



THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITY: A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC DISPLACEMENT

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Abstract

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, language emerges as a profound symbol of cultural, emotional, and psychological dislocation, particularly in the lives of the Ipe twins, Estha and Rahel. The novel highlights the impact of colonialism, familial trauma, and linguistic alienation on the characters' identities. This research explores the imposition of English, the silencing of Malayalam, and the trauma-induced mutism of Estha as manifestations of linguistic displacement. By examining the role of language in the postcolonial context, this paper investigates how linguistic alienation deepens the emotional and cultural rifts within the family, particularly between the twins. Ultimately, the study underscores how language is not just a means of communication but a medium through which identity, power, and belonging are negotiated, especially in a postcolonial society grappling with the legacies of colonial rule.

Keywords

Postcolonial identity, linguistic displacement, trauma, language, colonialism, emotional alienation, cultural assimilation, *The God of Small Things*, Malayalam, English.

Introduction

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy uses language as a key element to explore the deep psychological and cultural fractures caused by colonialism and trauma. The novel's focus on the Ipe twins, Estha and Rahel, reveals how their identities are shaped by linguistic displacement—a phenomenon that is both emotional and cultural. The imposition of English, as represented by the character of Baby Kochamma, symbolizes the continued dominance of colonial legacies even after India's independence. At the same time, the silencing of their mother tongue, Malayalam, and the trauma-induced mutism of Estha further emphasize the deep rifts in their sense of belonging and identity. This paper examines how language in *The God of Small Things* functions as a symbol of power and cultural capital, as well as a means of emotional repression and alienation. It delves into the psychological cost of linguistic displacement, exploring the emotional dislocation experienced by the twins, and the broader consequences of colonialism on personal and familial identities.

Unity and Trauma

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the Ipe twins, Estha and Rahel, begin their lives as a singular, interconnected unit. Their bond is not merely biological but psychological and emotional, underscoring a level of unity that transcends typical sibling relationships. Roy uses the metaphor of "two-egg twins" to emphasize this deep connection, highlighting how they share not just their physical existence but also their emotional worlds. The term "two-egg twins" symbolizes not just the biological link but the psychological intertwining of their beings. Roy's phrase evokes a sense of near-symbiosis, where the twins' identities are indistinguishable and inseparable from one another.

"Esthappen, the singular identity, did not exist alone. It was 'two-egg twins'—two halves of a whole"
(Roy, p. 33).

This singularity is one of the novel's defining characteristics, and Roy suggests that the twins are psychologically and emotionally bound as one, sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In the pre-trauma world, Estha and Rahel exist almost as one organism, their unity so strong that it operates as a single entity. They experience life in tandem, unaware of individual separateness, reinforcing their deep psychological and emotional unity. However, this harmonious unity is tragically ruptured by the drowning of Sophie Mol, a traumatic event that violently disbands their once inseparable identity and sets the stage for years of psychological fragmentation.

Sophie Mol's death is not just an accidental tragedy in the narrative but also a symbolic and literal shattering of the world the twins had inhabited. Sophie Mol, a beloved cousin, represents the innocent joys of childhood, and her sudden and tragic death marks the definitive loss of innocence for the twins. The drowning occurs early in the novel,



but its reverberations are felt throughout the narrative, and it is the catalyst that fractures the deep emotional bond between Estha and Rahel. The trauma of Sophie Mol's death displaces the twins from their original, shared identity, pushing them into a psychological abyss where their connection to one another becomes fractured.

At the core of the twins' response to this trauma is a profound psychological dislocation. Instead of immediately feeling the grief one would expect from such a loss, they experience emotional numbness, which Roy encapsulates through the phrase:

"They were stunned by their own immunity to grief" (Roy, p. 102).

The term "immunity" is a key word here, suggesting that the twins are not simply indifferent to the tragedy, but rather that they have psychologically "armed" themselves against the overwhelming sorrow. The emotional numbness they experience is not just a passive absence of grief but an active defense mechanism against the unbearable weight of their loss. In psychological terms, this reflects a form of repression, where painful emotions are blocked from conscious awareness, protecting the psyche from the intensity of the grief. However, this repression comes with a high psychological cost: it delays the grieving process, making it more destructive in the long run.

By using "immunity," Roy underscores the psychological coping strategies that the twins unconsciously adopt, suggesting a survival mechanism that, while protective in the short term, only leads to further emotional damage. The twins' detachment from grief is not a sign of emotional strength but rather an indicator of psychological trauma. The fact that they are "stunned" by their inability to grieve highlights how deep the emotional scar runs. The inability to process their loss at the time creates a lasting wound that will shape the rest of their lives. This delayed grief, a key theme in trauma theory, indicates that unprocessed grief does not dissipate but instead festers, eventually emerging in more destructive forms.

