

"The use of innocence in literature is never innocent." How far do you agree with this statement in the light of "The god of small things" by Arundhati Roy, and "Clear light of day", by Anita Desai?

Introduction

The innocent child has been a long-standing literary figure, used throughout the centuries and cultures by authors such as Dickens, keen to explore the subtleties and paradoxes of children. The latter-part of the twentieth century, however, has been especially rich in novels which give innocence a central role within the plot and the writing. In a society increasingly concerned with nurturing and protecting children, recognising their rights and their ability to express their thoughts and feelings, some authors have developed a fascination and a respect for children which is quite new in the world of literature. Whilst "Oliver Twist" may have struck a chord with nineteenth century readers, and resulted in an increase in the concern for the poor children of London, there is little true analysis of the deeper psychology of the child. This, however, cannot be said of the works of two female Indian authors, Arundhati Roy and Anita Desai, who in their respective novels "The god of small things", and "Clear light of day" have explored with depth and novelty the child, and hence the theme of innocence. It is their use of innocence in their novels, and the impact that this has over their style, as well as over the social, political and psychological aspects of their novels which I intend to study.

The child as a "social thermometer"

It is no coincidence that children were chosen by both Roy and Desai to figure as or amongst the main characters of their novels. Indeed, India is a country which has undergone great social and political turmoil in the last 50 years, and comparing the adult to the child that he or she was inevitably leads to comparing the way the world has changed and evolved in the time it took for the child to grow up. In

both novels, however, one must keep in mind that the socio-political situation is not the point of the stories, but that it is merely the setting, as well as a contributing factor to the way the child develops.

This is a point that has been stressed by many of Desai's critics , because it could lead to a serious misunderstanding of the point of "Clear light of day" if one were only to consider it as a political novel.

Indeed, "Anita Desai disowns all social concerns and asserts more than once that she is interested in individuals and not in social issues. Social issues intrude only where they affect the character" .

Political turmoil of the summer of 1947 is presented only through the eyes of Raja, the brother, who is worried because his neighbours, the Hyder Alis are in danger. She also manages to convey her own thoughts about the absurdity of the conflict by showing to what extent "Raja and Bim are aghast at the sudden outbreak of hatred, mistrust and parochialism among the Hindu-Muslim sections in India when Independence was to be declared". Because they are children, Raja and Bim do not understand the complex situation which the country is in, and are uninfluenced by their knowledge of India's past in perceiving the absurdity and horror of the sudden hate between neighbours. Their perception carries so much weight because it is so pure and is probably the only one which could show with such impartiality what is occurring in India at the time.

Social issues such as the restrictions imposed on women are shed light on through Bim, who in her naiveté, fails to realise that "the Hindu social code sees external ambition in women as detrimental and unnatural" , and that "sociological factors regard Bim's high ideals of service as only "sacrifice for the family." Judged by this conventional social matrix her sublime ambition is reduced to a pathetic search"

In both novels, the authors are careful not to let their books become a piece of political propaganda, and remain intent on showing the absurdities of politics through the children. It is the effect of an event on the people rather than the event itself which remain the focus of the authors.

In "The god of small things", one senses a great bitterness on Roy's part towards the western influence and world in general, as well as the decaying Indian culture. Scenes such as the airport scene, where

Roy dedicates a whole paragraph to the arrogance of the westerners, or those who have experienced the western world towards the traditional India : "And there they were, the Foreign Returnees, in wash'n'wear suits and rainbow sunglasses. (...) With love and a lick of shame that their families were so... so... gawkish. Look at the way they dressed! Surely they had more suitable airport wear! Why did Malayalees have such awful teeth?" are full of bitterness and a sense of resentment. This western-Indian conflict, is of course widely exemplified throughout the novel by Sophie Moll and her mother, Chacko's ex-wife's, arrival in India to stay at the family home. It is this constant sense of competition and jealousy felt by Rahel towards her western cousin, and eventually the fact that because of Sophie's arrival, and death, the whole of Rahel and Estha's world crumbles and disintegrates which symbolises the conflict.

This, of course, is probably the main point of Roy's novel : that it is through the small things, like a child, that one understands the world, because it is the small things which define our world. During the Communist march, for instance, Roy focuses on details, such as the car window : "Effortfully, because the black knob on the handle had fallen off" , and whether or not Velutha was present at the march. Roy shows a genuine concern with informing the reader about the political scene in Kerala in 1969, which is reflected in her extensive explanations of the events, such as in chapter 2, during the communist march, when Roy develops an in-depth account of why they are marching, whilst constantly relating it back to the children and their family.

