedding in Calcutta, but her father-in-law stole their wedding presents. Soon, her husband turned out to be an alcoholic and a pathological liar.

The twins were born in Assam in 1962. Their father's alcoholism nearly got him fired, but his boss proposed instead that Ammu sleep with him, to which her husband agreed. When he informed Ammu of this, she didn't consent, so he beat her. He passed out, and Ammu beat him with a book. He woke up and apologized, but this incident started a pattern of domestic violence and badgering. When he attacked the children and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu returned to her parents in Ayemenem. Pappachi didn't believe her story, and her parents were unhappy about her return.

Ammu is disconcerted by her children's innocence, and it makes her worried for them. She knows she has no life now, except to be in Ayemenem. Her world is very small now, all tinged with the community's disapproval of her. She regrets her foolish marriage. She is very beautiful, and sometimes, she doesn't act like a mother or a divorced woman. She gets reckless, partly because she is already condemned, and it is revealed that she will have an illicit affair.

In the car on the way to the movie, Baby Kochamma is sitting between Rahel and Estha in the back seat. She both pities and dislikes the twins, in part because they are “doomed, fatherless waifs” and also because they are half-Hindu, and therefore unlikely to be accepted into marriage with Syrian Christians. She considers herself to be



accepting of her outcast, unmarriageable fate. Ammu is fighting her own fate and being unreasonable. She is completely in agreement with the idea that Ammu should be shunned for being a divorced woman, and shouldn't be accepted in her parents' home. She also resents the twins for being happy.

The car is painted with an advertisement for the Paradise Pickles and Preserves: Emperors of the Realm of Taste. Ammu thinks the billboard makes them look ridiculous.

Mammachi started making pickles soon after Pappachi's retirement, and they moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi didn't help her because he thought it beneath him. He resented the attention the factory got her. This resentment caused him to abuse her more often than he had previously. When Chacko came home from Oxford, as a full-grown man, he put a stop to it. Pappachi was upset by this interference, and never spoke to Mammachi again. He also never let anyone ride in his Plymouth while he was alive.

Pappachi's greatest disappointment in life was that he was not properly credited with the discovery of a new species of moth. Though he had always been ill-tempered, this fact is blamed for his bad moods. When he died, he was honored in death but not truly missed.

Chacko tells the twins that Pappachi was an "Anglophile" and that they are a family of "Anglophiles" because they are disconnected from their history and culture. When Chacko compares history to an old house, the children think he means the abandoned rubber estate on the other side of the river. He tells the children that they belong nowhere. He tries to get them to understand history by telling them about the Earth Woman and cosmic time.

The children are struck by this talk, but especially with the idea of the History House, a place they will someday enter. Instead of learning ordinary things, the children learn how history collects from those who don't obey its laws and about history's smell.

Later, the children try to see what happens to them as insignificant in Earth Woman time, but it doesn't give them comfort.

Mammachi thinks Chacko is brilliant, which Ammu discounts, since he can't run the pickle factory profitably. Chacko has a hobby: assembling kit airplanes, which always crash. He doesn't blame the kits for these failures, and he keeps all the broken planes.

When Pappachi died, Chacko came home to Ayemenem to run the factory. It had been small but profitable until his involvement, when he expanded it and mortgaged out the family's property. Ammu has no stake in it, because she is a daughter. Before Chacko's involvement, the factory didn't have a name. He gave it the name Paradise Pickles & Preserves and had Comrade Pillai design the labels and the roof rack billboard.

They are late for the beginning of the film. To amuse themselves, the children read signs backwards. They have learned to read far in advance of their years.



The wait at the train crossing is long and hot. Vendors and beggars come up to the car, and are turned away by Ammu. The children are separated in the back seat by Baby Kochamma to keep them from fighting. They look around at all the interesting sights.

The children have many questions, but they don't feel comfortable asking them.

A Marxist demonstration comes by. Chacko professes to be a Marxist, but at the factory he uses this as a pretense to get close to his female workers. The approach of the demonstration causes the family to put up the car windows and avoid eye contact. There are various communist factions in Kerala. Baby Kochamma in particular is afraid of the march because she is afraid of the lower classes and their anger. Some of the marchers hit the car with their fists. Rahel sees her friend Velutha and greets him through the window, which causes her mother to be very angry with her. Rahel doesn't understand why. She wonders about that look for years.

Though Velutha has ignored her greeting, Rahel is certain it was he. He is a Paravan, an Untouchable, by birth. He has been very handy since he was a child. He does the handyman work around the house and factory. Velutha's father, Vellya Paapen, is concerned for his son, because he lacks the proper demeanor expected of Untouchables. Velutha thinks his father's concern is mere jealousy, and this has caused a rift between them. As a result, Velutha spent much of his time on the river, and at one point disappeared for years. No one knows where he went. He's now been back for five months. Mammachi has rehired him, but she pays him less than others and considers anything she does for him as a favor.

There is a flash-forward to when Velutha's father sees that Velutha and Ammu have been having an affair. He reveals this to the family in terror, apologizing for having a monster for a son and offering to kill him. When Baby Kochamma hears what has happened, she is both glad and disgusted.

The children have befriended Velutha and visit him at his house, though they aren't supposed to because of his caste. They like watching him work, and he teaches them to use the tools and to fish.

Back at the parade, a marcher opens the car door and heckles the family. He humiliates Baby Kochamma, forcing her to wave a red scarf and repeat a Marxist chant. When the parade finally passes, Chacko demands to know if Rahel really saw Velutha. She realizes that this is dangerous somehow, and she says that she isn't sure. Baby Kochamma says it was he, and they need to keep an eye on him. She later blames him for her humiliation at the march.

Meanwhile, the family still waits for the train, and Rahel thinks about various things, like the squashed dead frog on the road and the heat. She thinks about Julius Caesar, how he died, and how Ammu said it was a story about how you can't trust anyone.

Rahel behaves in ways her mother thinks is low class. It reminds her of their father Baba. Rahel knows Estha remembers custody arguments, but Ammu denies ever not wanting him. The family begins to argue in the heat.



Finally, the train goes by, and Uncle Chacko starts the car. Baby Kochamma unsuccessfully attempts to lighten the mood by singing a song.

## Analysis

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to three marriages. Chacko was married to an Englishwoman, and after the death of her second husband, he's invited her to spend Christmas in India. It is apparent he hasn't seen her for some time. It is implied that he is still in love with her. So, Chacko is divorced. Ammu, his sister, is also divorced. There is an apparent difference in how the two siblings are treated because of their failed marriages, however. Chacko marries outside his culture. This is not a reason to reject him, because he "married up" by marrying an Englishwoman. But when Ammu marries a Hindu, this is a reason for the family to disengage from her completely. When that marriage fails, she is only accepted back reluctantly.

While Chacko is responsible for the family business, he isn't good at his job. While it's possible Ammu might be successful, she isn't even given the chance, because of her gender. Ammu is disgraced for her divorce, but not Chacko. Ammu's life is basically ruined. She has nothing to live for except her children. Baby Kochamma judges Ammu for not returning chastened, like a nun.

The third marriage is that of their parents (Mammachi and Pappachi) where there is not a divorce, but a lifelong commitment, though it is obviously a very unhappy one. Pappachi abuses his wife physically for years, and when he is finally prevented from doing so, he turns to psychological abuse, refusing to speak to his wife for his remaining years.

Abuse against wives is rampant. It seems accepted on some level by the society around them. There doesn't seem to be any expectation of acceptance or help. Mammachi is beaten for stepping into the business world and gaining some sense of self. Pappachi behaves like a child, but he is allowed to do so. His status as patriarch is unquestioned. Ammu is beaten for not prostituting herself for her husband. She leaves, rejecting sexual degradation, but is then punished, even seen as a "fallen woman" though she has never done anything to deserve it except walk away from an abusive man who wants to pimp her out. Only Chacko, the soft, fat educated man, is not abusive to his wife. He stops the abuse of his mother. However, Margaret is an Englishwoman, which puts her in a class by herself.

The idea of being a family of "Anglophiles" is significant. Chacko marries an Englishwoman. The family speaks English, and has always, as far as the children are aware, aspired to be more like their colonial masters. English is a "better" language than Malayalam, their native tongue. English literature is taught to the children and emphasized as a sign of true education. They are a minority religion. However, since they live in Kerala, it is a sign of status rather than a way to be discriminated against. The family considers itself above others and works hard to eliminate anything in themselves that might be perceived as "low status." They know, however, that because



they are still Indian, they are reaching outside their culture, which creates a tension of an unachievable goal. They can, after all, never be English and white, not even with a white wife or an Oxford education. This makes them separate, outside the culture around them.

Caste and class are an obsession throughout the novel. Even Ammu, who has married “beneath” herself by marrying a Hindu, is obsessed with not being low class. She doesn't want her children to betray any of her aspirations. She feels this way in spite of the fact that she is a pariah herself, as a divorcee. Velutha and his father are Untouchables, and though they too are Syrian Christian, this has not washed away all the traditions associated with that caste status. Vellya Paapen remembers what it was like when he was treated little better than dirt. He is very concerned that his son's disregard for his status will cost him in the end. We know as readers that it will, but we don't know exactly how he pays the price for stepping above his station.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare the marriages of Ammu and Rahel. How were their marriages impacted by their upbringing? How does Ammu's divorce impact her present life in 1969? How was Mammachi's marriage different from that of her daughter and granddaughter? Is there a connection between the marriages of Rahel and Chacko and Ammu? How does Baby Kochamma's singlehood fit into all this?

## Discussion Question 2

What was the real life Pappachi's Moth? What does it represent in Rahel's life? Explain the connection between the two.

## Discussion Question 3

How does being an "Anglophile" family affect their collective sense of self-worth? What are some of the ways they demonstrate their Anglophile nature? How does it affect how they see Sophie Mol, sight unseen?

## Vocabulary

Surname, bequeathed, incursion, abjectly, oblivious, incipient, futile, penumbral, incumbent, ignominy, turmeric, entomology, lepidopterists, taxonomic, pernicious, dorsal, incipient, maleficent, inordinate, anglophile, translucent, sibilant, provident, chauvinist, precocious, desultory, bourgeois, opulent, insidiously, travails, cheroot, invidious, insolence, gossamer.



## Chapter 3 - 4

### Summary

In Chapter 3, the setting shifts back to the present day, at Ayemenem House. The house is dirty with neglect, as Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria watch television. The title of the chapter refers to something an old coolie used to say to Estha and his schoolmates, regarding life goals, in English “Big Man the Lantern, Small Man the Tallow-stick.” It refers to the idea that the powerful always get the better things.

The rain stops, and Estha appears with his puppy. Baby Kochamma talks about him to Rahel as if Estha is deaf. Estha, as predicted by Baby Kochamma, goes straight to his room, and Rahel follows. His room, which used to be Ammu's, is pristine, in contrast to the rest of the house. Rahel sees this as the one sign he has some purpose in life, but wonders if he's aware of her presence.

As she watches him, the reader receives a description of what she looks like now, how she looks similar to her mother/Ammu, but more angular, with big beautiful eyes. She looks at Estha's naked body as he dries himself off, looking for signs of their similarity. At the same time he is both intimately familiar to her, and a stranger. He retreats from her, and doesn't look at her, even when she reaches out and touches him to flick away a drop of water from his ear.

In Chapter 4, the setting shifts back to 1969 at the movie theater where the family is about to attend “The Sound of Music.” Everyone except Chacko (who has gone to check them into the hotel) uses the restroom. Rahel experiences it as a bonding experience with the two adult women, while the solitary Estha has his first “adult assignment” in using the men's room alone.

The usher is annoyed because they are late for the movie. When they finally get seated and start watching, Estha can't help singing along. He ends up having to leave the theatre for the duration of the song so he doesn't disturb the other patrons. When Estha sings in the lobby, it upsets the clerk at the snacks and drinks counter (called the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man), because it wakes him up from his habitual nap. He complains and asks Estha nosy questions. Then he insists the boy comes over to have a free drink behind the counter, where he sexually abuses him. Estha is frozen in fear and complies. Estha is stunned, upset and feeling soiled as he returns to the family inside the theater. The twins are struck with the difference between their family and the Von Trapp family, and how they are not “clean and white” like the world in the film. They realize that Sophie Mol, even though they've never met her, fits the bill.

