



Q333IE – Island and Empire

What role does the domestic space play in texts concerned with experiences of British imperialism in South Asia?

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In a selection of colonial and post-colonial literature, the domestic space plays a central role in offering alternative perspectives on hegemonic accounts of the imperial relationship between Britain and South Asia in both the past and the present. In *The God of Small Things* (*TGST*), Arundhati Roy focuses on the home as the realm of the marginalised, giving voice to this space to serve her postcolonial aims. Two colonial-era texts provide insight into the domestic space as a place of unstable colonial British identity. The poems of Imtiaz Dharker then offer an optimistic vision of the power of claiming and exerting domestic space. In these texts, the relationship between the individual and the institutional is explored across the canvas of the domestic space.

Set after the end of British imperialism in India, Roy's postcolonial novel adopts a domestic stance that facilitates the situation of the individual experience of imperialism within national and global structures. The homes of *TGST* are formed and pervaded with insidious colonial influence. Her domestic stance facilitates the situation of the individual experience within national and global structures. Early in the novel, the prioritisation of large scale experience in even the individual consciousness is established. An extended string of adjectives enforces the primacy of the 'public turmoil of a nation' over 'personal turmoil'.¹ To find space for the individual experience in a world where it is rendered inconsequential, Roy hones the narrative in on where 'Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited)' can be found – the domestic space.² Much of the narrative offers the viewpoint of the twins as children. This limited, childhood perspective is largely confined to that which is immediately proximate, situated within a vague and abstract wider world. Much of the action of the novel is, therefore, confined to the domestic space, conveying little to no overt awareness of a wider context. Events can be seen to mirror and resonate with broader contextual issues, but no direct consequentiality is represented. In this small scale world, the individual experience is given independent recognition and value. To represent the individual experience of imperialism, Roy reduces the textual world to the domestic space.

Understanding the domestic space as the realm of the personal, *TGST* explores questions of whether official, institutional history can be overwritten with the history of the marginal. Roy represents this process spatially – through the reappropriation of a space as domestic. Upstone suggests that Velutha and the twins' informal, accessible, magnetic relationship with the History House means it has been reclaimed and imperial signification has been triumphed by individual experience.³ However, this understanding overlooks the fact that

¹ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 19.

² Roy, *TGST*, p. 19.

³ Sara Upstone, 'The History House: The Magic of Contained Space in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*', in *Globalizing Dissent: Essays On Arundhati Roy* ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Antonia Navarro-Tejero (New York, London: Routledge, 2019), 71-79 (p. 76).

when these three characters seek refuge at the house they are confined to the veranda – they sleep outside of the house, shadowed by its sheltering potential. This leaves them vulnerable and exposed when the police arrive, making victims of all three sleepers as one is murdered and two are deeply emotionally injured. Yes, official History is rewritten with personal history for a fleeting moment, but this episode is not a reclamation of a once colonial space but rather a reassertion of institutional power and prerogative over the individual. Added to the colonial oppression that the house represents is the individual-level tragedy of fatal trauma, marked as the site becomes the grave of ‘a child’s plastic watch’.⁴ Upstone reads this image of a buried toy as one of enduring power and potential, but it is, in fact, symbolic of insignificance and loss. Whilst Roy gives voice to marginal narratives through the domestic space, she does not suggest the home is a site of resistance against hegemony but rather a covert site of oppression.

When the discourse of the History House is overwritten, it is with a narrative that serves to parallel colonialism under the East India Company and the modern imperialism of consumerism. A hotel, by definition, offers consumers a domestic space that can be purchased. The ‘Heritage’ hotel is a clear representation of the commodification of culture – ‘History and Literature enlisted by commerce’.⁵ The refrain ‘Toy Histories for rich tourists to play in’ is repeated in descriptions of the house.⁶ The capitalisation creates a label of a descriptor in a way that parodies how the hotel reduces lived experience to artefacts – an ‘edifying [placard]’ akin to ‘Heritage’, the hotel’s name. Through these labels a lived culture is stopped, framed by a proper noun.⁷ An imperial hierarchy in which native domesticity submits to colonial rule is architecturally encoded within this synthetic history, as ‘ancestral homes’ are ‘arranged around the History House in attitudes of deference’.⁸ Roy expresses the damage caused by this commodification of culture by using the language of a body being mutilated – old family homes are ‘transplanted’ and ancient dances are ‘amputated’.⁹ This representation of a changeable domestic space reasserts the idea that this realm of the individual is ultimately controlled by systematic forces.