By presenting the political backdrop through Rahel, Estha, and Raja's point of view, not only do we have a simpler account of the events, but we are also able, as a reader, to be more relaxed, as we will less easily feel provoked by the author. Indeed, it could be surprising that a novel such as "The god of small things", which presents in a rather negative light Westerners, Americans, and tourists became a best-seller in America, the West, and amongst the typical tourists. Yet it is thanks to the use of the children that Roy escaped criticism, because she was able to render her social commentary moving, but

also amusing through a very naive outlook on life, which Roy exploited.

Because of the great changes which India witnessed socially over the last century, especially as regards the family, and the entire concept of its functioning and form, it is interesting to observe, in both "The god of small things", and "Clear light of day", how the child interacts with his or her family, and to question the validity of the concept of the family in view of the way it affects the children. Indeed, the child's first view of life and of the world is through the family, and both Desai and Roy seem to question its advantages. In "Clear light of day", Desai portrays Bim and Tara's parents as individuals who are completely unconscious of their children, and have no real interest in them, leaving them in the care of others, and eventually of their aunt. Desai insists on the acute need for love which the children show, however, it becomes clear that to her it is not a natural instinct amongst parents to love their children, and that in their case their "true" family has a negative impact on them. Indeed, Tara suffers greatly from the feeling of loneliness and jealousy towards her siblings, as well as from the tremendous lack of love from her parents. Hence, when she recalls her childhood, it is only painful memories which she associates with her family, and explains her need to escape her past, as well as her family, through her husband.

The concept of the family also comes under attack in "The god of small things", but in a somewhat less radical way. Indeed, it is the preconceived ideas, the secrets, and the lies which tear the family apart on a larger scale, through characters such as Mammachi, the grandmother, or the aunt, Baby Kochamma, which are attacked in "The god of small things", but there remains an undivideable link between Ammu, and her children, as well as between the children themselves. They share a very intense and passionate love, a bond which may seem slightly unhealthy because of the way it enslaves Rahel and Estha one to another to the point that they start feeling as though they were only one person. Roy attacks the traditionally larger concept of the family, which was very much in tune with the older Indian concept of the family, but conveys the image of Ammu and her children as that of a true focal point in

the children's lives from which they drain all their strength. As soon as this unit is broken by the circumstances which are in part brought about by the larger unit of the family, the lives of all three suddenly become aimless and disintegrate.

The child's mind

Probably the most important element to take into consideration when one is questioning an author's motives for choosing the theme of childhood is that of the fascination expressed by generations in regards to the functioning of a child's mind, to its psyche, and to the impact which childhood has upon the adult. These are dealt with at length by both Roy and Desai, and are worth being looked at more closely.

It is often assumed that adult relationships are beyond the understanding of a child, and that as a general rule, children have difficulty in finding the objectivity to assess their own relationships with other people. Yet both Roy and Desai have taken particular care in their novels to illustrate how perceptive children can actually be towards relationships. In "Clear light of day", it is fascinating to observe through the eyes of the children the somewhat cold and ambiguous relationship which their parents have ; to sense, as the children do, the arrogance which all adults feel towards Aunt Mira, and to grasp the mixture of feelings and emotions which the brother and sisters have towards each other :envy, respect, disdain. "Raja, Bim, and Tara realise the dullness of their household and the strange distance between the world of adults and children. Their diabetic mother, tight-lipped father, administering daily an injection of insulin to their mother, their separate world of club and card-games created a chasm between the parents and the children. It also brings the four much closer in their search of love and security" It is interesting to observe how later in life these relationships evolve. "The childhood closeness is lost gradually as the children grow older, become aware of their different dreams and aspirations and seek fulfilment of these dreams". Bim, who has idealised her brother is inevitably disappointed when she discovers that he is an ordinary young man, and becomes bitter However,

between Bim and Tara, the emotions shift, and Tara is no longer the feeble victim in Bim's eyes, who inwardly envies her sister's happiness found in adulthood whilst resenting it.

In "The god of small things", relationships are portrayed differently. Indeed, whilst it can be said that Desai's speciality is the intricate study of relationships, Roy remains more superficial in her analysis, or rather in her characters' analysis of their feelings towards each other. The children have a more naive perception of each other, and emotions are left in a rawer state. The intensity of Rahel's affection for her brother and her mother, as well as that of her jealousy towards Sophie Moll is left untouched. However, her perception of the relationships between the adults surrounding her varies greatly in its accurateness. She senses the wrong being done to her mother by her family, whilst overlooking the amorous nature of Ammu and Velutha.