Estha puts his head down, and Ammu chastises him for not watching the movie. She is irritated because she thinks he's sulking. He tells her he might have to vomit, so she takes him out to the restroom. Then Ammu takes him to the snack counter. When Estha behaves oddly, and doesn't accept the treats, Ammu forces him to take them and say





thank you. The man tells Ammu he's familiar with Ayemenem, and visits often. This is obviously meant as a warning to Estha. Estha looks ill, and Ammu decides the family should leave and go to the hotel. Ammu apologizes to the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man for Estha's uncharacteristic behavior. The family leaves, though they are disappointed because the film isn't over. As they leave, the snack man offers Rahel a sweet as well, which greatly upsets Estha. Rahel is repelled by the look the man gives her, and takes the unwanted sweets from her brother instead. Instinctively, without words, Rahel knows something is wrong. Ammu compliments the clerk, saying he was "surprisingly sweet" to Estha. Rahel responds with a hurtful comment. Ammu tells her that hurting people makes them love you less, which greatly concerns Rahel. As they take a taxi to the hotel, Estha worries that if Ammu knew what had happened to him with the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, she would love him less.

When they arrive at the hotel, they find Chacko feasting and surprised to see them. Because Estha is ill, and Ammu is still angry at Rahel, sleeping arrangements are shifted. Rahel obsesses that her mother now loves her less. Chacko offers her some of his food, but she refuses, punishing herself.

Just before Chacko goes to bed, he looks at his photo of Sophie Mol, his daughter. He wonders what she looks like now. He remembers his divorce, how it happened three weeks after the birth of Sophie because Margaret loved another man named Joe. Chacko felt ripped apart when this happened. Chacko is concerned that Sophie Mol might not be his daughter, but rather Joe's. Now Joe is dead from a car accident. Rahel asks Chacko if he loves Sophie Mol more than anyone else. He replies that Sophie is his daughter, so Rahel asks if that is the way it works, that you have to love your own children the most in the world, or whether you might not love someone else more. Chacko becomes distant, and replies that anything is possible.

Estha gets up from bed and finally vomits. He leaves the room, and without knocking, waits outside Chacko and Rahel's hotel room door. Rahel opens the door for him. Chacko doesn't think about how she knew Estha was there, but instead worries about the possibly Marxist Velutha.

The perspective shifts to Comrade Pillai, who has been watching the pickle factory and thinking about organizing a union, as a way to increase his political clout. Chacko knows he's not paying enough in wages to the workers, and makes empty promises to them. He doesn't know that Comrade Pillai has been organizing them behind his back, and that this will cause the closing of the factory. Pillai doesn't worry about Chacko or his business relationship with him. He dehumanizes him when he gives rallying speeches. He is worried about Velutha, however, because he's an Untouchable. Velutha, as the only worker at the factory who is a member of the Party, should be his ally, but Pillai knows his caste makes this a problem. When Mammachi hears the rumors of the workers asking for more pay, she tries to warn Chacko, but he doesn't listen. In the hotel room, Chacko thinks that he could get around Comrade Pillai by organizing his own private labor union at the factory. He thinks of Margaret and Sophie Mol and their impending visit, while the twins sleep holding each other.



## Analysis

“Big Man the Laltain, Small Man the Mombatti” introduces the idea of the Small versus the Big. In the movie theater, the Audience is the Big Man with the Lantern, while Estha, who can’t stop himself from singing along, is the Little Man. He must submit to their demands. The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man is an adult, which means that Estha is the child who must comply with his wishes, even though they are perverted and wrong. Estha and Rahel have to submit to the wishes of the adults, no matter how nonsensical the wishes may be. Rahel has to remove her sunglasses, for instance, because her mother doesn’t like the way it looks. She dresses Rahel in an absurd dress, for her own needs, not because that’s what Rahel wants to wear.

However, it is not only about childhood. The Untouchables are treated as Small Men all the time. Velutha’s refusal to embrace that fate leads to his father’s fear. Though Velutha should be Pillai’s most natural ally in the factory, he has to reject him because of his caste. But the Small Men are rising, as exemplified by the Marxist march. They dare to frighten the family in their fancy car, even going so far as to open the door and harass its inhabitants. Baby Kochamma isn’t entirely wrong to be afraid of them, since she has what they want. Chacko’s sexism also comes into play, since his mother—the person who ran the factory competently and profitably until his arrival—notifies him of the unionizing effort in his factory. He ignores her reports. He ignores her advice. Because he is arrogant, and disregards the opinions or knowledge of his mother, he loses the factory.

The children understand each other completely, even as time has passed between them. They can’t speak, and the painfulness of the silence is overwhelming in the present. As children, Rahel doesn’t even have to be told that Estha was molested—she knows something terrible has happened. She knows when he needs her, without any talking.

The children are confronted again with the difference between their lives in India and the lives of the children on the movie screen. They can never attain the ideal appearance or life that they see in the film, because of their class and race.

Estha’s molestation is shocking because it is so common, yet so horrifying. The reader is brought into the banality of his experience. He gets a treat, and, at the same time, he is being forced to participate in his sexual abuse. Like most children, because he feels terrible, he blames himself and feels guilty. When adults are in charge and they make you do something terrible over which you have no power to say no, the guilt and anger dwell inside the child. Estha feels simultaneously soiled and sick. Since we see this event through the eyes of seven-year-old Estha, we feel his confusion and pain. We also feel his shock that his mother, the woman who is supposed to know him best, does not recognize the signs that something is terribly wrong. When he behaves strangely, his mother’s first reaction is to try to correct his behavior, and not embarrass her. The last thing she would want is for him to be molested, but because of her narrow focus—her children’s good behavior in public—she misses her betrayal of her son. She doesn’t





recognize his pain. When his mother forces Estha to take the proffered treats from his molester, the betrayal is compounded again and again. The molester is “so sweet” to Estha, his mother says. And like all molesters, the man instills a deep fear in Estha, that if he says anything, he will be hurt. He now has to watch out.

The primary fear of any child is the loss of his/her mother’s love. And Ammu uses this fear to improve her children’s behavior, or at least that is her plan. Her own history leads her to see that a mother and father’s love can be removed. She resents it, and rebels against it, but doesn’t refrain from using this same fact against her own children. It is interesting that Pappachi’s moth is used as the symbol for this fear. Pappachi never appeared to love anyone but himself. He beat his wife. He ignored his children. He was petty and mean. His moth was kept from him, his greatest disappointment. He is not, however, disappointed in his family participation. There is no indication of regret, and he appears to be a narcissist until the very end.

On Rahel’s heart, the moth is her fear of loss, her jealousy that everyone appears to be loved more than her. Sophie Mol is loved more because she is English and more white. Estha is loved more because he is a boy. Chacko is loved more because he is a man. It is tragic that Ammu has never had the love of her parents, and then visits this same loss on her children.

## Discussion Question 1

So far in the novel, who are the "Big" and who are the "Small"? How do these roles affect each of them?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some things that might have happened to prevent Estha's being sexually abused? What are the contributing factors that lead to it happening? What are some things that could have happened to help him, in an immediate sense? Why do you think those things don't occur?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some ways that the family's Indian culture is contrasted with English ways and lifestyles? How do these things affect each of the family members and their behavior toward each other?

## Vocabulary

Privation, coolie, curdled, volition, viable, angular, naphthalene, luminous, convulses, petulantly, pugnaciously, rescind, satiated, constituency, steeped, pertinent, provident, cadence, attributes, functionary.



## Chapter 5 - 6

### Summary

The scene moves back to 1993. The river has been very damaged by agricultural development and is severely polluted. It is no longer a place to swim or fish. The History House has become the centerpiece of an expensive hotel complex. "God's Own Country" refers to the hotel's brochure. The hotel's main draw is its "heritage" tourism, which takes the traditions of the local area and repackages them in bland bites stripped of most of their meaning. The children's experiences there have been erased or buried.

Rahel takes a walk and is made aware of her disconnection and the changes around her. The town has grown significantly. She walks past Comrade Pillai's print shop, hoping she won't be noticed. He recognizes her immediately, and asks if she remembers him. Pillai tells his customer who Rahel is by explaining who her grandfather was. The customer remembers there was some scandal, but not specifically what it was about, and then leaves. Pillai asks about her husband and plans to have children. She tries to shock him by telling him she's divorced. After telling her this is "unfortunate," he asks about Estha, who she says is fine. He calls him "poor fellow." He tells her about his son being in Delhi and shows her photos of him and his family.

As Rahel looks at the photos, she remembers the first time she and Estha saw Pillai's son, Lenin. They were both small children at the doctor's office waiting room, and they both had stuffed foreign objects up their respective noses. Rahel is able to expel the object by blowing her nose very hard. Therefore, she avoids having to see the frightening doctor who is also known for sexually harassing the mothers who come there with their children. At the time, she was considered superior to him in class, while now their positions are reversed.

Rahel tries to leave, but Pillai finds a photo of that Christmas when Sophie Mol visited. The children all look caught by surprise, except for Sophie Mol, who is mugging for the camera. Rahel remembers how Sophie had just told them they were probably bastards and explained what sex was. The photo was taken only days before she died.

In Chapter 6, family is at the Cochin Airport to pick up Sophie Mol and her mother Margaret. Rahel has on a new dress and is still concerned about her mother's love for her. The children are not speaking to each other because they have had an argument. Chacko is wearing a suit, which is uncharacteristic of him. He is holding two red roses.

There are four dirty cement kangaroo garbage cans in the Arrivals Lounge, overflowing. The place is full of families waiting for their relatives to arrive on the airplane from abroad. The children are informed that they are "Ambassadors of India," and responsible for Sophie Mol's first impression. Rahel imagines that the kangaroos are alive and walking around the airport and wanders off. The financial and cultural gap between the Returnees getting off the airplane and the people waiting for them is wide.



Ammu is upset when the children become distracted. Chacko refuses to help, because he has flowers for Margaret and Sophie Mol. There is an awkward greeting between them all. Baby Kochamma tries to impress Margaret by comparing Sophie Mol to a Shakespeare character. When the children laugh, Baby mocks Estha's Elvis Presley hairstyle. As a result Estha becomes obstinate, and makes Ammu angry. All the family's plans for perfect behavior have failed. While Chacko takes the visitors to retrieve their luggage, Ammu and Baby Kochamma shame the children for their defiant behavior and getting dirty.

On the way to the car, Sophie asks the twins if their mother hits them. She says that Margaret slaps her sometimes. Rahel asks Sophie whom she loves most, and Sophie responds that it is her dead stepfather. She asks where their father is, and Estha avoids the question. Rahel distracts her by giving her "list" of her best-loved people, beginning with Ammu and Chacko. When Rahel lists Sophie, Sophie is surprised because they don't know each other. She says she doesn't love her back. Rahel doesn't have Estha on her list, because they are like the same person. Sophie teaches the children to sashay.

On the trip back to Ayemenem, they pass a dead elephant. Chacko stops to find out if it was an elephant they knew, and they are relieved it is not. Baby Kochamma suggests a song, and they sing an English hymn they have rehearsed.

## Analysis

"God's Own Country" refers to the hotel the History House becomes. It was once the abandoned estate of a long gone colonial. The colonial used to molest the local boys, so the fact that the children end up seeing this place as the repository of safety, of their personal, secret history, is ironic. Not only has it been dragged from decay, it has become a performance space for the local culture to be made palatable for foreign tourists. As a result, history is watered down, and re-fed to those who don't know any better. The History House has been erased, buried, and become not only unrecognizable to the children, but to the entire community. It is supposed to be about history for the tourists, but history no longer exists there.

The sense of class difference emerges again with the people getting off the plane from abroad. The native Indians all think of themselves as lesser people, and as the Returning people to be their superiors, primarily because of access to money.

Class difference is also apparent when Rahel as an adult visits with Comrade Pillai. Because she is female, divorced, and her family's properties no longer really exist, she has come down in the world, while Comrade Pillai is grasping at status through his son. While Rahel no longer matters, Lenin has succeeded, and has a family.

Sophie Mol is the foreign cousin, perfect, yet not very nice, almost from the beginning. She tells the children they are bastards, for instance. And like most children, she uses her age and therefore greater knowledge, to gain any superiority she has. She feels out



of her element, and yet the children are jealous of the love and attention she gets. Sophie probably has very little sense of her privilege, except for the place she comes from and the money she has. Here, however, the children are in charge. If the children had the capacity to understand that they are now essentially both without fathers, their meeting might have been different. Sophie Mol confesses that she too is abused by her mother. This fact is taken as normal, rather than something to bond over. The twins have no father at all, it would seem, while Sophie Mol has two, even though one has died. To her, however, Chacko is a stranger from a strange place.

Like all families, the family fails any time they try to pretend they're perfect. The failure to maintain their perfection in public is seen as a great failing, however, from all the adults' perspective. Instead of recognizing that children are children, they project all their needs onto the little ones.