The trauma-induced numbness Estha and Rahel experience is not limited to their emotional state but extends to their identities. Estha's response is particularly evident in his silence, which becomes a powerful metaphor for the emotional and psychological damage he suffers. Estha's muteness is not just the refusal to speak but is indicative of his emotional alienation and disempowerment. It reflects the deep psychological cost of the trauma that the twins cannot verbalize, a psychological silence that mirrors their inability to process the grief that should have followed Sophie Mol's death.

"He couldn't talk. He had no voice" (Roy, p. 126).

This loss of voice is not merely a physical condition; it symbolizes the total disempowerment Estha feels in the aftermath of the trauma. His silence is an external manifestation of the internal rupture caused by the event. Silence, in this sense, becomes a form of resistance, a defense mechanism against an emotional wound too deep to articulate. Psychologically, this is an example of dissociation, where the individual, in an attempt to protect themselves, mentally and emotionally disconnects from the traumatic event. Estha's inability to speak represents his inability to engage with the world around him, and by extension, his inability to engage with the pain of the past.

In addition to Estha's silence, Rahel's reaction to the trauma is marked by emotional exile. Her physical exile to England after the drowning is both a literal and figurative distancing from the trauma she shared with Estha. Rahel's move to England is not just a change of location but represents her emotional and psychological escape from the painful memories of Sophie Mol's death. However, her return to India years later confronts her with the unresolved emotional and psychological damage that she left behind. Rahel's return is not a triumphant homecoming but a painful re-entry into a space that holds nothing but reminders of the trauma.

"Rahel was coming home to a house that had no homecoming" (Roy, 2002, p. 154).

This quote is particularly telling of Rahel's emotional state upon her return to India. The house, once a place of unity and familial belonging, is now a site of alienation and grief. Rahel's homecoming is defined not by reunion but by loss—both the loss of Sophie Mol and the loss of the deep bond she once shared with Estha. The house, as a symbol of family and togetherness, has lost its function as a space of belonging because the trauma that once connected the twins has left it hollow. Rahel's return becomes symbolic of her own alienation and emotional fragmentation. The house, once home, is now a shell, representing the rupture in the twins' relationship and their inability to reclaim what was lost.

The trauma caused by Sophie Mol's death, thus, is not just a family tragedy but a catalyst for deeper emotional and psychological disintegration. The emotional and psychological rift between Estha and Rahel is not merely a result of their individual reactions to the trauma but is also a reflection of the broader familial and societal failure to



address and process grief. The trauma is internalized, repressed, and silenced, creating emotional and psychological wounds that the twins cannot heal. The failure to grieve appropriately, both individually and as a family, leads to the fracturing of their identities, making it impossible for them to return to the unity they once shared.

"They were stunned by their own immunity to grief" (Roy, p. 102).

The repetition of this line emphasizes the centrality of repression and delayed grief in the novel's exploration of trauma. The twins' fractured selves are a direct consequence of the trauma that was never fully addressed. This delayed grief is not simply a personal tragedy but a reflection of the broader societal and cultural forces that prevent the characters from confronting their pain. The trauma is not just a personal issue but is intricately tied to the Ipe family's refusal to address the emotional fallout of Sophie Mol's death, reflecting a larger theme of repression within the family unit.

In Summary, the trauma of Sophie Mol's drowning fractures the once inseparable bond between Estha and Rahel. The psychological responses to the trauma—Estha's silence and Rahel's emotional exile—are symbolic of the broader theme of repression and dislocation that runs throughout the novel. Roy critiques the ways in which trauma, when left unresolved or repressed, leads to deep emotional and psychological scars that persist long after the event itself. Through Estha and Rahel's fractured selves, Roy illustrates the profound and lasting effects of unresolved grief, showing how it not only fractures individual identities but also the relationships that once defined them. This analysis underscores the novel's central themes of trauma, guilt, repression, and the long-term impact of grief on personal and familial identities.

Roy's portrayal of trauma in *The God of Small Things* offers a powerful exploration of how unresolved grief and guilt can rupture identities, leaving behind fractures that define the characters' emotional and psychological lives. Estha and Rahel's fractured selves serve as a critique of the ways in which trauma is internalized, silenced, and repressed, leaving lasting scars on individuals and their relationships. The twins' journey reflects the painful and often destructive effects of unresolved trauma, making their search for healing and reconciliation both deeply poignant and tragically elusive.