The narratives encoded within domestic spaces are bleak reflections of the unjust structures of India in the post-imperial period. Throughout *TGST*, home is not a place of refuge as domestic spaces fail to offer shelter and protection to their inhabitants. Roy represents the totality of systematic injustice by representing several homes that are places of violence and trauma rather than safety. Ammu and her mother seek safety outside, in the ‘mehndi hedge around their house’ – the proximity to their home emphasising the unjust exclusion.¹⁰ In this passage, the family home becomes a space offering protection from public view to the ‘monstrous, suspicious bully’ that Pappachi becomes in private.¹¹ The motif of domestic abuse runs throughout the text – from this explicit description of beatings with ‘brass vases’ to the nonchalant acknowledgement that Kathakali dancers would go ‘home to beat their wives’.¹² This normalisation epitomises Roy’s connection of the home with trauma. In the Ayemenem House, the narrator describes how ‘the egg white from nearly nine hundred eggs went into [the floor]. It took a high polish’.¹³ The reference to ‘egg-white’ parallels the description of semen in Estha’s childhood sexual assault and evokes the text’s idiomatic

⁴ Roy, *TGST*, p. 125.

⁵ Roy, *TGST*, p. 126.

⁶ Roy, *TGST*, p. 126.

⁷ Roy, *TGST*, p. 126; 125.

⁸ Roy, *TGST*, p. 126.

⁹ Roy, *TGST*, p. 126; 127.

¹⁰ Roy, *TGST*, p. 181.

¹¹ Roy, *TGST*, p. 180.

¹² Roy, *TGST*, p. 180; p. 236.

¹³ Roy, *TGST*, p. 166.

motif of cracking eggs to make an omelette.¹⁴ This description of the floor is, therefore, an image of a home intrinsically embedded with trauma, with a deceptive surface shine. Roy, thus, exposes systematic abuse within domestic spaces that repeatedly fail to offer refuge to their inhabitants. The deceptive external appearances of these spaces show why Roy must adopt a domestic perspective to illustrate the totality of societal injustice.

The institutional significance of the domestic space is also evident in the 'placelessness' of Ammu and the twins.¹⁵ These three protagonists all defy societal categorisation and restraint, a characteristic reflected in their inability to settle in one domestic space. For Ammu, this stems from her resistant, defiant streak and the twins, both their hybrid cultural background and their childish, unprejudiced outlook on the world. They become placeless as they cannot fit into the institutional structures that the domestic space represents. These three figures become perpetual travellers, wandering but never able to find the shelter they seek in a home – the 'refugee' element of Estha's nickname for Rahel is not without significance.¹⁶ Estha's bedroom is the closest thing Roy offers to a potentially long term home. While the room 'kept his secrets', offering safety in this sense, its inhabitant still resists settling there, keeping it 'hospital' clean – this sterility reflecting a resistance to let the room become his.¹⁷ Instead, he seeks refuge within himself, learning to 'occup[y] very little space in the world' in recognition that there is 'no physical structure that will hide', or shelter him.¹⁸

In Walter Scott's *The Surgeon's Daughter*, Richard Middlemas's 'transgressive boundary crossing' identity is also signified by placelessness.¹⁹ His abandonment in his infancy is depicted in terms of space. He describes himself as an 'outcast', 'cast ... on the wide world'.²⁰ The recurrence of the verb 'cast' characterises his identity through rejection from the domestic space. His start in life sets the paradigm for his identity as a traveller whose fractured narrative retains no consistent home. In bidding him to 'go where his fate calls him', Witherington highlights the external pull that drives Middlemas's path, where others might have a central home to return to.²¹ Estha's narrative in *TGST* displays a similar pattern, he is 'returned' to one home, then 're-Returned' to another.²² The process of return depends on a base to return to and the cyclicity of this repetition shows this evades Estha. Roy and Scott draw on narratives of placelessness to represent figures whose identities are at odds with institutional structures.

The contrasting domestic grounding of those who are not deviant is reflected in Scott's descriptions of homes that are reflections of their inhabitants' experience and identities. The architecture and design of General Witherington's house is a manifestation of 'the riches of the East expended'.²³ The 'superb drawing-room' and 'large chandelier' establish the space's grandeur from its introduction.²⁴ The image of a 'heap of cushions, wrapped in a

¹⁴ Roy, *TGST*, p. 104.