## Discussion Question 1

Is there some significance to calling the old plantation house, now hotel, the "History House"? What are the different ways in which it represents history?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some ways that expectations or appearances are foiled by real occurrences in these two chapters? What do you think is the significance of the cement kangaroos?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some of the ways Rahel has switched places with Lenin, Comrade Pillai's son, over the years?

## Vocabulary

Barrage, succulent, fetid, viscous, truncated, baleful, aberrations, cantankerous, impertinence, calamitous, adulation, piously, sashay.



## Chapter 7 - 8

### Summary

Rahel is looking for something she hid in Pappachi's neglected study. Estha comes in and tells him that she stole their home school notebooks from Ammu, after he was Returned. On one of Estha's, he had rubbed out his last name and replaced it with "Unknown" because Ammu had been in the middle of deciding whether or not she would retain her ex-husband's name. Rahel reads some of Estha's notebook from when he was six years old. She reads his version of the story of Ulysses' return from his long journey, disguised as a beggar. She also reads a passage where the child Estha had explained street safety. Rahel treats it all lightly, until she reaches a touching story titled "Little Ammu," on the subject of Ammu's birthday. Instead of praising Estha for his nice story about her, Ammu has corrected his spelling and written a note chastising him for having interrupted her.

It reminds Rahel that Ammu was forced to leave Ayemenem after her affair was found out, and was never able to repair their relationship after Estha was Returned. Rahel was left behind with Chacko and Mammachi. Ammu worked menial jobs, sometimes getting fired for ill health. The last time she visited Ayemenem, she brought inappropriate gifts for Rahel's age, as if she were trying to freeze time. Ammu was trying to earn enough money to bring the children to live with her. Ammu promised Rahel she would get a better job, or start a school. She chattered nervously, and looked and sounded unhealthy. At dinner, she was uncharacteristically uncouth, looking unkempt. Mammachi accused her of drinking and told her not to visit as often, so Ammu abruptly left. Chacko ordered Rahel to go say goodbye, but Rahel was disgusted, and refused. This was the last time she ever saw Ammu.

Ammu died alone in a hotel room where she'd gone for a job interview. In her last moments, she had awakened with a familiar nightmare about having her hair hacked off by policemen in order to brand her as a prostitute. Because of her past, she was not buried in a cemetery, so Chacko had her cremated. They transported the body themselves, which was an awkward and undignified experience. Her remains weren't respected or treated with any class or honor. Only Chacko and Rahel were present, and they didn't cry. Estha was still in Calcutta. The family notified him about Ammu's death by letter. Rahel did not write to him.

Rahel looks up from the notebook to find that Estha has gone. She tries to catch him, but she only sees his back as he leaves the property

"Welcome Home, Our Sophie Mol," the title of Chapter 8, refers to a banner that was hung above the verandah of the house the day Sophie Mol came to visit from England in 1969. Mammachi is on the verandah waiting for the family to come back from the airport, playing a violin. She is beautiful and regal, though blind. She has scars on her head from when Pappachi beat her.



She thinks about her pickles, and how they are imperfect. She thinks about Sophie Mol and about her dislike of Margaret Kochamma. Her dislike is rooted partly in Margaret's working class status, but also in Mammachi's jealousy. She is not worried about Chacko bringing shame to the family name by having multiple sexual affairs. She even slips Chacko's women money. She isn't happy about Chacko's marriage. When Margaret visits, she secretly sees Margaret as nothing more than a prostitute.

Kochu Maria is icing the cake she baked for Sophie Mol. Kochu Maria is careful to wear jewelry that shows her to be distinct from the Untouchable caste, and a Syrian Christian. She and the children do not have a friendly relationship.

When they hear the car arriving, work stops at the factory. The workers come out to greet the guests. Rahel soon realizes she has only a small part to play in the proceedings, which is similar to theater. Chacko escorts Margaret and Sophie Mol onto the verandah to meet Mammachi. They exchange basic pleasantries, awkwardly. Mammachi then brings Sophie Mol close to her and appraises her appearance.

Velutha walks by, and Rahel escapes the group to go to him. Ammu watches them as Velutha picks up her happy child. Ammu appraises his looks, remembering him as a boy. She hopes that it was him that Rahel saw at the march, because it would mean he shared her anger against order. She also envies both of them, because she feels excluded from the ease they share with one another. This is the moment they both notice one another outside their caste differences for the first time, though no one else notices their exchanged look. Rahel teases Velutha about seeing him at the march, and he denies it. When Velutha looks up the verandah to see Sophie Mol, Rahel covers his eyes and tells him she doesn't want him to look. They notice that Estha is not on the verandah.

Kochu Maria brings out the cake, and at Mammachi's prompting praises Sophie Mol and saying she's very beautiful. There is further awkwardness, which causes Ammu to comment in sarcasm. Chacko is offended and Ammu storms off. Velutha and Rahel wonder where Estha is. Mammachi plays the violin until Chacko asks her to stop.

Ammu comes out to summon Rahel for cake and a nap, which she doesn't want. Baby Kochamma complains about Rahel being "over familiar" with Velutha, and suggests again that they inquire whether he'd been at the march. Everyone ignores her.

Rahel continues to be jealous of all the attention and praise Sophie Mol gets, and says she's moving to Africa. Rahel stomps on some ants that smell when they're squished. Sophie Mol comes out to see what she's doing. All the adults watching think it's sweet to see the girls playing together, but Sophie suggests they leave one ant alive so that it would be alone. Rahel ignores her, kills them all and runs away.

## Analysis

The school notebooks are poignant for two reasons. One reason is that Estha calls himself "Estha Unknown" because his mother has not yet chosen which last name she



will use. It certainly mattered to the children that they were left with no real name, but it is yet more poignant in light of the fact that Estha as an adult has become virtually unknown through his silence and disconnection from the world around him. He is like a ghost, moving through the world but never really impacting it in any way. No one knows what he's thinking at all, even Rahel, who used to be so close to him.

The second reason is related to the story of Ammu's Birthday. Estha had been so excited to show Ammu his story that he'd interrupted her when she was talking to someone, like children do. He was proud of the story, but instead he is slapped down for "bad behavior." The story is ignored, except for the spelling mistakes. It ends with "Please complete your corrections." It is the height of tragedy, yet so common for adults to ignore their children's search for love. She answers his love with distance and rejection. It is as if she is so attached to the idea of improving the children and being their teacher that she's incapable of mothering them at the same time. The seriousness with which she takes her task becomes a way to deny them love.

Ammu's reaction to the Indians being treated weirdly by the English is not because of her education, but because of her nature. She is reacting in part to her Anglophile father's carefully cultivated public persona versus his horrific private abuse of Mammachi and Ammu all through her childhood. As a reaction to Pappachi's terrible abuse, Ammu has developed a certain recklessness and defiance. Being confronted with Mammachi's overweening love for her son versus her rejection of her daughter drives her daughter to become what she is so widely seen to be. If you are treated as a slut, why not be one? However, in this chapter, the door is only opened wide enough for her to finally see Velutha the Untouchable as a real man. She might not even see herself as crossing the divide forbidden to her.

Rahel wants to prevent Velutha from looking at Sophie Mol and preferring her. In her family system, love is rare, and when Sophie gets it from everyone, even as an unknown person, Rahel can't help but be jealous. Any love she might get must be taken from the bounty given to Sophie Mol.

## Discussion Question 1

What "wisdom" is gained by looking through Estha's old notebooks? What does it say about how Estha's childhood affected his present?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some examples of things "left unsaid" or unresolved between the family members? What are some possible phrases or sentences you think might have changed outcomes?





## Discussion Question 3

What are some ways characters in the novel seek to escape their class status? How or why do they fail or succeed?

## Vocabulary

Iridescent, meager, incessantly, garrulous, viable, derelicts, famished, rheumy, prescience, imperceptible, languid, libertine, enigmatic, implicit, feudal, libido, traipsing, tacit, gullibility, cornea, mien, tactile, evanescent, parapet, effrontery, clairvoyant.





## Chapter 9 - 10

### Summary

It is the present day, and Rahel is in the abandoned garden. She is thinking about her former life in America. For the first time since she's arrived in Ayemenem it isn't raining. Rahel has some money, but Baby Kochamma is already asking about how long she's staying and what she's going to do about Estha. She has no plans. She notices Baby Kochamma's giant satellite dish for TV.

There is a flashback to one week after Sophie Mol's arrival. Sophie Mol has surprised the twins with several things. First, she prefers the dead Joe over Chacko. Next, she hasn't agreed to take Mammachi's favored place as hair braider each night. Finally, the most important surprise is that she's rejected Baby Kochamma's overtures of affection. She also has proved to be sensitive to the twins' rejection. So, they take her to visit Velutha, wearing saris, pretending to be grown ladies. Velutha agrees to the game and treats them courteously, an act that Rahel realizes as an adult was very sweet. Velutha is often indulgent to the children in this way.

In the present, Rahel can see Estha sitting alone in his room. However, Estha does not see her. Rahel realizes that things could have been different if the children had ever been able to see themselves as victims rather than perpetrators. She realizes they weren't the only perpetrators, but there is no question that Velutha was a victim. When he leaves, their mother does, too, leaving them alone.

The moon rises, and Rahel decides to go for a walk. On the way she stops in the abandoned pickle factory.

In Chapter 10, "The River in the Boat," it is 1969 and everyone is greeting Sophie Mol and having cake, Estha has sneaked off to find a place to think inside the pickle factory. He likes to be in the pickle factory, with all the scents and beautiful fruits. He is afraid of what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man has said about coming to Ayemenam to find him, and that he'll come any moment. He is also afraid of how Ammu will treat his abuser like an honored guest, and he would have no one to help him. He stirs the jam and thinks Two Thoughts: that anything can happen to anyone, and it's best to be prepared. Then, he gets the idea to get a boat so he can escape and run away.

He hears Rahel calling for him, but he doesn't answer, instead keeping on stirring. But she finds him anyway. He is hostile to her when she asks what he's doing. He keeps thinking of his molester coming and being greeted by his mother. She finally gets up to go, and he tells her he's going to the History House. She hears it as an abandonment of her, and asks him why. He tells her his two thoughts. She doesn't know how to reply, but knows the place is abandoned and no one goes there.



It is said to be haunted. Vellya Paapen has told people he trapped the pedophile ghost there with his sickle. Vellya Paapen doesn't know that "History" is going to use him to ruin the family.

The children make plans for Estha to escape. Rahel would go pretend to take her nap, and Estha would wait for her by the river, and they would prepare. Rahel lies down next to her mother and waits until she's asleep and then goes to the river to join Estha, who is sitting on a forgotten boat that Rahel found long before.

The children wonder if the boat is too old to make it across the river. The children know how to swim and to fish, but they need to take things with them and so cannot swim across like they have before. The boat sinks when they try it, so they clean it off and take it to Velutha's hut, but no one is there but Kuttappen, Velutha's older, paralyzed brother.

Kuttappen has been paralyzed for some time, and is waiting for death. He is a "good" Paravan/Untouchable, because he doesn't threaten the order of things. The children go inside and greet him. The hut is small and neat, and has many hand-me-downs from the big house. They give the paralyzed man a drink of water. Kuttappen is embarrassed to see them. He asks them about Sophie Mol. The children pretend indifference. They ask him about how to fix the boat. He tells them it won't be too difficult, but he also warns them about the river. From the bed, he supervises the fixing, and they sing a dirty song together they've heard on the river. Velutha returns, and for a while the ghost of the molester threat disappears. He is happy to see them, but his new feelings for Ammu make him feel different. He tries not to think about it. When he asks where they're going in the boat, Rahel tells him to Africa. Velutha is reluctant to fix it for them, because he's concerned about them being on the river. They promise not to mess around and go only with him. Estha is happy to hear it will only take a day to fix it. So they begin to work. When Velutha and Kuttappen are alone, Kuttappen asks if the boss's family has asked about the March. Velutha says they didn't ask, but they know he was there. He tries to block out his thoughts about Ammu, thinking her an enemy because she is of the hated class. After awhile, Rahel realizes she might be missed. She runs home.

## Analysis

The children are confronted with the reality that Sophie Mol is neither perfect, nor terrible. The mythology of her superiority isn't real. They see her more and more as a person, and even make her cry. And so, she is included in their adventures, which leads to her death.

Once again, the reader isn't let in to the peak of Rahel and Estha's pain. Though we know about him being abused, we as readers are not yet let into the details of how Velutha and Sophie Mol are killed. In a way, this absence is like the denial or avoidance that accompanies great pain. The incidents are so painful that Rahel can't bring herself to remember it outright. Like her, we are led on a roundabout journey to the source of her and Estha's pain.



