Texts tend to focus on the negative effects of cultural values upon individuals. To what extent do you agree? In your answer you must refer to TWO texts studied since the half-yearly examination.

Despite their differing cultural values of late 20th century India and post-World War II Europe, Arundhati Roy’s novel The God of Small Things and Michael Ondaatje’s novel The English Patient emphasise the corrosive impacts of a dominant sociocultural narrative on the personal voices of marginalised individuals. Roy reveals the conflict between oppressive neo-imperialism and the private sphere, while Ondaatje explores how nationalistic cultural values limit the individual experience, sparking conflict between their choices and imposed societal beliefs. In contrasting the texts of their literary canon, both novels emphasise the negative effects of hegemonic and pervasive cultural discourses to critique social hierarchies and give voice to ignored perspectives.

Neo-imperialistic forces undermine individuals, exposing them to the marginalisation of social hierarchies. In The God of Small Things, instability within characters’ personal circumstances reflects political and national discord within the caste system. The imagery of ‘then Small God... came away cauterised, laughing numbly at his own temerity,’ symbolically embodies ‘Small God’ as restricted and marginalised personal struggles. ‘Small God’ also represents Untouchables’ servile behaviour, reaffirmed by Velutha’s identity as the ‘God of Small Things’ and his suppressed freedom as an Untouchable. Roy’s emphasis on the disastrous effects of Velutha’s and Sophie’s deaths indicates the significance of personal catastrophes. Religious imagery in ‘personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling...public turmoil’ metaphorically establishes the veneration of public tragedies, while personal tragedies are marginalised. The asyndeton develops the heightened anguish of individuals who face the suffering of the ‘small things.’ The paradox of peace in Rahel’s description of India as ‘poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace’ reinforces national turmoil, the result of neo-imperialistic culture, and the volatility of individuals’ lives. Characters are also marginalised corruption, the consequence historical imperialistic control. Corruption is demonstrated through the ironic juxtaposition of the acrostic for police, ‘Politeness. Obedience…. Courtesy. Efficiency,’ with the police brutality towards Velutha in maintaining the culture of the ‘Love Laws.’ The spread of Marxism is also a symbol of sociocultural unrest, as a ‘religion turned against itself.’ The gulf between sociocultural ideals and reality is illustrated through the hypocrisy of communist ideologies, as K.N.M Pillai ironically maintains the prejudices of the caste system, refusing Untouchables their rights. Similarly to Velutha’s exclusion from the nationalist cause of Marxism, in The English Patient nationalistic endeavours have marginalised the individuals that live at the villa, facing their personal trauma with Hana ‘in a rough shape herself,’ and Caravaggio ‘in near ruins.’ Thus neo-imperialistic culture creates national tragedies, marginalising individuals’ personal suffering.

The fragmentation of individuals’ private world by nationalistic cultural values reveals their sense of restricted identity. The English Patient challenges the glorification of imperialism and war. The adaptation of culture to different contexts is depicted symbolically as Hana uses the ‘six foot crucifix’ as a scarecrow over her garden. The juxtaposition of this religious symbol with the mundane demonstrates a changing belief system as old cultural values are eroded due to the tragedy of war. Hana’s personal resistance to social norms is illustrated as she ‘stepped away from the war,’ voicing her decision to stay at the unstable Villa San Girolamo. Hana’s moral numbness and disillusionment as a result of her experiences is illustrated in her bitter tone of ‘who the hell were we to be given this responsibility... to lead people towards [death].’ The devastation of war is also illustrated in the villa,
which has ‘little demarcation between... damaged building and the burned shelled remnants of the earth.’ Caravaggio’s mutilated thumbs and likewise Velutha’s brutalised body also reflect the vulnerability of the private world to political violence. Connotations of moral purity in Velutha, meaning white, with the symbolic contrast of the police as ‘dark of Heartness tiptoed...’ highlights the innocence of the marginalised. Ondaatje and Roy both portray the destabilisation of identity as a result of war, using polyphony to disrupt the conventional narrative form. A confused sense of self is exemplified in the alternating perspectives of the English patient or Almasy’s, disjointed storytelling as he says ‘death means you are in third person.’ Also, fragmented chronology and frequent analepsis illustrates chaos within both texts’ narration and within characters’ personal identity. Thus, political conflict and devastation mirrors individuals’ internal struggles with their identity and morality.

