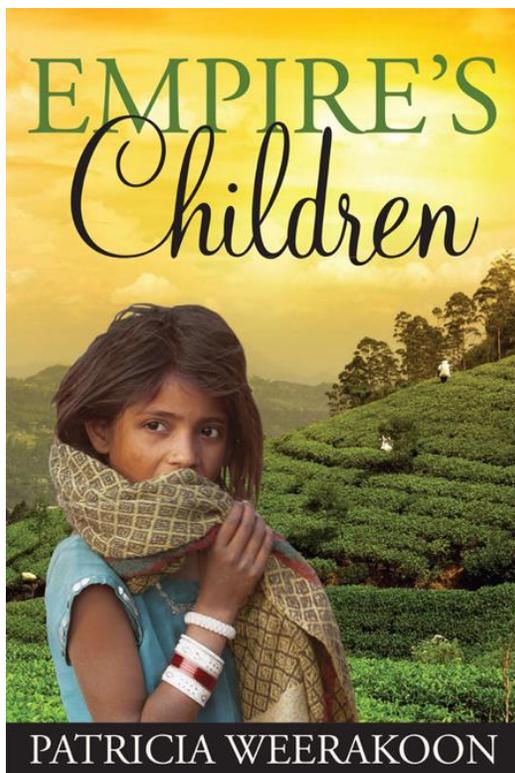




Rhiza Press Book Club Notes



Empire's Children

By Patricia Weerakoon

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Reading level: Adult

Rhiza Press, PO Box 1519, Capalaba BC Qld 4157 www.rhizapress.com.au
07-32451938 info@rhizapress.com.au

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Story Summary

As the daughter of the Tea-maker, Shiro is bound by the expectations of others. But Shiro has no interest in convention. Her holidays are spent with best friend Lakshmi, a coolie labourer, and she dreams of becoming a doctor, unhampered by her gender, her race or her social standing. Privilege is something Anthony and William Ashley-Cooper take for granted. On the Sri Lankan tea fields in particular, the English are masters. When Anthony takes over management of the plantation, he discovers the truth about his family's dealings with the locals. He desperately wants to make a difference – to be a different kind of man – but William's reckless lust and their father's never-ending greed stand in his way. Tragedy, grief and separation threaten Shiro and shackle Lakshmi in the bondage of class distinction.

Can Anthony's love of justice set right the wrongs of the past?

Key Learning Areas

Cultural practices and norms in Sri Lanka.

Varied expressions and outcomes of desire (power, riches, career, freedom, sex).

Power dynamics of colonial Sri Lanka.

Themes

Family expectations and duty

Arranged marriages

Tea plantation life in Sri Lanka

Search for atonement.

Related Text/Resources

<http://empireschildren.patriciaweerakoon.com/>

About the Author



Patricia Weerakoon is a medical doctor-cum-academic turned sexologist and writer.

She was director of an internationally renowned graduate program in sexual health at the University of Sydney, but retired in 2012 to pursue her passion for writing and public speaking. She writes romantic fiction with a social conscience, bringing together her international experience in sexual health and her love for her homeland of Sri Lanka. Her non-fiction books are gold-standard guides for good sex for all ages.

As a sexologist she has translated her passion to bring good holistic sexual health to all people into practical sex education, sex research and sex therapy. Her writing and speaking brings together her enthusiasm for sex and her love for the glory of God. Patricia has a recognised media presence and is a popular public speaker and social commentator in Australia.

Questions and Reflections

Chapter 1

1. What do we learn about the power differences and divisions between the British, Sri Lankans and Indian labourer?
2. How does Shiro understand and interpret the expectations placed on her as a Tamil girl growing up in the tea plantation?

Chapter 2

1. What are Lakshmi's dreams for the future? How do these fit in with her expectations? How does the fact that she is a nanny to Shiro affect this?
2. How does the relationship that Lakshmi has with her parents differ from that of Shiro with hers?

Chapter 3

1. What do we learn about Anthony's attitude towards Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans?
2. How does he perceive the role of the British in Sri Lanka?
3. What do you learn about Sri Lanka in these first three chapters?

Chapter 4

1. How do the events of this chapter reinforce or challenge the relationships between British, Sri Lankans and Indian labourers that we have seen in the preceding chapters?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Shiro and Anthony?

Chapter 5

1. What do we learn about a Sri Lankan Christmas?
2. The Rasiah family is a traditional Sri Lankan Tamil family. What do we learn about the relationships and characters of each member of the family? How they see and treat Lakshmi?

Chapter 6

1. What do we learn about the ethnic tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils?
2. Has the British Empire played a role in this?

Chapter 7

1. Seven years have passed. What differences do we see in the lives of Shiro and Lakshmi?
2. How may these affect or change their relationship?
3. Is there any change in the relationship of Lakshmi with her parents and other labourers?

Chapter 8

1. We meet Anthony (after seven years). Has he changed from the teenage boy we met earlier? If so, how?
2. What do we learn about the role and behaviour of the British superintendents on the tea plantations?
3. How do the female Indian labourers interact in this chapter?

Chapter 9

1. What do we learn about the relationships between Rev Robert Kirkland and Anthony? How may this have built up Anthony's character?
2. We meet Anthony's older brother, William. What do we learn of his character? How do the brothers differ in how they deal with the staff and labourers on the tea plantation?