Neither Rahel nor Estha have been able to see themselves from the outside. Like most people, they are unable to see themselves as blameless, though they were only children. Rahel is conscious that much of their pain could be lessened if only they could realize they were victims, rather than perpetrators. They have become stuck in their “child-minds” and are unable to understand the scope of their victimization. Instead, they still take responsibility for what happened to Velutha and Sophie Mol. The guilt has essentially ruined their lives, and none of the adults who mattered were able to relieve them of that guilt, and in fact perpetrated it upon them.

Velutha the Untouchable is a gentle and kind person. He treats the children with respect, but not the kind of caste-based respect that an Untouchable might be expected to give. He treats the children like children ought to be treated, and he is the only person in their lives to do so.

## Discussion Question 1

In the first chapter, Rahel imagines that the dead Sophie Mol shows her Two Things. In the pickle factory, Estha has Two Thoughts. What are these, and how are they significant or trivial?

## Discussion Question 2

How does “History” use Vellya Paapen to ruin the family? What are the consequences that come from his decision to spill the beans about Velutha and Ammu’s affair?

## Discussion Question 3

What is ironic about the history of the History House? Contrast the atmosphere in the Paapen hut and the family’s big house. What are some ways Velutha treats the children in contrast to the way their family members treat them.

## Vocabulary

Pectorals, nictitating, perspicacious, astutely, clandestine, decimate, recondite, regurgitated, brine, pectin, augmentation, discourteous, tuberculosis, treacherous, verdant, malevolent, mortified, laconically, scatology, lambent.



# Chapter 11 - 12

## Summary

In Chapter 11, "The God of Small Things," Ammu is dreaming during her nap, dreaming of an unnamed dark-skinned lover with one arm. He is holding her close, and they are being watched by an audience of people wearing Mammachi's sunglasses and playing violins. Outside the circle of the audience, there is a beach of broken blue glass bottles, and beyond that, the chair that Pappachi broke apart when he was no longer allowed to beat his wife. They don't try to escape. She senses her children watching over her, worried, but doesn't wake immediately. She wonders who the man is, and whether he is the "God of Small Things."

Rays of sun fall on Ammu's transistor radio. It is noted that Estha's "soiled" hand carries his fear in a tangerine shape as well. The children try to wake Ammu by making small noises. She doesn't quite wake, but aches with love for them.

In her dream, the one-armed man blows out the lamp that illuminates them and walks across the glass-strewn beach into the shadows, leaving no footprints. Their night together has been postponed. The children express concern about her dream, but Ammu says she was happy. The children wonder if it "counts" if you're happy in a dream. She turns on her radio. It plays a song about a tragic love triangle. The fancy dress Rahel wore the day before and the saris the women wore are all laid aside for washing. The electrocuted elephant is being cremated where he fell.

Ammu notices the children have wood dust on them, and warns them not to go to Velutha's house, because it will cause some unspecified trouble. She recognizes that Velutha is the man of her dream. The children and she enjoy a moment of cuddling intimacy. Then Ammu goes to the bathroom alone and sees her aging in the mirror. She evaluates her body. She worries she might go mad. She dreads her future because she thinks she can see it so clearly, and she wishes she couldn't. She is sad for herself and the God of Small Things and her children.

There is a pause in time, a sense of waiting for a catastrophe. There is the memory of a near future when the bedroom would become a place where Ammu will be first locked up and then thrown from into the world. Chacko threatens to "break every bone" in Ammu's body, while breaking down the door, and for years afterward, Rahel has nightmares about it. During this crisis, Ammu makes the children promise to always love one another, which they do, though they don't consider themselves separate beings. While the door is being broken down by Chacko, there is a weird pause when their mother stitches ribbons. When Chacko comes through the broken door, he tells Ammu to pack up and go.

The bedroom is also the place where Ammu will pack up Estha's things when he is Returned. It becomes clear just how young Estha is, in the packing list. Ammu has



included addressed envelopes and makes him promise to write. Estha doesn't really get the magnitude of what's happening.

Now the room is where the silent adult Estha is staying.

In Chapter 12, "Kochu Thomban," it is the present day. Rahel is going for her walk. She goes to the temple, where the kathakali dancers are performing. She can hear the drums. Kochu Thomban, the elephant, is sleeping, as is the priest. Rahel knows the elephant from her childhood, and he has aged. She offers him a coconut, though he stays sleeping. Kathakali dancers come to the Ayemenem temple to worship and dance apologetically for selling their services for tourism. She watches the dancers. Rahel sits down to watch the dancers. She is familiar with the stories, as she's seen and heard them her whole life. The day of kathakali is passing by, because of disinterest. The dancer turns to tourism to stave off the end, though this is humiliating, because of the tourist detachment, and even disrespect. The dancer's gear is worn out, and even sad looking. The performance is also sad, because the dancer has drowned his sorrows in getting stoned.

The mythical story of Karna and Kunti is danced. Karna is despairing, alone, raised as an orphan, and Kunti appears and explains that she is his mother. Karna reproaches her for having abandoned him. All is forgotten when she kisses him. Karna then realizes she has revealed herself in order to save her five other sons, the Pandavas, and she invokes the Love Laws, his responsibility to his siblings, his blood, and tries to get him to promise he won't go to war against them. But Karna has already promised to go to war against them, and pledged himself to their enemy. He compromises with her, promising not to kill anyone but the one who has publicly insulted him.

Estha arrives to watch the dance, and Rahel senses it.

The dancers dance all night, story after story. At four a.m. they dance the story of the Death of Duryodhana and his brother Dushasana, culminating in a long battle scene that ends in a gruesome death. Estha and Rahel recognize the reality of the dancers' rage. Then the dancers go home "to beat their wives."

Comrade Pillai is the one who introduced the children to kathakali dances and the legends that go with them. They remember seeing this same story at age six. As they leave the temple, they see him. He greets them with pleasure that they still are interested in Indian culture, but they don't respond, and leave together.

## Analysis

Ammu dreams of being trapped together with a protective one-armed man while surrounded by people who represent the judgement and abuse of her family. There is nowhere for her to go, nowhere to escape. The God of Small Things, who is also Velutha, can leave no footprints, and can walk away. She does not appear to have the same power. The question is whether or not this powerlessness is real or imagined. Could she walk away if she chose? The one time she did escape, and marry against the



wishes of her family, she is thwarted by abuse and lies. She never takes the step of escape again, though she flirts with the idea by the fantasy represented by the tangerine shaped radio. Songs and fantasy become a sort of hopeless escape. There is no real way to get away, except in her mind. So, the reader gets the sense that even though she is about to love an Untouchable, something taboo, she is going to do so as a product of expected catastrophe. There is no sense that she is going to take steps to protect herself in this, or participate in any real escape.

The tangerine-shaped radio is the only, tiny avenue of escape. The fact that Estha's fear resulting from his abuse is also in the shape of a tangerine represents some sense that the radio is not just a source of good fantasy, but also the kind that poisons and sullies. Estha doesn't ever realize that his fear can be dispelled if he only had the safety of a mother he could tell, a mother who could see his pain. Instead, everything is operating as a sort of dream-state that no one appears to be able to shake.

Awakening from this dream, in her bedroom, Ammu and the children have one pure moment of intimacy and affection. She realizes she loves Velutha, and becomes the only adult who sees Velutha as a real person, a real man. It is as if her children's affection for him has opened her eyes, and it leads to her being able to truly love her children for one very real moment.

Ammu's bedroom becomes the location of true love between Ammu and their children, but also the location of their greatest trauma, when Chacko breaks down the door, and throws Ammu out. It is where the most closeness happened, but also where Estha's childhood was finally and completely lost. If his abuse was recognized and dealt with, perhaps none of what followed could have happened. If Ammu had true intimacy with her children, perhaps Estha would have stopped being so afraid, and wouldn't have tried to run away. The bedroom becomes Estha's sacred refuge when he is Re-returned.

The kathakali dancers represent the sadness of history lost. Not only are they humiliated and sad for the loss of the respect they once had from the culture at large, they are no longer supported financially. They are a remnant of the past. The stories they act out also bring forward two themes that have been ever-present in the novel, the idea of maternal betrayal and the "love laws" that must never be broken. Loyalty to one's family is supposed to be unbreakable, and yet it is broken in both mythology and Estha's and Rahel's family.

## Discussion Question 1

In your opinion, how can Ammu's dream be interpreted? Who and what is the "God of Small Things"? How is Ammu's bedroom both a refuge and a place of terror?



## Discussion Question 2

What, if anything, is significant about Estha's "tangerine-shaped" fear and Ammu's "tangerine-shaped" radio? Are they connected? How?

## Discussion Question 3

How are the Kathakali dancers "apologetic"? What are they apologizing for? How has tourism affected them? What are the parallels between the stories they dance and the overall story in the novel?

## Vocabulary

Pariah, tousled, proprietary, voluptuous, caper, vapid, incoherence, cognizant, encompassing, jettison, truncated, colonnaded, ebullience, unviable, imprudence, fealty, equivocated, recalcitrant.





# Chapter 13

## Summary

In Chapter 13, "The Pessimist and the Optimist," it is 1969. Chacko has moved out of his room so Margaret and Sophie Mol can be together. Sophie Mol and Margaret are napping there. Sophie Mol wakes and after feeling trapped, she thinks of Joe while Margaret sleeps. Chacko and Margaret's wedding picture is on the bedside table. Margaret's mother is in the picture, but she doesn't look happy. Margaret's father had refused to attend the wedding because of his prejudice against Indians. In the corner of the picture is a man on a bicycle. It is implied that this might be Joe.

There is a flashback or memory to when Margaret and Chacko met. Margaret's father owned a bakery, and her mother was a hat-maker's assistant in a shop. Margaret did not live at home, and wished to become a teacher. She was working as a waitress in Oxford, where Chacko visited her. He was nearly done with his schooling at Oxford University. He did not dress well, but he had an athletic build and looked friendly. They bonded over laughing at his jokes at their first meeting, though she was reprimanded by her employer for her behavior.

Chacko continued to patronize the café often, and they began to date. He represented an escape for her, a way to escape her society's expectations and find magic in herself. After a year they were married.

Margaret was Chacko's first female friend. He loved her for her independence and her difference from his mother. He rarely spoke of his family to her and didn't stay in touch with them, though he got regular letters from Mammachi. Sometimes he didn't even read them.

When they were married, it was against her family's wishes, and he didn't notify his family. He moved into her flat. He had trouble finding a job. He gained a lot of weight. After a year, Margaret grew tired of his laziness. They moved to London when he found a temporary job, she got pregnant, and she met Joe, who was attractive and had a good job.

Chacko wrote to Mammachi, informed her of his marriage, and asked for money. She pawned her jewelry and sent it to him, but it wasn't enough. Margaret asked for a divorce. Chacko returned to India and found a job at a college. When Pappachi died, he returned to Ayemenem.

Mammachi adores Chacko and treats him like a prince. He responds by overeating and dressing badly. He behaves uncouthly when Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have guests. He upsets Mammachi by talking about Margaret, whom he seems to admire for having divorced him for a "better man."





Margaret and Chacko write to each other frequently. Margaret becomes a teacher. It is while she's at work that she is told that Joe has died, having been hit by a car while on his bicycle. Margaret hides her grief for Sophie Mol's sake. Neither of them takes time off. When Chacko invites her to India for Christmas, she is relieved and wants very much to go. This decision haunts her the rest of her life.

She keeps a picture of Sophie Mol's drowned body until she dies. She never forgives herself for leaving Sophie Mol behind while she and Chacko went to Cochin.

The morning Sophie Mol's body is discovered in the river, Estha and Rahel are still missing. Chacko and Margaret are away. This is right after Vellya Paapen has informed Mammachi and Baby Kochamma about Ammu and Velutha's affair, so the house is in an uproar. Ammu has been locked in her bedroom. The children are being searched for, with no success. Ammu is full of rage at what's happening to her, at being locked up, and can't answer when Baby Kochamma asks about the children. Later, Ammu remembers that when the children had knocked on her locked door and asked why she was locked in, she'd blamed them. She'd told them to go away, and now they were missing.

There is a flashback to the previous afternoon during the rain. Kochu Maria was preparing dinner, and Vellya Paapen came by, drunk and upset. His behavior upset Kochu Maria and Mammachi. Eventually, he informed Mammachi that he has seen Velutha and Ammu in the boat together, for several nights, meeting at Kari Saipu's abandoned house. The whole village has witnessed this love affair. Mammachi reacted by attacking Vellya Paapen, which is shocking, since she isn't supposed to touch him.

When Baby Kochamma hears what has happened, she sees it as God's punishment on Ammu for her sins and as her own personal revenge for her humiliation at the March. She is the one who calms everyone down and gets all the details on the affair.

Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are disgusted with what Ammu has done, in particular because he is a Paravan, and she has defiled her body and the family name forever. They trick Ammu into going into her room, and lock her in. They send for Velutha, knowing they have to get him to leave before Chacko returns, because they don't know what Chacko will do.

By the time Chacko and Margaret come back from Cochin, Sophie Mol's body is found by a fisherman.

At the police station, Baby Kochamma tells the police that she has fired Velutha, because he forced himself on Ammu. She accuses him of threatening the family. She lies in order to protect the family reputation. She doesn't anticipate that Ammu will go to the station and tell the truth. The police officer, because he like everyone is prejudiced against Untouchables, believes Baby Kochamma about why she hasn't made the accusation earlier. Later, he is very concerned when he hears the truth. This is why, after the funeral, he humiliates Ammu, trying to restore the "natural order of things."



Baby Kochamma tells the policeman that Velutha has threatened the family while the man of the house has gone away. She says he has lied about Ammu consenting to sex. He has threatened her with his knowledge of his rights.

Velutha has not been remorseful or backed down when the women have told him to leave town. So Baby Kochamma accuses him to the police of having threatened the family. His behavior is indicative of his guilt, and that he is responsible for the missing children. She also mentions that she saw him at the Marxist march, and that she has heard he must be a Naxalite.

The Inspector summons Comrade Pillai to the police station, because he is concerned about any political ramifications. He tells Pillai about the report by Baby Kochamma. Though Pillai has been approached by Velutha for help, he doesn't tell the police this. He does say that he knows him, but not that he is a Communist. He doesn't defend Velutha from the accusation, though he knows it's a lie. He assures the police inspector that Velutha isn't a member of the party.

When Baby Kochamma comes home, she finds Margaret and Chacko have returned, and Sophie Mol's drowned body is laid out. Margaret becomes hysterical, and behaves poorly. She blames the twins for what has happened, especially Estha. She doesn't know that Estha has rowed the girls across the river for days, to the abandoned house over and over again. Estha is the one who decides they should all run away, because Ammu didn't want them anymore. Every time Margaret becomes coherent, she slaps Estha. She later writes to Ammu to apologize for this, but Estha has already been Returned and Ammu exiled. Margaret never thinks about Velutha, and has never been aware of how he's been arrested for causing Sophie Mol's death.

## Analysis

For the first time, the reader is given insight into Chacko's history and his experience. We also see that Margaret's life in some way parallels Ammu's, in that she too uses marriage as a way to escape, and also fails. Chacko too appears to be attempting to escape the overwhelming nature of his relationship with his mother, refusing even to read her letters to him. Chacko's attempt to become English is his downfall, however. The probable racism that impacts his ability to secure a position, combined with his inability to lower himself to a "regular job" leads to the failure of his marriage. Margaret too, is unable to sustain her rebellion, and cannot love him in the face of adversity. In the end, both of them fail to escape their history and culture.

There is a great deal of irony in the combined effect of Chacko's upper middle class expectations and Margaret's working class background. He is, after all, Oxford educated and qualified to be a professor, but marries a waitress. Despite this, he is the one who "marries up" by marrying an Englishwoman, and she then has the power to reject him for a better offer down the road. It is unclear whether it is truly his laziness that leads to his failure to get a job, or the impact of his attempt to fit in in a society that rejects his race.



Vellya Paapen's debasement of himself in the face of his son's affair brings forward the full scope of the Untouchable/Paraven past versus its present. Both Mammachi and Paapen represent the past, and while he behaves as he is "supposed to" by betraying his son, Mammachi's shock leads her to do the unthinkable: touch an Untouchable in her rage. Again, family betrays family. Paapen betrays his son, thinking his son is the one doing the betraying, and even decides to kill him for his transgression. Mammachi betrays her daughter, while seeing Ammu's behavior as a betrayal of the family.

In the end, Sophie Mol dies because Ammu's committed the ultimate betrayal—not her affair, but her rejection of her children. Because they think themselves unloved, they resolve to run away to the History House, and Sophie Mol, seeking to be part of the group, insists on joining them. In reality, it is a tragic accident, and any one of the children could have died. But no one will ever see it that way. Instead, the "best" of the children (really the worst behaved) is the one who is sacrificed on the altar of lost love.

The reader is also finally exposed to the full depth of Baby Kochamma's and Comrade Pillai's depravity and willful betrayal of people that should be their allies. Baby Kochamma, because of her pathological self-centeredness and desire for revenge against Ammu and the children, essentially destroys their family and kills Velutha. Does she see it as a twisted way to "save" the reputation of herself and her family? Probably, but she does so in a way that no one would accept. Velutha is to be sacrificed on the altar of her lack of love for anyone except herself. She will not abide anyone's attempt at happiness. If Ammu is seduced by the fantasy of her illicit love affair and songs on the radio, Baby Kochamma sinks herself into the television. Her life never began, and it never goes anywhere at all. There appears to be no love in her whatsoever. What love might expected from an aunt or sister is completely absent.

While Comrade Pillai is supposed to find allies for his communist aims, he sees Velutha as an obstacle, strictly because of his caste. As a communist, he is supposed to be about the equality of all humans, and all their rights to a decent life, but instead he sacrifices Velutha to get him out of the way. He never appears to hold any remorse or regret for his actions. He is Velutha's only hope, and he rejects him completely.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare how Chacko's family and Margaret's family view their marriage. Discuss the reasons for their divorce.

## Discussion Question 2

What are the various ways misplaced guilt plays a role in the novel, from each character's perspective?



## Discussion Question 3

What, according to the police and Baby Kochamma, is the "natural order of things"? How do various characters disrupt that order?

## Vocabulary

Hibiscus, nascent, milliner, assertion, gramophone, beautified, contradictory, prudence, reticence, frivolous, baroque, blithe, timorous, decadence, sordid, penury, elation, solvent, corpulence, equanimity, incoherent, immutable, averse, munificence, unctuous, insolence, limpet, abrogated.



## Chapter 14 - 15

### Summary

In Chapter 14, "Work is Struggle," Chacko waits to see Pillai, wearing his suit. The title of the chapter refers to a plaque on a wall in Pillai's home, a communist slogan. Pillai behaves like a politician to Chacko. He orchestrates the situation so that he can look important. Pillai's young relatives are paraded before Chacko, expected to expose their talent and education, but the result is awkward parroting.

During their meeting, Chacko gradually loses his confidence, feeling intimidated by Pillai's political legitimacy. They do some factory graphic design business, but then Chacko asks him about the march, which is really why he's come. Pillai is non-committal about its success. Chacko tells him he's seen Velutha there. Pillai is caught off guard, because of his own unspoken concerns about Velutha. Pillai tells Chacko that Velutha is a good party worker, calculating that this will cause Velutha trouble. This surprises and concerns Chacko. Pillai warns Chacko that Velutha is going to be a problem for him, and attempts to persuade him to fire the man. Chacko is puzzled by Pillai's confidences, and insists he's got no problem with Velutha being a Marxist. Pillai goes on to sow trouble, and informs Chacko that the other workers at the factory want him gone. Chacko defends Velutha, saying he's essential to the household. Pillai hints that Chacko is too progressive, and too English, saying the factory should be unionized. When Chacko tells him of his plan to organize them in their own union, Pillai rejects the idea.

Comrade Pillai's victory over Chacko comes, but Pillai finds that the victory hurts him politically, and doesn't give him the power he desires. No one ever finds out exactly how Pillai influences events. By the time the pickle factory closed, Chacko was too grief-stricken to care. The family has to sell many of its holdings to keep the house.

Velutha visits Pillai after he is confronted by Mammachi and Baby Kochamma and told to leave town. No one knows what he said to Pillai, and Pillai betrays him. Velutha was ambushed by his father's betrayal, and Kuttappen plans to warn Velutha before his father has a chance to kill him.

Velutha does not go home to possibly be killed by his father, however, but straight to the house. He stays composed throughout Mammachi's extremely insulting tirade, egged on by Baby Kochamma. Mammachi threatens him with castration and death if he doesn't leave the property that night, but Velutha is calm. His only response is to say, "We'll see about that." This statement is later overblown by Baby Kochamma into a threat. Mammachi spits on him. He leaves, stunned and worried about Ammu. He goes to see Comrade Pillai, thinking that because of his loyalty to the Party, he will be helped. Velutha has trouble explaining his situation, and Pillai treats him poorly. Pillai tells him he has heard the rumors, and that his personal life is not the business of the Party. Pillai sacrifices Velutha for the good of the revolution. Velutha is stunned.



In Chapter 15, “The Crossing,” it is after midnight. Still shocked, Velutha swims across the river to the History House. He is hopeful about the future. He is the God of Loss and the God of Small Things. He leaves no footprints. He is naked except for the nail polish the children have painted on his fingernails.

## Analysis

Chapter 14 contrasts Chacko’s genuine, if naïve, interest in Marxism against Comrade Pillai’s much more practical and even devious use of the party to gain himself political power. Chacko really wants to help his workers (even if he also uses these political ideas to give him an excuse to talk to women), volunteering to help them form a union. But instead of taking a compromise victory beneficial to the community and the workers, Pillai insists that this is not how things are done. He believes he needs conflict to build himself up in the eyes of his constituents, and that is his priority, rather than their needs. Chacko has class and power, but he neither knows how to use it nor desires to, which leads to the downfall of his family.

The chapter also contrasts the children in Pillai’s family and the twins. Both Pillai’s niece and son parrot the desires of their parents, reciting words without any understanding. As a result, they are praised. Rahel and Estha are very well educated and know English, but are never really praised much for their knowledge. In fact, their knowledge often puts off adults who don’t understand their skills. In the end, the children of the Pillai family (or at least Lenin) attains social status, while both Estha and Rahel suffer a loss of social status.

Both Chacko and Velutha are naïve pawns in the game of others, but these two chapters really bring home the scope of Velutha’s failure to understand the conniving meanness of the world, and how his stepping above his station will lead to his downfall. He trusts people he ought to be able to, and every one of them fails him, either purposely or not. All of these betrayals will lead to his death. He loves and loses, and he is the God of Small Things. The problem is that the Small always lose against the Big.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Comrade Pillai betray his responsibility to the workers at the factory? What are his true interests?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the various ways that Velutha is a victim of his class? What about his pride? What do you think Velutha should have done?



## Discussion Question 3

How is Chacko outmatched by Pillai? What could he have done differently?

## Vocabulary

Midges, sumptuous, combative, elocution, cadence, constituency, invalidation, reticent, proximity, idiom, antagonism, collusion, partiality, caustically, hectoring, fervent, pharisaic, lucidity, modulate, castration, glutinous, edifice.



## Chapter 16 - 17

### Summary

In Chapter 16, "A Few Hours Later," the children are running away. The rain has swollen the river, and made it more dangerous than usual. The children are confident in their habitual use of the boat, but Sophie Mol is more insecure. Sophie has brought food for their escape. The children are haunted by their mother's rejection, and have brought nothing with them. Because of Estha's fear of his molester, the History House has provisions for them, but they are children's plans. The twins plan on returning only if Ammu begs them to come back. Sophie Mol has insisted on coming along. She is attempting to make the adults feel bad for what they have done to them all, as children. She wants them to feel punished. They plan to return only when the adults are truly sorry, and think they all are dead. She persuades the twins to take her along, because she might be forced to tell of their location. They have learned to use the boat under Velutha's teaching, but it is dark, and they can't see that the river is full of dangerous debris. A log tips the boat over. This has happened previously, but this time, the boat gets away from them. They swim to shore, and find that Sophie Mol has not made it. She has drowned in silence. When they get to the abandoned house, they are upset and exhausted. They are sure the world is going to end, and they are going to jail. They fall asleep on the porch. Velutha is there as well, sleeping, but they don't see him.

In Chapter 17, "Cochin Harbor Terminus," it is the present. Estha sits in his clean room. The rest of the house is dirty. He has done his self-appointed chores. The car and the garden have both been abandoned in the advent of television in the house. The car is decaying and settling into the earth. A dead bird lies in the back seat.

Kochu Maria is asleep on the floor, while a Cops-type show plays on the telly. Baby Kochamma is in her bedroom, filling in rebate coupons and writing her daily diary entry to Father Mulligan. She has years of diaries that repeat "I love you I love you" over and over. Fifteen years before, Father Mulligan had become a follower of Lord Vishnu, and still kept in contact with Baby Kochamma. His conversion offends Baby Kochamma, and she pretends it did not happen, mostly because he renounced his vows for something other than to be with her. He is now dead, but she still writes the diary entries. In death, she can possess him in a way she couldn't before. She is worried about Rahel and Estha and wonders when they're leaving.