The crisis of cultural identity creates a divide between individuals’ public and private worlds in oppressive societies. A subaltern character and outcast of the social hierarchy, The God of Small Things’ Vellya Paapen faces conflicting loyalties to his society and son, with the juxtaposition of him ‘torn between Loyalty and Love.’ The metaphor ‘half of him wept,’ shows the split in Vellya’s identity between his role as a father and imposed notions of maintaining social order. India’s colonial history has thus caused marginalisation in the lingering, strict hierarchy, disastrous for the ‘hollow people. Homeless. Hungry,’ while also creating a society of ‘Anglophiles.’ Chacko metaphorically highlights ‘a war that makes us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves,’ as the struggle of different cultural influences in India. The impact of hegemonic cultural narratives in enforcing Eurocentricism is exemplified in ‘little angels were beach-coloured... Little demons were mudbrown.’ Rahel and Estha’s internal displacement, caused by neo-imperialistic culture, emphasises their marginalisation and private suffering. Rhetorical questions such as ‘Are they clean white children?’ and the repetition of ‘No. (But Sophie Mol is)’ conveys the ingrained social values of Western superiority, influencing the twins even as children. This social conditioning has created psychological divisions between their nationality and the national identity favoured by their society. Furthermore, the intertextuality to The Sound of Music used in this scene to compare the twins to the West, and likewise Ondaatje’s reference to The Histories challenges the authority of dominant narratives. Gyges’ relationship with Candaules’s wife in The Histories parallels Almasy’s affair with Katherine, effectively rewriting history through the view of a personal tragedy marginalised by war. Roy also mirrors the stories of the kathakali dances; where Karna suffers prejudice towards his low caste and an unjust death, to Velutha’s struggles and undeserved death. Thus, postmodern texts emphasise how enforced societal notions of cultural and class inferiority from neo-imperialistic roots, marginalise individuals.

The reinterpretation of cultural values and national identities reveals new perspectives about the conflict of individuals’ wills against the beliefs of their restrictive societies. In The English Patient, the individuals who stay at the villa, marginalised by a war of nationalistic pursuits, all reject national identity after displacement from their homeland. The war culture has fostered ‘international bastards’ whose trauma has developed dissociation from their culture. Kirpal or Kip’s cultural hybridity creates alienation from his family and culture. Kip is compared to Kipling’s character Kim, as they face a conflict of cultures in behaving like Indians, however having allegiance to the English. Intertextuality to Kipling’s novel Kim in ‘who is Kim-Kim-Kim?’ uses repetition to demonstrate post colonialist notions of conflicting identity. Truncated sentences of ‘a man with... all identification
consumed in a fire,’ indicates that Almasy has been stripped of all physical identity in addition to his lack of cultural identity. Almasy finds his true identity in the desert, uninfluenced by society, and where he learnt to ‘erase the family name! Erase nations!’ Almasy deconstructs ideas of colonialism by acknowledging that the land is bound by various conflicting territorial conquests, suggested through low modality in ‘Alexander had traversed it...for this cause or that greed.’ Almasy’s lack of colonial possessiveness contrasts Roy’s portrayal of neo-imperialistic influences on India, as the introduced commercialist culture has broken the kathakali dances into incoherent performances for tourists. Thus, texts display the marginalisation of individuals by the values of their societies through the creation of cultural hybridity or loss of cultural heritage.

Through uncovering the struggle between social and private identities, the reinterpretation of contextual values and communication of post-modern influences provides insight into human culture. The post-colonial novels, *The God of Small Things* and *The English Patient* condemn how cultural values uphold damaging social beliefs and marginalise individuals. By challenging hegemonic paradigms, these texts similarly assert the heterogeneity of marginalised perspectives.