Chapter 10

1. On the day of the staff party we see an array of staff, the two British superintendents and Lakshmi. How do we see the relationships between these groups work out?
2. What about the relationship between Anthony and William?

Chapter 11

1. How are the differences between the character of the brothers Anthony and William played out in this chapter?
2. What do we learn about the brothers' father, James? How may this have affected the character of the two sons? How does it affect Anthony now?

Chapter 12

1. We see here a clash between the superstitious beliefs of the Indian labourers and Mr Rasiah's Christian faith. How do we see this played out?
2. How does this faith affect the way Mr Rasiah deals with the conflict with the labourers?

Chapter 13

1. What are possible reasons for the way the Rasiahs treat Lakshmi when they find out she is pregnant?
2. How does this fit with their professed Christian faith?

Chapter 14

1. What changes are there in the relationships between the teenage Shiro and her family?
2. How is Shiro's response to Lakshmi's absence affected by what she is experiencing in boarding school in Colombo?

Chapter 15

1. How would you interpret Anthony's response to the grown up Shiro?
2. What fears does Shiro's mother have about her? Do you think these are justified?

Chapter 16

1. Anthony and Shiro meet for the first time as adults. How do they respond? See if you can get into their heads and work out how they must have felt.
2. What are the obstacles to a friendship between them?

Chapter 17

1. As they read Shakespeare together, how do Shiro's and Anthony's responses and feelings differ?
2. During that scene how do we see this relationship developing?

Chapter 18

1. Why are Bob Kirkland and Grace concerned about Anthony's relationship with Shiro?
2. What is Bob Kirkland's attitude towards Anthony's attempts at making reparation?

Chapter 19

1. How do we see the relationship between Shiro and Anthony change?
2. What do we see of Appu's role so far in the superintendents' lives?

Chapter 20

1. What are Lakshmi's choices for life after leaving Watakälé? Discuss her thought process in making the choice she did.
2. How have Lakshmi's feelings towards the Rasiah family changed? Is this justified?

Chapter 21

1. What do we learn of the family's expectations for Shiro's future? What do you think these are based on?
2. How do these differ from her dreams and wishes? Which do you think will prevail? Why?

Chapter 22

1. What do we learn about arranged marriages in this chapter?
2. Do some reading around the concept of arranged marriages. Discuss why these may be a good or bad way to find a suitable partner.

Chapter 23

1. What do we see of William's character and attitude towards the Sri Lankan staff and labourers?
2. How does Anthony feel about what has happened?

Chapter 24

1. What emotional changes do we see in Shiro in this chapter?

Chapter 25

1. What do we learn here of James Ashley-Cooper's feelings towards Anthony and William?
2. What are the possible reasons for James to act the way he did?

Chapter 26

1. If we get into Shiro's mind what would she be thinking as the events of this chapter unfold?
2. What would Anthony be thinking and feeling?

Chapter 27

1. Shiro has her future as a medical student and doctor ahead of her. Why would she react this way to rejection in love?
2. How do you interpret the financial payment made by Anthony to Mr Rasiah?

Chapter 28

1. What are Lakshmi's fears for the future of her son, Daniel?
2. Why is she so fascinated by the spider's web?

Chapter 29

1. Finally we meet the 'Empire's Children'. Draw a family tree and fit in the people you have met so far as well as the one you haven't.
2. How practical and feasible is Anthony's plan for redemption of his parents and William's actions?

Chapter 30

1. How is Shiro coping with medical school and a life after Anthony?
2. What can we surmise about Dr Jega?

Chapter 31

1. How has William's life changed since we last met him?
2. What relationships do you think he would have with the Sri Lankan staff and labourers? What about with his wife, Janet?

Chapter 32

1. Hemachandra Mudalali is a typical small town businessman in Sri Lanka. How would you describe his life and his relationship with his wife?
2. What is Lakshmi's role in the Hemachandra house? How does this influence Hemachandra Mudalali's attitude towards Anthony's plans?

Chapter 33

1. What factors influenced Mr Rasiah's decision to resign? Was it wise at this juncture? Did he have an alternative course of action?
2. Could Victor have done anything to change the events of the day?

Chapter 34

1. What do we learn about Jega? Why may this be important in the unfolding tale of the Empire's Children?

Chapter 35

1. We now learn Jega's family story. Go back to the family tree you drew in chapter 29 and add in what you now know.
2. How does what Shiro knows at this point affect her plans for revenge on William?

Chapter 35

1. Discuss the unfolding drama of Shiro's plan for revenge. What could she do next?

Chapter 36

1. Where have we met Mr Wright before? What was he like then?
2. How do we see his character portrayed here?

Chapter 37

1. How do we see the relationship between Shiro and Jega shift?
2. How does Shiro feel now that she has accomplished what she set out to do?

Chapter 38

1. We see multiple relational misunderstandings here. What are they?
2. What would Anthony feel when seeing Shiro? What is her reaction?

Chapter 39

1. We see a change in the power dynamics begin between the children of the empire and the Sri Lankan natives. Can you feel this? Discuss it.

Chapter 40 and 41

1. Describe the continuing shift in the power dynamics between the Empire (represented by James and his wife, Elise, and sons, William and Anthony) and the Sri Lankan natives (Shiromi, Lakshmi and Jega).
2. Is it possible that there could have been an alternate ending where Jega wins Shiro?