Rahel is lying on Estha's bed in the dark. He can see her, and thinks she looks lovely. He thinks she looks like their mother. He remembers the last time he saw her, when she kissed him goodbye when he was on the train being Returned. He remembers all the confusing sights and sounds of the train station, and his fear. He recalls the moment when Chacko broke through the door and insisted Ammu leave the house. Rahel sees that Chacko is no longer a loving uncle, but a monster. Mammachi has said there was no reason to pay for Ammu to accompany Estha, so instead he is accompanied by a





family friend. Ammu has to pack and get her life together so she can reunite her children. She thinks that maybe Estha does need his Baba.

The news has covered the whole story, and everyone thinks they know what's gone on. Sophie Mol died, and a Paravan is implicated in kidnapping and murder, The Communist Party takes over the pickle factory, Pillai tells everyone that the Management falsely implicated Velutha because he was a Communist, which becomes the official version of the story. The real version is that there was a posse of policemen who were prejudiced against Untouchables who stalked Velutha to the "Heart of Darkness," the History House.

## Analysis

The full scope of the children's immaturity is apparent in their runaway plans. In a way, what they've done is all too typical. Children often "run away" in the face of adults who disappoint them, and it usually is meant to put a scare into the adults. The problem is not the running away, but the circumstances that surround it. The river has risen, and the children are unprepared for this happening, and there is a tragic accident. It could happen to anyone, and no one is to blame. But, as with any tragic accident, everyone wants to see meaning in it, and the children of course blame themselves. They are terrified of the consequences for what they've done, and they expect a terrible punishment.

Everything in the house is decaying, except Ammu's/Estha's room, which is perfectly clean. Estha sits there in the dark, while the two ladies of the house sink themselves into fantasy. The full scope of that deluded fantasy becomes apparent when the reader learns that Father Mulligan is not only dead, but that Baby Kochamma (like a delusional teenage girl) continues her obsession. Her conversion to Catholicism, and her subsequent denial of the possibility of love in her life has all been for nought, since Father Mulligan long ago rejected Catholicism in favor of Hinduism, a religion that Baby Kochamma finds repugnant. So she continues her juvenile obsession as if nothing has happened.

One might wonder if the twins are a reminder of ugly reality. Perhaps by their presence, she is not only made to step outside her fantasy-land of purity and fear of the working class, but she might also be confronted with the memory of her transgressions. The separation of Rahel and Estha is her greatest crime, though there's no evidence she feels any guilt whatsoever for it. Is it because she is jealous? She is obviously emotionally stunted far beyond anyone else in the novel. Her tragedy is that she has to destroy the family along with herself.

There is a window into Estha's pain, almost tentatively. The reader can see the tenderness there, and the incredible depth of his loss. Both of them see Chacko's transformation from loving uncle to violent monster as the moment that struck them to the heart. But Estha suffers more because he believed his mother when she said they would be reunited. Rahel is left to see her mother fall apart, but Estha is left only with



the image of her promises as he is sent away. Her rejection of him therefore is more deep. Instead, Rahel watches her mother fail, and ultimately rejects her as a petulant teen. Rahel, then, must experience a different sort of guilt for their loss. She might feel she broke her mother's heart, while Estha, who has always seen his mother's perfection and been loved by her more, must deal more with his perception that he was deficient and didn't deserve her love.

At the end of Chapter 17, the official story the community hears is contrasted with a hint of what really happens to Velutha. Velutha turns out to be an inconvenient life for everyone. Baby Kochamma wants him dead because he has sullied her family. Pillai wants him dead because he interferes with his political plans, and then uses his death to get his way. The police use Velutha's supposed crimes as a way to exercise their violent prejudice against Untouchables, which is no longer sanctioned officially.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some ways the children's youth leads them to make faulty decisions? Is it their fault that Sophie Mol drowns? Why is the History House also called The Heart of Darkness?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways has the house deteriorated over the years? What things have been left to rot or been abandoned? Is there any deeper meaning to those things? How is the decay reflected in Baby Kochamma or vice versa? Do you think that Baby Kochamma feels any guilt for what she's done? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the writer show that Rahel and Estha are "the same person"? How do they see things differently? Why do you think Estha chooses to live in Ammu's room?

## Vocabulary

Tentative, distraught, municipal, divest, accentuated, theological, wan, dexterous, resignation.



## Chapter 18 - 19

### Summary

In Chapter 18, "The History House," the posse crosses the river and stalks up to the History House. It's surrounded by the jungle, birds, and insects. Estha has been carrying the Marxist flag with him since Sophie Mol arrived, and he has planted the flag outside the house. The police sneak up. They find the children and Velutha asleep on the verandah. They kick Velutha, breaking his kneecaps and other bones. The children are awakened by this, and confused to find Velutha is being beaten up. They hadn't known he was there. They are terrified by the savage, deliberate beating, which continues until Velutha is nearly dead.

Rahel tries to convince herself that it isn't Velutha, but the fictional twin brother he has told them about in jest. Estha says nothing. The police ask if they are all right (yes) and whether he hurt them (no). The police take the children's toys from the house as loot. They drag Velutha away in handcuffs.

In Chapter 19, "Saving Ammu," the children are in shock at the police station. The police inspector realizes from questioning them that they weren't kidnapped at all. He summons Baby Kochamma. He confronts her with her false report. He is upset because Velutha will likely die from his beating. He is angry about the possibility of getting in trouble for killing an innocent man. He tells her that Ammu must make a report of rape or attempted rape, or the children must accuse Velutha of kidnapping. Otherwise, he will have to charge Baby Kochamma for making a false report. Baby Kochamma tells him that the children will do as they're told, if he gives her a few moments with them. She confronts the children accusingly about the boat, and for stealing the things they kept at the History House. She tells them that they have killed their cousin, and that they are murderers. She tells them they killed her because they were jealous, and that she will have to tell the police what they have done, and they will go to jail. Their mother, too, will have to go to jail. She tells them they will be alone in prison, and describes how awful it will be. They have destroyed their lives and their mother's life. Then she tells them that Velutha will die no matter what, and the only way to save Ammu is to say yes to whatever the police ask. She asks them what they want to do, and their choice to Save Ammu haunts them the rest of their lives, because it is such an easy decision. The police come and say they only need one child to confirm Velutha's guilt. Baby Kochamma chooses Estha, knowing he is more practical and responsible.

The police take Estha to the lock-up. It is dark. He can see Velutha on the floor, bleeding. They ask the question, and Estha says yes.

On the way back to the house, Estha whispers to Rahel that it was Velutha's twin brother. They imagine Velutha has escaped to Africa. He dies in the night. The family stops living as well.



When Ammu takes the children to the jail after Sophie Mol's funeral, Velutha's body has already been taken away. When Baby Kochamma hears of her visit she is terrified of being found out. She had believed that Ammu would never admit her true relationship with Velutha, because of his status. Since she is afraid of the police reopening the case, she knows she has to get Ammu away from Ayemenem as soon as possible. She manipulates Chacko into directing his rage and grief at Ammu and the twins.

## Analysis

The extreme violence perpetrated by the police upon Velutha upon the slightest excuse brings home the sense of inevitability in the whole tale. Despite his hopes, Velutha's chances of being treated as a real human being are shown to be completely false. The police will take any excuse to break him and kill him. Despite the fact that the children appear to be perfectly well cared for, Velutha must be punished, even unto death.

The trauma the children face by witnesses such extreme violence is salvaged somewhat by their pretending it isn't Velutha there, bleeding, but rather his imaginary brother. Like them, he has a twin who takes the fall for them both.

Baby Kochamma's manipulation of the children to save herself from embarrassment is extreme and disturbing. She will do anything to preserve her status in the community, even to allowing an innocent man to die. She exploits her adulthood and knowledge, and her knowledge of childhood fears and love for their mother to make them do as she wishes. The children, of course, remember only the fact that they chose to save themselves and their mother and sacrifice Velutha, rather than realizing how terribly they were manipulated. An outside observer might be able to say that the children were cruelly used, and victims of adult conspiracy, even given no choice. But even as adults Rahel and Estha can only see through their child-eyes. They believe themselves to have killed both Sophie Mol and Velutha, and no one ever takes away this belief. One is left to wonder what would have happened if any adult in their lives, anywhere along the way had been able to tell them it wasn't their fault, and that they were victims, rather than perpetrators. Instead, they are trapped by this one moment in their lives, up until the present. No one has ever taken away their guilt.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the presence of the Marxist flag increase the police aggressiveness? How do the children deal with the police violence? Can you think of examples for how a child deals with trauma in similar ways?

## Discussion Question 2

For what reasons is Velutha ultimately killed or sacrificed? What are the various characters' interests in making sure he dies?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Baby Kochamma succeed in her manipulation? Why is she so sure it will work? Why must she make sure Ammu leaves town?

## Vocabulary

Millipedes, adjutant, deft, lethal, translucent, abrogated, palette, coalesced, caprice, mesmerized, inchoate, ascendancy, incoherence, innocuously, volition, belligerent, fermented, conjured, macabre, tractable.



# Chapter 20 - 21

## Summary

In Chapter 20, "The Madras Mail," Estha is on the train, called The Madras Mail, waiting to be returned. Ammu is bidding him goodbye through the barred window. They each know they have loved Velutha to death.

It took the twins years to understand that Ammu had had an affair with Velutha. As children, they thought all her grief was because of them.

She tells the children they will all be together as soon as she gets a job. Estha thinks that will take too long. He blurts out "that will be never!" He doesn't imagine that he will never see her again. He blames himself for her death. He was the one who said those words, even though he didn't mean them. Ammu makes promises about getting a job as a teacher and starting a school. They talk about how they'll be together again in a house. They talk about their dreams. As the train leaves, she promises again she'll come for him soon. He cries out, for the last time. Rahel screams, left behind.

Back in the present, Rahel whispers his full nickname. He thinks of her speaking with her mother's mouth. He touches her mouth with his fingers. She kisses his hand. She embraces him, and they lie together for a long time, awake and quiet. They are both strangers to each other and have known each other before life began.

In grief and with a lack of words, the twins make love, breaking the Love Laws once again.

Back on the night Sophie Mol arrived, when Ammu puts Rahel to bed, mother and daughter experienced a moment of true mother-child closeness. Ammu doesn't want to return to the dinner table. She remembers her dream from the afternoon nap, of the one-armed man, the God of Small Things, and aches for him.

In Chapter 21, "The Cost of Living," everyone is asleep. Ammu gets up and goes out to the verandah and listens to her radio. The song seems to encourage her to break free and go after what she wants. After waiting for awhile, she walks and runs out to the river to meet Velutha, believing he will be there waiting for her, but he isn't. She feels foolish. He is out floating on the river on his back, feeling foolish that though he had felt sure she'd be there, she wasn't.

When he sees her on the shore, he is deeply surprised, and treads water, looking at her, though she can't see him. He swims to shore, and she only sees him when he gets very close. She sees that the river is his world, and fully recognizes his beauty. He hesitates, and she comes and embraces him. He recognizes he could lose everything. She kisses him. They make love passionately and slowly on the ground where the boat had been, and there was now bare earth. The sex is transcendent. He brings her to life with his loving touch. They don't speak. They are together for thirteen nights after this one.



Because they know they are living dangerously, they don't talk about anything serious, sticking to the Small Things. The only promise they ever make is to meet again the next day.

## Analysis

There is significant child-like magical thinking that brings Estha his guilt—he thinks he has magically dismissed his mother with his words, “that will be never!” It is this moment in combination with his one word acquiescence to Baby Kochamma’s manipulation (accusing Velutha) that has led him to permanently shut his mouth. As a child, he thinks his words have brought evil and destruction upon those he loves, and so forever he has stopped up his own mouth.

The excruciating ripping apart of the family occurs the moment the train pulls away, never to be healed. Ammu falls apart in her attempt to keep the family together, and it is no one’s fault but Baby Kochamma’s ultimately, though she too is plagued by unrealistic dreams.

Rahel and Estha’s incestuous coupling is not lust, but rather the opposite of lust. Because there are no words that can heal their grief and separation, they do the only thing left to them, joining together sexually. It isn’t meant to be erotic, but more like a re-connection of two broken halves. Though the act is “breaking the Love Laws,” it is the only way they can find their way back to one another. They can never embrace like they did in the womb, so they do the closest possible thing.

