ZELEK Sebastian 04/09/2014

English essay

“What issues about identity and colonisation do these texts explore?”

Identity and colonisation are very important topics in “Heart of Darkness” by Joseph Conrad as well as in “The God of Small Things” by Arundhati Roy. Both are placed in countries that suffered through the European Imperialism and it's iron rule over them, which has deeply impacted them and shaped the population who inhabited them. In the “Heart of Darkness”, Joseph Conrad shows Marlowe, an adventurer from the early 20th century that has been sent by a trade company from Europe, to sail on the Congo river in Africa, and find the chief of the company's inner station, Mr. Kurtz. “The God of Small Things” on the other hand, places the reader in modern India, who recently managed to free itself from the British empire and cease to be a colony. It follows two twins: Rahel and Estha, who are trying to identify themselves only to find their lives destroyed by the Indian “Love Laws”.

Along his journey in “Heart of Darkness”, Marlowe explores the areas around the Congo river in Africa, and along his journey he discovers how the European colonisation of Africa has changed it's landscape and it's people. Based on Joseph Conrad's own experiences from his journeys in Africa, he draws an image of Africa deeply transformed by the Europeans. During the Scramble for Africa, it has seen it's resources depleted and the people mistreated and enslaved. He starts to show this with the Eurocentrism shown by practically all the characters seen in the book: Marlowe, and other European characters view the Africans as a faceless mass, “simple people” that are portrayed in a animalistic way. Throughout the entire text, the Africans are shown only using wordless grunts and moans to communicate, as well as they are given a wild aspect that scares off the European characters. However, the Africans themselves are described as “simple people”, who are easily scared by the European technology, such as guns, whistles or machines. And next to this simple population, Conrad shows his reader their environment: a savage, untamed and a dark land. "The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there - there you could look at a thing monstrous and free.” Marlowe and Conrad exhibit these Eurocentric philosophies, where Europe is “the civilised” nation, Africa is considered wild, and thus the Europeans believe that through their colonisation of Africa they “help” the natives to become civilised.

However, the scramble for Africa and it's forced colonisation has deeply changed the natives. A specific bond between the African natives and the European colonisators has been created. For instance, when Marlowe was sailing up the river, he described his relationship with his African pilot like this: "Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back - a help - an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me - I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken. And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt remains to this day in my memory - like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment." In fact, Joseph Conrad shows that the lives of the natives have irreversibly changed and became closely bonded with the European conquerors. Now that the Africans have European goods like brass wire, access to European machinery, and some even know English and had interactions with Europeans. They even became more aware about some of the tribes that were around them. It would be practically impossible for them to deny that impact, come back to their original ways and continue as if nothing happened. But that change came in for a heavy price: numerous African lives and minds have been lost during the European colonisation. One of the victims is Marlowe's helmsman, who's death was preceded by a mental breakdown: "That fool-helmsman, his hands on the spokes, was lifting his knees high, stamping his feet, champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse.". All that shows that Africa will never be the same. It's culture, it's people, it's every day life will be forever changed by the colonisation. That can be seen in the tribe that followed Kurtz practically revered him, mourning and grieves the threat of him leaving. They even went as far as thinking that without Kurtz they will not be able to survive, leading towards their violent outburst: "The tumult of angry and warlike yells was checked instantly, and then from the depths of the woods went out such a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair as may be imagined to follow the flight of the last hope from the earth.". Colonisation had a tragic effect on Africans in Conrad's novella, who are depicted as nothing more as savage beasts who need to be tamed.

But why did the Europeans consider that they had the right to “civilise” Africa? Who said that they are better than the “savage” people of Africa? By European standards, Kurtz is a great conqueror and colonizer for having subdued an entire tribe, but when the reader sees him in the novella, Kurtz is a wreck of his former self. When Marlowe finally meets Kurtz, he is sick, degenerated, seen almost as an animal himself. The man who was seen as great by everyone ends up as a degenerated fool whose “immense plans” end up ruined just when he "was on the threshold of great things.". In the end, this European superman that Kurtz was shown as ends up on the same shelf as the Africans.

On the other hand, Arundhati Roy's “The God of Small Things” focuses mainly on the identity of it's characters and their issues, and only sometimes touches on the results of the British colonisation. The novel follows the stories of Estha and Rahel, two Indian twins from the Kerala province. Both of them try to find their place in their world, but throughout the whole novel they just can't find a place that they could call home: they are banished to unhomeliness and an eternal quest for stability that they cannot find. The link that is between the twins heavily impacts them and makes them almost inseparable, to the point where the reader could talk about them being as one, one being who has a double consciousness who is stagnated by the outside world who plunged into chaos and hybridity. For example, Estha, who was “returned” to his father for several years, returned to Ayemenem only to wander the streets of the town, progressively exploring more and more from the terrains around Ayemenem, while he remains silent with everyone. He ends up as a “psychological refugee” who wants to escape the world that was imposed upon him: “He walked through the world like a chameleon. Never revealing himself, never appearing not to. Emerging through the chaos unscathed.” One could go as far as saying that Estha couldn't reveal himself at that point because he didn't even knew who he was, suffering from the double consciousness since his early childhood. Same goes with Rahel: because of that double consciousness she was unable to maintain a stable relationship with her husband. “What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel’s eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha’s words had been. He couldn’t be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other.” In fact, Rahel and Estha were so linked that they could be at ease only with each other somewhere close. That link between the twins, their double consciousness, what grew with their ongoing experiences from their childhood has alienated them from a defined sense of self. They could speak their native language, Malayalam, but they were heavily reprimanded for it's use. Their family forced them to speak in English, and even “they had to form the words properly”, even if “it [Malayalam] was the language everyone spoke in Kerala”. But that lack of a way for them to determinate themselves didn't rely only on an enforced language: the twins were also ripped apart from the society and themselves on the religious grounds: from one side, they were influenced by Syrian Christianity that Ammu and Baby Kochamma believed in, and from the other side there was the ever-present Hinduism, coming for example from Chacko and his creation story based on the “Earth Woman”. Baby Kochamma even referenced the twins as “Half-Hindu Hybrids” to show the religious conflict that each needed to endure through. They were even exposed to prolonged discussions of Anglophilia, that inserted in them a certain love for their conqueror, Great Britain, and raised them amongst people who idealise what is foreign rather the native elements that surrounded them. Both twins are made inferior in comparison with their British cousin, Sophie Mol.Even Chacko debates before the twins that “Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore.” This statement emphasizes his belief that they are all foreign to their native land, suffering from the complex hybridity that has occurred from colonization. They suffer from the feeling that they are alien to what they should consider their homeland. That made Estha and Rahel practically homeless, without a place they could truly call home, even the Ayemenem House, where the extensions of the family consistently flocked to was, “their maternal grandmother’s house, where they really had no right to be.” The book The God of Small Things continually cycled around the idea of rights: the right to love and be loved, the right to childhood innocence, and the right to a stable sense of self. All of which are things that are lost to the twins Estha and Rahel through their experiences, travelling through their own hearts of darkness.

In the end, both of these texts explore different aspects of colonialism and issues about identity. Where as “Heart of Darkness” concentrates heavily on the damage caused by colonisation on natives as seen from an external point of view, “God of Small Things” follows around 2 characters who have trouble identifying themselves in their heavily post-colonial world.