Both authors seem to convey the message that whilst a child may not be able to explain or fully understand relationships and the nature of feelings which people may experience one towards another, they possess a more acute sensitivity than adults and are able to sense hurt in others or in themselves on a quite different level to that experienced by adults. The child's mind, however, cannot be restricted to a purely emotional level. Its study is equally fascinating in the thoughts a child has, notably towards its own future, and its perception of itself. Many people, when asked to define maturity would mention an opening up to others, and the realisation that the world is not restricted to oneself. That is the beauty of a child's consciousness, that it relies so entirely upon itself, and that it functions exclusively in its own bubble. In "Clear light of day", it is especially interesting to consider the ambitions and perception of the future which the children have, because so much focus is put by Desai on the later disillusionment of Bim, especially. Bim, the child "who desired to conquer the world but who ends up by conquering herself" , who claims that she wants to become a heroine, offers a bittersweet example of the high hopes, and impossibility of a youth's dream. Bim does not consider that being a "heroine" implies helping others, she considers its values on a purely personal level. "The god of small things" does not

place such a focus on the children's aspirations. The children portrayed are not as deep as those in "Clear light of day", and their aspirations are purely limited to a day-to day basis. Eventually, of course, one discovers the tragic destiny of all three children. Sophie Moll dying as a child, Estha becoming insane, and a recluse, and Rahel attempting to insert herself into the western world, but miserably failing. The outcome of the children's lives is a lot more pessimistic than that of the children from "Clear light of day", because both twins end up unhappy, and it is perhaps more merciful of Arundhati Roy not to have given her characters too many hopes as children, because it relieves the novel from added bitterness. Rahel and Estha are unlucky from the beginning, finding a world in which they encounter only people with ill dispositions towards them because of their parentage. The use of children also provides the author with the marvellous possibility to present alternative philosophies and viewpoints on events and life in general to those commonly expressed by adults. Because a child's understanding of events and relationships, as we have seen above differs from that of an adult in that it is more restricted in its knowledge of facts, but more acute in its sensitivity, the conclusions which a child may make about life are extremely diverse to those held by adults. In "Clear light of day", the children's minds are characterised by a search for direction and meaning. They have, one senses, an intense wish to grow older, and be recognised as adults, as people. Raja wants to be a poet, and a hero, to reconstruct the world. Bim wants to assist him in his attempts, and to identify herself with a cause, whilst Tara searches only for someone to love her, and protect her. Their naiveté and innocence prevents them from understanding the restrictions and oppositions which they would meet in the real world.

In "The god of small things", the children, on the contrary, seem desperate to remain together in a state of childhood. They realise the evils of the world, subconsciously, and instinctively want to remain within the safety nets of their innocence. The study of innocence, therefore also provides the author with the exceptional opportunity to explore the intricacies and subtleties of the complex emotions,

psychology, perceptions and philosophies of the innocent child's mind.

Language and form

Because the theme of childhood and innocence are dealt with so largely in both "Clear light of day" and "The god of small things", the style of both novels is deeply affected by these themes. Indeed, the authors had to make changes in the form and language used to describe childhood and adulthood (the present state). It is the stylistic devices used by Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy to portray this world of the child, and to make the distinction between adult and child which I intend to study in this final part.

Both authors make a strong use of flashbacks to introduce childhood scenes, because neither of them fully expose the childhood. Indeed it has been said of Desai that "She does not fully expose the childhood of her personages, but whatever flashbacks are provided are enough to understand them" .

The scenes we are presented with such as that of the communist march in "The god of small things", or the episode of the bees in "Clear light of day" are sufficient for the reader to understand how the protagonists' childhood affected them, which is the main focus of study of both novels. This technique was also used by Virginia Woolf, who called it her "tunnelling process by which she tells the past by instalments". Its main advantage is that it "provides a method of presenting character outside time and place; in the double sense that, first, it separates the presentation of consciousness from the chronological sequence of events, and second, it enables the quality of a given state of mind to be investigated so completely, by means of pursuing to their end the remote mental association and suggestions that we do not need to wait for time to make the potential actual before we can see the whole".

Flashbacks are powerful because of their evocative nature. Indeed, they appeal to the senses because of their focus on the sights, smells and sounds which make up the experience, such as the scene in which Rahel angrily squashes a colony of ants: "Rahel found a whole colony of juicy ants. They were on their