The book ends on the scene of Ammu and Velutha’s first lovemaking. Though it is “breaking the Love Laws,” their love is the purest that love can be, with no thoughts of the future or danger or anything larger than each other. The only promise they make is to meet again. Like her dream, they meet in a dream-state, with no thought of safety or anything else. Nothing comes between them. They meet as mythical figures, as god and goddess. The most illicit love known to their society (adulterous, disregarding caste status) becomes the pure state of perfection.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some examples of child-like magical thinking in the novel, and especially with Estha in Chapter 20?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the incest between Rahel and Estha. How, even though it breaks the Love Laws, is it in any way healing? Can it be an example of the twins being “one person”?



## Discussion Question 3

What are the "Small Things" for Ammu and Velutha? What are they for the children?

## Vocabulary

Culpable, indulgently, pragmatism, dilated, congealed, prophylaxis, emanated, feral, lambent, nocturnal, coquettish, detonation, egress, supple, delectable, spate, devout, eclectic.





# Characters

## Rahel

The *God of Small Things* is told from Rahel's point of view. She is Estha's twin sister. The action of the novel revolves around the present time when she is 31 years old. It also is set in 1969, when she and Estha are seven. Until that time, Rahel thinks of herself and her twin as one person, sharing the same memories and experiences. Much of the time, they communicate without speaking. As children, she and her brother are precocious in their reading, and like to play by reading things backwards. She is concerned about losing her mother's love, and when Ammu dies at age 31, she is left alone to fend for herself. She leaves home as soon as she can and becomes an architect, though it is not a career she's passionate about. She marries an American named Larry McCaslin and moves to the United States, but the marriage does not last. She has returned to Ayemenem for the first time in years because she's been summoned there by her aunt Baby Kochamma. She is there to see her brother Estha, who has been "Re-returned" because his father has emigrated to Australia. In 1993, she has not seen her brother in 23 years.

## Estha

Estha is Rahel's twin brother. His full name is Esthappen Yako. He is older than Rahel by 18 minutes. He has not spoken out loud since he was a child, though no one is certain when or why this occurred. When he was seven, he was molested by a stranger while on a family outing. The next day, his cousin Sophie Mol came to visit, and the molestation sets in place a chain of events that leads to Sophie Mol's accidental drowning. He is also manipulated by his aunt to accuse Velutha of kidnapping, which he believes leads to Velutha's death. After Sophie Mol's drowning, Estha is "Returned," meaning he is sent to live with his father in Calcutta.

## Ammu

Ammu is Rahel and Estha's mother. She dies at age 31, after being exiled from Ayemenem for her illicit affair with the Paraven/Untouchable Velutha. She is also divorced from her Hindu husband, who abused her. Her parents have always favored her brother Chacko over her, and both she and the children are treated as unwanted guests by the rest of the family. Despite her outsider status, she is obsessed with her children's education, and that they maintain the appearance of class status. Her efforts in this matter lead to her alienation from her children, before the family is separated. She has a two-week secret affair with Velutha, an Untouchable, which leads to her disgrace and exile from Ayemenem.



## Baby Kochamma

Baby Kochamma is Rahel and Estha's grand aunt, her grandfather's younger sister. She is also called Navomi Ipe. In 1993, she is the only remaining family member to live in the Ayemenem house. When she was young, she fell in love with a priest, and converted to Catholicism. She joined a convent, thinking it would bring her closer to her love, but when this fails she returns home, resolving to stay celibate forever. She has a degree in Ornamental Gardening, and once maintained a beautiful garden at the house in Ayemenem. She considers herself to be all-sacrificing for others, but she often manipulates bad situations in the interest of her jealousy and desire for revenge. By 1993, she is obsessed with television and has let the house deteriorate severely.

## Sophie Mol

Sophie Mol is Estha and Rahel's cousin. She is Uncle Chacko's daughter. She dies in an accidental drowning at age nine while on a visit from England to India. Mol means "little girl" in Malayalam. Her mother Margaret is English. She is seen as perfect by the family, though in reality she is crueler than the average child.

## Mammachi

Mammachi is the twins' nearly blind grandmother. She opened a pickle factory when her husband retired and they moved to Ayemenem. Her real name is Soshamma. She was beaten severely by her husband for having the audacity to open the factory, and still has the scars on her head. She also plays the violin. She has an unhealthy adoration of her son Chacko, while disdaining her daughter. She believes Chacko to be a genius, though his lack of business sense and arrogance lead to the closing of the factory.

## Pappachi

Pappachi is the twins' dead grandfather, named Shri Benaan John Ipe. He was an Imperial Entomologist at the Pusa Institute, and was very jealous of his wife for her youth and success in the factory. He abused her severely, and when his son Chacko prevents him from continuing his abuse, he stopped speaking to Mammachi, and destroyed his favorite chair. He bought a sky-blue Plymouth that no one in the family was allowed to ride or drive until after his death. He was obsessed with his own appearance. His greatest disappointment in life was his failure to get credit for the discovery of a new moth.

## Uncle Chacko

Chacko is the son of Mammachi and Pappachi, and the brother of Ammu. He was once married to Margaret, and Sophie Mol is his daughter, but he hasn't seen her since she



was a baby. He loves to read, and has a habit of randomly quoting from them. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, which is where he met Margaret. After some trouble getting a job in England, he became a lecturer at a college in India, but returned to Ayemenem to run the pickle factory after Pappachi's death. He tells everyone he wants to die of overeating, but he says it's because of "sheer greed." He also has a hobby of building kit airplanes, but they never fly properly.

## Velutha

Velutha is a Paravan, or a member of the Untouchable caste. He is a Syrian Christian, but is still considered an Untouchable. He developed a talent for working with his hands as a child, and became a carpenter. He is well-loved by the children because he treats them kindly and with respect. He has a secret affair with Ammu which leads to his death.

## Kochu Maria

Kochu Maria is the servant at Ayemenem House. She is a Syrian Christian, like her employers, and does what she can to make it clear she is not an Untouchable. As a reaction to gullibility when she was younger, she has become deeply skeptical of everything people tell her. Her relationship with the children is not good.

## Comrade K.N.M. Pillai

Comrade Pillai has a printing press, and is the local organizer for the Marxists/the Communist Party. He works for Chacko as a graphic designer for the factory's labels and advertising. He also conspires to organize the factory behind Chacko's back, even though Chacko is ostensibly friendly to the idea of a union. Because of this conniving, the pickle factory ends up going out of business, and the family is nearly financially ruined. He also neglects to help Velutha, which leads to his death.

## Margaret Kochamma

Margaret Kochamma is Uncle Chacko's ex-wife, and the mother of Sophie Mol. She is English, and met Uncle Chacko when he was getting his education in Oxford. Her father owns a bakery and her mother is a milliner's assistant. When she meets and marries Chacko, she is a waitress, though she eventually becomes a teacher. She divorces Chacko soon after the birth of Sophie and marries Joe. She visits India with Sophie after her husband's accidental death. When Sophie dies, she blames Estha. Eventually, she comes to regret her behavior. She never knows the dire consequences to the family as a result of her grief, or how Velutha suffers and dies for it.



## Vellya Paapen

Vellya Paapen is Velutha's father, a Syrian Christian Paraven/Untouchable. He remembers the time when Untouchables were treated like beasts. He is afraid of his son's pride and senses that he should be treated like a human being. He has a glass eye. He tells the family of Velutha and Ammu's affair because he feels responsible for his son. He resolves to kill Velutha to restore his family honor.

## The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man

The Orangedrink Lemondrink Man works at the Abhilash Talkies at the snack counter. He sexually abuses Estha. Without realizing what he's done to Estha, Ammu makes Estha interact with him, and makes him apologize for his strange behavior. The man implies that he knows where to find Estha in Ayemenem. Estha becomes convinced Ammu will invite him to the house and reacts by planning to run away.

## Lenin

Lenin is Comrade Pillai's son. Though he isn't terribly smart, he ends up being financially successful.

## Kutappen

Kutappen is Velutha's paralyzed brother.

## Larry McCaslin

Larry McCaslin is Rahel's American ex-husband.

## Baba

Baba is Ammu's ex-husband and the father of Rahel and Estha. He is a Hindu and lives in Calcutta. When Ammu and he were married, she saw him as a way to escape coming back to Ayemenem. Unfortunately, he turned out to be a liar and abuser.

## Miss Mitten

Miss Mitten is a born-again missionary who gives the children a book far below their reading level. They annoy her by reading it backwards. She is later killed by a milk van going in reverse.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Love Laws

The Love Laws are the responsibilities one has to one's family and community. One must only love within marriage and within one's religion. One also has an obligation to help one's family when needed and be loyal to them. The Love Laws are broken in many ways by the family. They marry outside their religion and without the consent of their parents. Ammu and Velutha have an illicit affair. Estha and Rahel finally come together after their long absence by committing incest.

## The Skyblue Plymouth

Pappachi buys the Plymouth after he is forbidden by Chacko to abuse his wife. No one else is even allowed to go inside it. After his death, Chacko takes it over and uses it to carry a garish advertisement for the pickle factory, "Emperors of the Realm of Taste." After Chacko leaves for Canada, Baby Kochamma leaves it to rot in the yard.

## Pappachi's Moth

Pappachi's moth is Pappachi's great disappointment, since he was never given credit for its discovery. The moth is also the symbol of Rahel's fear of losing her mother's love. Pappachi's loss of career credit is dwarfed by the loss Rahel feels after losing her mother and then her brother.

## Marxism

Marxism is a successful philosophy in Kerala, more than anywhere else during the 1960s, when some of the novel takes place. Chacko considers himself a Marxist, though it appears he often uses it to get closer to his female employees. Velutha is spotted at a Marxist demonstration by the family, and this is seen as a transgression. Comrade Pillai runs the Ayemenem Marxist party. Baby Kochamma fears the Marxists.

## Mayalalam

Malayalam is the native language spoken in Kerala. The Ipe family considers it a lesser language than colonial English, and they often speak English instead.



## Paravan

This is part of the caste of the Untouchables who are treated very poorly. Some of the rules that still existed in the time of the novel is that they could not enter the homes of Caste Hindus or Christians. In Kerala, some of them converted to Christianity in an attempt to escape the caste system, but they did not succeed in gaining any additional rights. Velutha and his family are Paravan.

## Ammu's Bedroom

Ammu's bedroom is where she is confined after her affair is found out. Chacko breaks down its door and transforms into a violent frightening figure in front of the children. It is also where the children experience their greatest intimacy with their mother. When Estha is Returned, it is where Ammu packs all his things. When Estha is Re-returned, he moves into this room, and it becomes the only clean place in the entire house. It is also where the children finally reconcile and begin to heal.

## Love-in-Tokyo Hair Clip

Rahel proudly wears this hair clip when the family goes to Kerala to pick up Sophie Mol and her mother at the airport. It consists of two beads on a rubber band. It became popular because of a film.

## The Tangerine-shaped Transistor Radio

Ammu owns a tangerine-shaped radio, and she uses it as a window to another sort of world. It is a way for her to escape the ruined life she is living and experience a bit of fantasy love. Sometimes listening to it leads her to behave distantly to the children. Estha's fear after he is molested is also said to be "tangerine-shaped." A song plays on the radio just before Ammu goes to meet Velutha for the first time.

## Ayemenem House

The house belonging to the Ipe family, located in Ayemenem, a village in Kerala, India. In 1969, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Kochu Maria, Ammu, Chacko and the twins all live there. In 1993, Baby Kochamma is the only remaining family member living in the house, attended by Kochu Maria. She has allowed it to deteriorate, and in contrast to earlier times, keeps the place closed up tight, in fear of intruders.

## Paradise Pickles and Preserves

This is Mammachi's pickle factory. It is located between the house and river. The factory is successful until Chacko takes over its management. Mammachi perfected many



recipes there, including pickles, squash, jams, curry powders, and canned pineapples. Her recipe for banana jam was found to be illegal because it couldn't be classified as either jam or jelly.

## The Syrian Christian Church in Kerala

The Ipe family is Syrian Christian, as are many people of all castes who live in Kerala. They believe they are the descendants of the one hundred Brahmins whom St. Thomas the Apostle converted to Christianity when he traveled East after the Resurrection. A large minority of Kerala citizens are Syrian Christian, and they tend to be wealthier landowners. The church is not a familiar place for the twins, but it is where Sophie Mol's funeral is conducted.

## The History House

The History House is an abandoned rubber plantation house across the river from Ayemenem House, which was once owned by "the Black Sahib," an Englishman who "went native" and molested young boys. He committed suicide after one of his young boys was taken from him. The house is thought by many including Vellya Paapen to be haunted by the demon of its former owner. In 1969, the children use it as a refuge when they decide to run away. Velutha and Ammu also use it as a place to conduct their secret affair. In 1993, it has been converted into a modern hotel complex, where tourists can experience a bland interpretation of Indian culture.