¹⁵ Anna Froula, 'In-Between and Elsewhere: Liminality In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*', in *Globalizing Dissent: Essays On Arundhati Roy* ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Antonia Navarro-Tejero (New York, London: Routledge, 2019, 39-46 (p. 39).

¹⁶ Roy, *TGST*, p. 62.

¹⁷ Roy, *TGST*, p. 91.

¹⁸ Upstone, 'The History House', p. 78.

¹⁹ Tara Wallace, 'The Elephant's Foot and the British Mouth: Walter Scott on Imperial Rhetoric', *European Romantic Review*, 13:3 (2002), 311-324 (p. 318).

²⁰ Walter Scott, 'The Surgeon's Daughter', in *Chronicles of the Canongate* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1896), ch. VIII.

²¹ Scott, *TSD*, VIII.

²² Roy, *TGST*, p. 9.

²³ Scott, *TSD*, IX.

²⁴ Scott, *TSD*, VIII.

glittering drapery of gold and silver muslins' encompasses the imported exotic opulence that characterises the returned coloniser's identity.²⁵ This experience is sensually represented in the 'richest perfumes' that are 'breathed' by the couches – the personification representing a lived experience saturated with colonial gains.²⁶ This image of a lavish home establishes a context for what Wallace reads as colonial anxieties about a potentially 'exploitative relationship with India'.²⁷ The risks of this relationship are later manifested in the hybrid colonial figure of Madame Montreville, 'who can no longer be termed European'.²⁸ Montreville represents the mythological narrative of an 'Englishman who had "gone native"', like Kari Saipu in the backstory of *TGST's* History House.²⁹ *The Surgeon's Daughter* mobilises this trope in its authentic sense, representing Indian culture as 'one that contaminates and de-natures British integrity and therefore must be purged'.³⁰ The coloniser's home should be British 'domesticity transplanted to the empire', but the homes of these figures are permeated with the native, as are their hybrid identities.³¹ Montreville resides within 'that district of the city ... which the natives occupy'.³² The description of her home is of the garden her room is situated by. In describing her home with 'the brilliant-coloured flowers of eastern climates' and the 'sparkling jet' of a fountain, Scott characterises the space as dynamic and exotic – at odds with a rigid colonial ideal.³³ The permeability of the domestic space in both the History House and Montreville's apartment is shown to threaten the imperialist project causing the colonial anxiety that Roy mocks and Scott embodies.

Scott's description of how Madame Montreville 'leaves her court when she pleases' contributes to her depiction as a uniquely independent female figure in her society.³⁴ Her relationship with her domestic space reflects the deviance of her identity when compared to Emma Roberts's representation of the archetypal British domestic space in India. In the 'Bengal Bridals' chapter of *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*, a text contemporary to *The Surgeon's Daughter*, Roberts depicts the home of British women in terms of imprisonment, isolation and mundanity, in direct contract to Montreville's open, dynamic space. From the moment of marriage, the wife must 'proceed straight to their own residence' rather than partaking in a bridal tour.³⁵ She is obliged to 'remain shut up at home' instead of 'enjoying a pleasant excursion'.³⁶ From its introduction, the home is thus rendered a place of exclusion, in binary with the outside world. The transience of these domestic spaces, however, represents the impermanence of this experience. Robert's states 'there's always some person quitting a station and selling off'.³⁷ She also describes an unlucky wife's domestic experience as 'a long melancholy sojourn', using a noun denoting impermanence.³⁸ Like Scott and Roy, Roberts thus depicts a colonial identity characterised by placelessness, although here this stems from an institutionally complicit identity.

²⁵ Scott, *TSD*, VIII.

²⁶ Scott, *TSD*, IX.

²⁷ Wallace, 'Imperial Rhetoric', p. 318.

²⁸ Scott, *TSD*, XI

²⁹ Roy, *TGST*, p. 52.

³⁰ Wallace, 'Imperial Rhetoric', p. 318.

³¹ Deirdre David, 'Imperial Chintz: Domesticity and Empire', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1999), 569-577 (p. 569).

³² Scott, *TSD*, XI.

³³ Scott, *TSD*, XI.

³⁴ Scott, *TSD*, X.

³⁵ Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1835), p. 24.

³⁶ Roberts, *Scenes*, p. 25.

³⁷ Roberts, *Scenes*, p. 27.

³⁸ Roberts, *Scenes*, p. 35.