Linguistic Displacement

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, language is far more than a tool of communication; it functions as a profound medium for power, culture, and identity. Through the imposition of English, the silencing of Malayalam, and the trauma-induced mutism of Estha, Roy delves into the multifaceted roles that language plays in the lives of her characters, particularly the Ipe twins, Estha and Rahel. Language, in the context of this novel, becomes a complex symbol of colonial imposition, emotional repression, and the struggle for postcolonial identity. It reflects not only the linguistic displacement caused by colonial history but also the emotional alienation resulting from personal trauma. The twins' fractured identities serve as a compelling metaphor for the broader effects of linguistic alienation—how the loss or silencing of one's mother tongue creates deep rifts in cultural belonging, memory, and emotional connection.

The imposition of English within the Ipe family represents the ongoing dominance of colonial powers, even in postcolonial India. The central character who embodies this influence is Baby Kochamma. Her obsession with ensuring that the children speak "correct" English highlights the continuation of the colonial mindset even after India's political independence. Despite the formal end of British rule, English is still viewed as a means of upward mobility, intellectual superiority, and cultural refinement. Baby Kochamma's attitude towards the English language reveals the extent to which colonial legacy still permeates societal norms, positioning English as a marker of cultural sophistication and social status. Her strict enforcement of "proper" English on the Ipe children reflects the ways in which colonial powers structured language as a tool of oppression and control.

Baby Kochamma's fixation on English fluency is not just a personal preference but a deep-seated belief in the superiority of colonial norms. By forcing her children to speak "proper" English, she is not only disciplining them in a foreign language but also systematically erasing their native cultural identity. The imposition of English becomes a means of aligning herself with the perceived "higher" status of the British colonial rulers, thereby reinforcing the social and cultural hierarchies established during colonial rule. Her insistence on English fluency is symbolic of the continued erasure of the native language and culture, where Malayalam—spoken by the Ipe family as their mother tongue—becomes subordinated and viewed as inferior in comparison to English.

"Baby Kochamma drilled them in the correct way to speak English... to speak it properly, as only



English people spoke it” (Roy, p. 91).

This quote is crucial in demonstrating how Baby Kochamma's obsession with English goes beyond mere linguistic instruction—it becomes an attempt to conform to the structures of colonial power. The idea of drilling the children into speaking English “properly” is not just a practical effort to ensure they are articulate but a method of cultural indoctrination, where speaking English becomes a way of perpetuating colonial authority. The act of “drilling” evokes the forced education practices of colonial regimes, where the colonized subjects were often compelled to learn the colonizer’s language as a means of subjugation. By enforcing English fluency, Baby Kochamma seeks to position herself and her family within the colonial power structure, at the expense of their native language and cultural heritage.

In the aftermath of Sophie Mol’s drowning, Estha’s experience of linguistic displacement becomes even more pronounced. The trauma he endures after the tragic event silences him—not just emotionally, but linguistically. Estha’s muteness is symbolic of the deep emotional and psychological rift caused by the trauma. His inability to speak represents a profound disconnection from the language of emotion, identity, and connection. This loss of voice is not merely a physical condition but a psychological and emotional one. In the immediate aftermath of Sophie Mol’s death, Estha is unable to process the grief and guilt that plague him. His silence becomes a defense mechanism—a way to block out the overwhelming pain that he cannot articulate.

“Estha had no voice. He could not talk... the world had no words for him” (Roy, p. 126).

Estha’s muteness can be interpreted as a form of linguistic alienation. The very words that might have allowed him to express his suffering, to seek comfort, or to connect with others are unavailable to him. The phrase “the world had no words for him” speaks to a larger theme of repression within the novel: the inability of language to capture the full depth of trauma. Estha’s silence is not merely a refusal to speak but a profound emotional paralysis, where language fails him as a tool for processing pain. It is a powerful metaphor for the ways in which trauma can sever one's connection to their own sense of self and to the external world, rendering them mute, both physically and emotionally.

While Estha’s mutism can be seen as a response to the trauma he experiences, Rahel’s experience of linguistic displacement is different, though equally profound. Rahel’s exile to England and her return to India years later serves as a key moment in her own journey of linguistic and emotional alienation. Upon her return to India, Rahel finds herself caught between two cultures—one she left behind in India and one she tried to adopt in England. Language becomes a marker of this dual identity, a site where Rahel’s fractured sense of belonging is constantly at odds with her surroundings. Rahel’s fluency in English, developed during her years in England, further distances her from her native language, Malayalam, and deepens her sense of alienation upon her return.

“Rahel returned to a house that had no homecoming... she was caught between the languages, neither fully here nor fully there” (Roy, p. 154).

This quote encapsulates Rahel’s cultural and emotional displacement. She physically returns to her childhood home, yet she no longer feels at home. The house, which once represented comfort, familiarity, and family, now symbolizes alienation. Rahel’s exile to England has fundamentally altered her cultural and linguistic identity, and the tension between her native language, Malayalam, and the English she now speaks, highlights the fractured nature of her selfhood. The return to her homeland does not restore her sense of belonging but forces her to confront the deep cultural schism between her past and present selves.