# Settings

## Ayemenem

Ayemenem is a village in the province of Kerala, where the bulk of the action in the novel takes place. It is a place unique for its Syrian Christian population and the acceptance of Marxism.

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secret affair. In 1993, it has been converted into a modern hotel complex, where tourists can experience a bland interpretation of Indian culture.



# Themes and Motifs

## Caste and Class Differences

The entire society around the Ipe family is obsessed with caste and class differences. The English are still an oppressive colonial ghost in the form of self-hatred. Everything English is still seen as brighter and higher class than anything produced by India. The whiter one's skin, the closer one is to cleanliness and good. The children are painfully aware of this at all times, especially when watching *The Sound of Music*. Chacko repeatedly reminds the children that the family are Anglophiles. They prefer to speak English, and Chacko goes to English to get a high-class education. He marries an Englishwoman, though she is treated as little better than a prostitute by Mammachi. Mammachi is both jealous of her, and also dissatisfied with her working class background. Not to mention the fact that any Englishwoman who would marry a brown-skinned Indian must have something wrong with her. Sophie Mol is seen as a better person, sight unseen, because she is half-English. While Chacko has "married up," Ammu has "married down" by marrying a Hindu. Syrian Christians tended to see themselves as higher class than Hindus.

The title of the novel appears to refer to the idea of the Big Man versus the Small Man. The Big Man gets the lantern, while the Small Man gets the candlestick. This is the way of the world. The God of Small Things is Velutha, who despite the fact that he is of the lowest-of-the-low Untouchable caste, is the only psychologically healthy character. He treats everyone with respect, and he also respects himself. He expects to be treated as well as anyone else. His sense of self leads to his alienation from his own father, who fears (rightly) that his pride will lead to his downfall.

## Family Loyalty

The novel focuses a great deal on the alienation experienced in the Ipe family. No one in this family appears to like one another much, or even know one another, despite their common history. One is supposed to be able to trust one's family members, but the Ipe family continually betrays one another in the most base and painful of ways. Pappachi brutally abuses Mammachi. Mammachi openly favors Chacko over Ammu, even down to encouraging his womanizing.

When Ammu returns from her abusive marriage with her children, her parents both reject her, refusing to believe her story. They treat the children as if they are lesser than Sophie Mol, who they haven't even met.

Ammu then turns around after this painful experience and uses the same fear and pain of loss against her own children. She threatens to "love them less" if they misbehave. When the children seek her out for comfort, she turns them away most of the time, focusing only on their education. When Ammu sends Estha away, it breaks her heart,



but it also breaks her children. As Ammu loses her grip on her life, Rahel ends up rejecting her with the blessings of the rest of the Ipe family, and her pain at this never heals.

When Baby Kochamma is faced with the dishonor of her family, she manipulates the children, twisting the idea of family loyalty in a way that sacrifices Velutha's life. As a result, the children forever feel themselves at fault for both Sophie Mol's and Velutha's deaths.

The family continually sacrifices family loyalty on the altar of Appearances. They are obsessed with looking perfect, and it leads them to mistreat the children and Ammu repeatedly. Ammu, ironically, is more attached to having her children look "perfect" than anyone else, to the point that she disregards their needs; this obsession even causes her to miss the signs of Estha's sexual abuse.

## Memory and Childhood

The novel is told from Rahel's point of view, as an adult and as a child. She slips back and forth into childlike language, which demonstrates the difficulty people have, especially if they've been traumatized as children, to separate themselves from their inner child's point of view. Rahel slowly comes around to remembering the details of the source of her pain, and Estha cannot even speak at all. They are trapped in their traumatic memories, and cannot escape, until they find each other again.

Children are Small Things. Like people of lower class or caste, they must comply with the orders of the Big, regardless of logic or their own needs. They cannot speak up, because they are taught to be silent, or that they are foolish. As a result of this oppression, Estha is abused. He complies with his abuser's demands because he has been taught to obey all adults no matter what they ask. The fear he experiences when he believes (based on experience) that his mother will favor his abuser over his own wishes, leads him to run away. This fear leads to the death of both Sophie Mol and Velutha.

A child's world is also different when seen from the outside by adults. While the adults see Rahel and Sophie Mol playing, the children are cruelly stomping and torturing ants. The adults see playing, while the children exchange information about love and abuse.

## Love and Marriage

Everyone in the novel experiences failed marriages, except for Mammachi and Pappachi. Their marriage is brutally abusive. Ammu marries in an effort to escape her family, as does Chacko and Rahel. None of them has the approval of their parents, and they end up divorced due to abuse, cultural differences, and an inability to be truthful about their feelings. Rahel comes the closest to a love marriage on both their parts, but the gulf between them leaves neither understanding each other.



Pappachi never behaves as if he loves his wife, and spends his final years refusing to speak to her. He treats the entire family as if they're disobedient chattel. In the place of love, he is still treated as a patriarch, and his portrait receives a place of honor.

India has cultural mythology that echoes the story of Velutha and Ammu. Krishna and Radha have an affair on the river, and she becomes a "tainted woman." It is considered the national myth of India, and told over and over. Indian culture has a sense that true love is not found in marriage, but rather in illicit love, demanding the breaking of society's rules. Velutha, dark-skinned, becomes a god, and loves the fallen woman. Their love is transcendent, and goes on for fourteen days. It is the purest of loves, but the rest of the world sees it as dirty and disgusting, because of the caste differences between the lovers. Not only is it adulterous, but also across the gulf of class.

## Death

The theme of death is addressed throughout the novel. From the beginning, the reader has been informed that Sophie Mol is going to die, and the question of how and why that will occur is a tension throughout the story. Despite all possibilities that might accompany the guilt associated with her death, her death is actually rather natural for a child, in that many children living near bodies of water do drown. It is a tragedy, but not nearly as unnatural or tragic as Velutha's violent and wrongful death. The death of Ammu, who is plagued with anguish and fear, is ultimately met with a kind of relief. Her tragedy is that her children have lost her long before she stops breathing. The novel consistently addresses the presence of the dead in the lives of the living, and how witnessing their deaths is seen differently by different characters.



# Styles

## Point of View

This novel is mostly told from Rahel's perspective, shifting frequently between her adult mind and her child mind. But, the story is told from the third person omniscient point of view. Like a mind-reader, we travel between the memories of family members and townspeople in order to flesh out an understanding of what has occurred. Through limited omniscience, the reader is given a more detached understanding of Rahel's and Estha's world, and, therefore, a more adult and less traumatized point of view. We can see that their guilt and trauma trap them within their own perspectives.

## Language and Meaning

The author uses poetic language, shifting seamlessly back and forth from childlike language and adult language. She also uses capitalization in an unusual way, for emphasis, and to bring forth the importance children attach to some objects or words. She also combines words together to create new meanings or connotations. (Ex: "wetgreen" and "thunderdarkness.")

The narration wanders the way a child's thoughts wander, with sing-song words and memories.

## Structure

Foreshadowing is used frequently in this novel. From the beginning, the reader knows that something terrible has happened to the twins. But, it is only through the full novel that this thread of terrible family memory is unraveled for full understanding. We know that the family has been torn apart, but the causes are alluded to with small clues.

The story unfolds in vignettes of memory. It travels back and forth in time, sometimes with little warning. A character will be mentioned, and then the reader is given a window into that character's private, internal past.



## Quotes

They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much.

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 188)

**Importance:** This quote identifies the strict rules of the caste. The rules were very strict in not loving or marrying "down." However, everyone was guilty of breaking the rules when it came to love.

In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us. (chapter 1 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Rahel and Estha are "two-egg twins," fraternal twins. Until they are separated after the death of Sophie Mol, they consider themselves to be one person. They experience the world in a way that gives the impression they know what the other is thinking and has experienced without words. The entire novel depicts their struggle to reunite after having had their two halves ripped apart for many years.

Estha occupied very little space in the world. (chapter 1 paragraph 69)

**Importance:** Some time after having been "Returned" to his father in Calcutta, Estha stopped speaking. He was a mediocre student and essentially invisible. Instead of holding a job, or pursuing higher education, he takes over domestic duties that reduce him to the level of a female servant. Upon being "Re-returned," he cleans only one room in the house, Ammu's former bedroom, and walks. He does not participate in social discourse or speak to anyone.

Occasionally, when Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place. (chapter 2 paragraph 49)

**Importance:** Ammu escapes her "dead end" life by listening to songs on the radio. She fantasizes about a different life, and, eventually, she allows a song on the radio to persuade her to seek out Velutha for their affair.

Its pernicious ghost—gray, furry, and with unusually dense dorsal tufts—haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children. (chapter 2 paragraph 75)

**Importance:** This quote refers to Pappachi's moth, his greatest disappointment. It is a symbol of his stunted life, but also a symbol of the withholding of love that persists throughout the family. He appears to care more for his career disappointment than he



does for his wife and any of his family members. The moth also manifests in Rahel's deep worry that her mother will "love her less" because she is disappointed in her.

They were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away. (chapter 2 paragraph 90)

**Importance:** The Ipe family is stuck between cultures. Not only are they Syrian Christians and a minority, but also they aspire to be English, which they can never be. They take great pride in speaking English well, and Chacko goes to university in England, even marrying an English wife. None of these things gain them status in the way they hope. In this way, they become as lost as an Untouchable--an unclean person that historically was required to sweep away his own footsteps.

Big Man the Lantern. Small Man the Tallow-stick. (chapter 3 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** This quote is also the title of Chapter 3. It refers to a saying Estha learns from an old "coolie" regarding dreams. "Big Man the Laltain sahib, Small Man the Mombatti." The important person gets the good, modern useful thing like a lantern, and the unimportant person, the poor, only gets to use the candle, or the old-fashioned, less useful thing. Likewise, the important people always win out, and that's the way the world works.

When you hurt people, they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do. They make people love you a little less.  
-- Ammu (chapter 4 paragraph 208)

**Importance:** Rahel makes an inappropriate, insubordinate comment when Ammu talks about how the nice OrangeDrink Lemondrink Man. Ammu responds by warning Rahel that being hurtful can cause people to "love you less." This causes Rahel to fear deeply that her mother will never love her the same way and that her words will cause her to lose that love. Ammu probably forgets saying these words because she says them so quickly; but, Rahel takes them deeply to heart and never forgets them. They instill in her a deep fear.

She arrived on the Bombay-Cochin flight. Hatted, bell-bottomed and Loved from the Beginning. (chapter 5 paragraph 116)

**Importance:** This quotation refers to Sophie Mol, who is loved. She is a star-child sight unseen. She is automatically more beautiful because she's not completely Indian, and more fashionable. She is presumed to be better in all ways. This causes a great deal of jealousy in Rahel. Ironically, Sophie Mol is neither perfect, nor even as well-behaved as the Ipe children.

That word slipped out easily. Returned. As though that was what twins were meant for. To be borrowed and returned. Like library books. (chapter 7 paragraph 11)



**Importance:** After Sophie Mol's death, Estha is "Returned" to his father in Calcutta, ostensibly because it is presumed his "misbehavior" is because he needs his Baba. The children often feel unwanted, and in the way, and Estha's exile is the culmination and worst of it. Because of this, Rahel and Estha are deeply damaged.

She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. (chapter 8 paragraph 153)

**Importance:** This quote refers to Ammu. She has been abused and rejected her whole life by her mother and father. As a result, she becomes a bit of a rebel. She marries outside her religion. She refuses to bow completely to the way she is treated by the family. Eventually, being treated like a "fallen woman" because of her divorce leads her to find find love in a taboo place, both outside her caste and outside marriage.

Pickle Baron dreams and the People's War joined the racks of broken airplanes in his glass-paned cupboard. (chapter 14 paragraph 122)

**Importance:** Chacko never becomes successful at the management of the pickle factory, and he is not allowed by Comrade Pillai to unionize his workers privately, and in fact is sabotaged by Pillai's ambitions. Just like all the model airplanes that never worked, all of Chacko's ambitions are destroyed.

Maybe a boy does need a Baba.  
-- Ammu (chapter 17 paragraph 74)

**Importance:** Ammu says this to herself as an excuse for why she consents to have Estha sent away. Ironically, it is his mother and sister he needs most, to make him feel secure again after being sexually abused. But, Ammu is too wrapped up in her own worries and expectations for her children to realize it.

He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair. (chapter 21 paragraph 59)

**Importance:** When Velutha and Ammu make love, it is a transgression that leads to Velutha's death and Ammu's exile from her children. In essence, it destroys everyone, though it is a perfect, honest kind of love. They love each other purely, despite the fact that it is seen by the society around them as dirty.