way to church. All dressed in red. They had to be killed before they got there. Squished and squashed with a stone. You can't have smelly ants in church. The ants made a faint crunchy sound as life left them. Like an elf eating toast, or a crisp biscuit." In this extract, Roy through her strong use of assonance and colours appeals to the reader's sounds and sights. Such scenes strike a chord with the reader because they bring up in his or her mind memories of sensations and experiences from childhood, which although seemingly meaningless have remained in its consciousness. In flashbacks, the characters regain their innocence and naiveté, and hence the tone of the text shifts to accommodate this change. This was undoubtedly one of the main elements taken into consideration when deciding to deal with the theme of innocence and childhood by both authors, since it provides them with the opportunity to engage into so much literary experimentation. The thought processes are that of a child, and especially in "The god of small things", the tone is extremely naive, yet strangely perceptive. Indeed, scenes such as in chapter three of "The god of small things", when Estha spots an old man in the station, and instinctively feels the humiliation and unfairness of this man's treatment by the schoolmaster, focus on details which remained in Estha's mind, "Smallest Man the Varicose Veins he clean forgot to mention as he wobbled off with less than half the money he had asked for, and less than a tenth of what he deserved". He feels this instinctively, with all the beauty of a mind which hasn't been conditioned to shun ugliness and poverty yet. His naiveté makes the reader's heart "ache" as it does Ammu, who is scared by the innocence and naiveté of her children. It also makes us smile because of the irrationality (or is it rationality?) of the children's thoughts, such as Rahel and Estha's decision that it is "pappachi's moth" which is the cause of all unhappiness.

All children possess, to a certain extent, an imaginary world, and this is true for the children of the novels we are looking at. These imaginary worlds, or rather alternative worlds, since they rely on reality, but a reality transformed by the child's perception of it, resemble interior monologues, although they do not include the word "I". Roy, especially, conveys the ideas of only one character at a time, through the

third person. Rahel uses her imaginary world to fill the void which she feels when too much attention is given to her cousin Sophie Moll, for instance in the "Cochin kangaroos" episode. There, Rahel imagines that kangaroo shaped dustbins are in fact alive : "The middle one rummaged in her pouch for a long cigarette stub to smoke. She found an old cashew nut in a dim plastic bag. She gnawed it with her front teeth like a rodent." In this instance, Roy does not introduce this statement with "Rahel thought she saw", or "imagined", but plunges us straight into Rahel's imaginary world, with no warning. It is for the reader to understand that we are being presented with very subjective views, and are in fact in the thoughts of the character. The same process is used by Jane Austen in "Emma", where we are only presented with the views of Emma although the novel is written in the third person.

In "Clear light of day", the writer is more objective. This process is used, notably in the thoughts and analysis of each character as regards their relationships towards each other, but Desai tends to introduce their thoughts more clearly, thus creating a different effect, in which the reader consciously shifts between the various streams of consciousness of her characters. This variation could perhaps be explained by the fact that whilst in "The god of small things", most of the action goes on in 1967, during the childhood of Rahel and Estha, "Clear light of day" focuses more on the adults life of Bim and Tara, who are re-examinig their childhood in an attempt to understand what they have become.

The choice of vocabulary and register of language are crucial when looking at novels in which the predominant theme is childhood, because it is the main characteristic of a child's speech and thoughts which distinguish it from an adult's speech: his or her choice of words. This has been the basis for a great deal of the praise of Roy's novel: the exactitude with which she picked up on the child's speech. Words such as "later" become "Lay.Ter." under Estha's tongue and Roy's pen 6.

It is interesting to note that whilst many authors have chosen to use a child's voice when describing childhood scenes, such as Roddy Doyle, in "Paddy Clarke, ha ha ha", Desai chooses to retain a more elevated level of vocabulary and language, avoiding the rather common stylistic use of grammatical

mistakes.

There is a noticeable contrast in the styles of Roy and Desai, who both in certain areas of their writing are trying to convey similar ideas, and yet go about it in very contrasting ways. Possibly what distinguishes both styles of writing the most is the grammatically rigorous style used by Desai, as opposed to the freer style used by Roy when referring to childhood. It is difficult to assess whether these differences are due to a slight difference in the times in which these novels were written, Desai's being written in the late seventy's and Roy in the late nineties, or if it is simply a difference in the perception of the idea of writing between both authors. Choosing to deal with children in a novel, and to place their innocence at the centre of a plot offers the author great technical challenges, but also freedom to experiment, and hence develop the literary tradition. Because the author is dealing with the thoughts of a different kind of individual, the language, style, time-scale and format must be adapted to this, thus creating novels which are extremely rich stylistically and fascinating to study.

Conclusion

Why authors use innocence in literature is a complex and intricate question, because it involves considering the role of the author under many different lights. Firstly as someone who wants to convey a message, politically or socially, and manages to do so in a subtle form through the innocence of the on-looking characters :the children. One must also see the task of the author as a psychologist and philosopher, keen to develop new perspectives and ideas about the mind and human nature, and thus needs a different perspective and attitude in his or her characters to illustrate these ideas : the innocent child could serve no better purpose. The third facet of a writer is that of being a craftsman of words, and using a different language and time-scale, that of a child's, is an exceptional opportunity to innovate and experiment. And thus, through considering an author's choice, one reaches a definition of what it means to be a writer : an artisan of words who watches the world and Man evolve.