Roberts's homes are spaces of commerce. She depicts an interest in consumer objects as a feminine concern by describing how, in anticipation of marriage, a man might be seen 'purchasing looking-glasses, toilette tables', items that are 'unwonted luxuries' in a bachelor's home.³⁹ Her prose aims to dispel illusions of a colonial ideal in 'young persons whose destination is India'.⁴⁰ To ensure her narrative resonates with young women, she focuses on the she understands them to have interest in – the intersection of commerce and domesticity. Robert's homes are shadowed by the absent ideal marketplace of Britain. Items are mispriced based on 'the stock in hand, and the demand', furniture is purchased second hand at 'sales', fabrics for clothes are marked with 'spots and specks' and mismatched with 'discrepancies [in] the trimming'.⁴¹ The Indian marketplace mirrors an absent, stably priced ideal market that sells new, high quality goods. To aid in her aim of disillusionment, Roberts represents domestic spaces that are characterised by deficiency.

In Imtiaz Dharker's poetry, Chakraborty finds evidence that 'the otherizing gaze of the white natives pushes the black/brown migrant into a peripheral space where she must confront a crippling unhomeliness'.⁴² 'Campsie Fells' represents a direct artistic resistance against this social experience. In its opening line, Dharker appropriates the 'otherizing gaze', asking 'What did we look like?'.⁴³ In reclaiming the power to self-define, she facilitates her own construction of the 'homeliness' that Chakraborty understands this gaze to take from her. The alternative notion of domestic space that she constructs is encompassed by her focus on 'a caravan'. The noun is isolated within the stanza on its own line, inviting consideration of its dual meaning – denoting both a group of travellers and a traveller's home. This term comes to signify a domestic space composed of people and their culture. As the word can embody either or both definitions, a physical home is posed as either just one part of the domestic space or as not necessary at all. The narrative that follows depicts a South Asian migrant experience of home evoked in a 'Scottish field' – a rural space that subverts Chakraborty's 'peripheral space' from alienation to inclusion. The domestic space is here evoked through a collective experience. The first person plural pronoun 'we' exists alongside variations of the third person, as well as the first person singular, blending individual and collective experiences into one domestic narrative.

In 'At the Lahore Karhai', Dharker depicts a similar evoked domestic space. In a South Asian restaurant in Wembley, a group is 'bound together by the bread [they] break', in a home evoked through food, as in 'Campsie Fells'.⁴⁴ The descriptions of food in both poems are specific. References to 'tikka with chutney' and 'tarka dal' encode a culturally distinctive domestic image.⁴⁵ The Lahore Karhai is a commercial space rendered domestic, where the market allows migrants to 'recuperate a lost authenticity' – a process expected to be found in a private home.⁴⁶ Dharker, unlike Roy, represents the domestic space as a site of resistance where the cultural identity that subsides to imperial forces in the public realm might be manifested.

³⁹ Roberts, *Scenes*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Christian Isobel Johnstone and William Tait, eds. 'Anglo-Indian Society; by Miss Roberts', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1835), 683-93 (684).

⁴¹ Roberts, *Scenes*, p. 29; p. 27; p. 31; p. 31.

⁴² Abin Chakraborty, 'Beyond the 'Purdah of the Mind': Gender, Religion and Diasporic Imaginings in the Poetry of Imtiaz Dharker', *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 4 (2013) 72-86 (p. 76).

⁴³ Imtiaz Dharker, 'Campsie Fells', in *The Terrorist at my Table* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 30.

⁴⁴ Imtiaz Dharker, 'At the Lahore Karhai', *Imtiaz Dharker* <http://www.imtiazdharker.com/poems_3-at-the-lahore-karhai> [accessed 1 May 2019]

⁴⁵ Dharker, 'Campsie Fells'; Dharker, 'At the Lahore Karhai'.

⁴⁶ Chakraborty, 'Beyond', p. 73.

The domestic space is central to these texts that are concerned with representing aspects of the British imperial relationship with India. Roy's domestic spaces are sites of oppression, reflecting the traumatic individual experience of institutional injustices; although through these spaces, Roy empowers the marginalised by giving voice to their experience. Dharker's post-colonial poems mobilise the domestic space as a site of resistance against cultural hegemony in modern Britain. As in Roy, the domestic space allows marginal voices to be heard, however, the optimistic, active empowerment allows dominant narratives to be rewritten with personal ones, where *TGST* does not. Identity is bound with domestic space across all the texts, providing insight into contested and troubled situations of individuals within institutional structures. Each writer explores fictional homes in order to reconstruct institutional accounts of colonial experiences, engaging with dominant discourses to provide an enriched understanding of imperialism as a lived experience.

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