Rahel’s alienation is not only linguistic but also emotional. The duality of language—English and Malayalam—becomes a source of internal conflict. Rahel’s fluency in English, once an asset in navigating her new life in England, now feels like a foreign language when she returns to India. Her inability to reconnect fully with Malayalam, the language of her childhood and her family, further exacerbates her sense of isolation. This internal conflict between two languages symbolizes the broader postcolonial struggle for identity, where the legacy of colonialism forces individuals to reconcile conflicting cultural influences. Rahel no longer feels at home in the world she left behind, and her linguistic alienation only amplifies this sense of emotional estrangement.

In contrast to Estha’s muteness, Rahel’s emotional alienation is both linguistic and cultural. Her fluency in English becomes a symbol of her assimilation into colonial structures, but it also represents the alienation she feels upon her return to India. The loss of her native language, and the cultural alienation that comes with it, exemplifies the complexities of postcolonial identity. Rahel’s return to India is not a reunion with her past but a confrontation



with the fractured self that results from linguistic and cultural dislocation.

Language in *The God of Small Things* is not just a means of communication but a form of cultural capital. English, as the language of colonial power, functions as a tool for social mobility, intellectual success, and cultural status. However, this cultural capital comes at the expense of the native language, which is relegated to a secondary status. For characters like Baby Kochamma, English represents not just a tool for communication but a means of aligning oneself with colonial values. In postcolonial societies, the fluency in English becomes a way to gain access to power and social acceptance, but it also creates a disconnection from one's cultural roots. The linguistic displacement of the Ipe twins—particularly Rahel—demonstrates the cost of cultural assimilation, as it creates emotional and psychological rifts between the individual and their native culture.

“It was the English language that had elevated her family... she insisted that her children speak English correctly, as only English people spoke it” (Roy, p. 91).

This statement reinforces the idea that English is not just a language for communication but a marker of social distinction. Baby Kochamma's insistence on her family speaking proper English reveals her belief that the language of the colonizer provides the keys to upward mobility. The Ipe family's obsession with speaking English correctly reflects the ongoing influence of colonialism in postcolonial societies, where English continues to be valued over native languages. However, the cost of this cultural assimilation is the erasure of the Ipe family's native language and heritage. The imposition of English in the family leads to the linguistic alienation of Estha and Rahel, leaving them stranded between two worlds—the world of their childhood, defined by Malayalam, and the world of adulthood, dominated by English.

For Estha and Rahel, the loss of their native language is symbolic of the broader emotional and cultural dislocation they experience. Language, in this case, is not just a tool for communication but a means of connection to their heritage, their family, and each other. As they are forced to abandon Malayalam in favor of English, they lose the means by which they once connected to their cultural roots. The emotional alienation that follows is a direct result of this linguistic displacement, as the twins' inability to speak their native language further fragments their sense of self and belonging.

“The words in their mother tongue, the sounds of the old world, felt foreign to them” (Roy, p. 147).

This quote underscores the emotional cost of linguistic displacement. The words that once defined their childhood and their connection to each other now feel foreign. Estha and Rahel's disconnection from their native language reflects the emotional and psychological distance they now experience from each other. Their inability to speak Malayalam symbolizes the deep emotional wounds left by trauma and cultural alienation. Language, in this case, becomes a powerful symbol of loss—a loss of identity, heritage, and connection.

In Summary, linguistic displacement in *The God of Small Things* is intricately tied to the trauma experienced by Estha and Rahel. The imposition of English, the trauma-induced mutism of Estha, and Rahel's cultural alienation upon her return to India all reflect the broader themes of colonial legacy, postcolonial identity, and the loss of native identity. Language, in this context, is not merely a tool of communication but a symbolic representation of cultural erasure, emotional repression, and the ongoing struggle for identity in a postcolonial world. Through the linguistic displacement of Estha and Rahel, Roy paints a vivid picture of the complexities of belonging, the consequences of colonization, and the personal cost of cultural and emotional alienation.

Conclusion

Linguistic displacement in *The God of Small Things* offers a compelling commentary on the complexities of identity in postcolonial societies. Through the imposition of English and the silencing of Malayalam, Roy demonstrates how language shapes not only personal identity but also the cultural and emotional connections that define a sense of belonging. The trauma experienced by Estha and Rahel is compounded by their linguistic alienation, which deepens their emotional and psychological fragmentation. Roy critiques the colonial legacy that continues to influence postcolonial subjects, showing how language serves as both a tool of oppression and a marker of social status. Ultimately, the twins' journey of linguistic and cultural alienation reflects the broader struggles of postcolonial identity, highlighting the personal cost of cultural assimilation and the complex process of reconciling multiple linguistic and cultural worlds.



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