Basic Plot Overview and Author

The story is told from the perspective of Rahel and Estapphen, the twins and protagonists of the novel.  It begins in 1981 with Rahel's return to India after receiving a degree in architecture and moving to the United States with her husband for a number of years.  This is reminiscent of the author's life. Early in her career, Roy became an architect and had a short first marriage. Unlike the author, Rahel has a twin brother, Esta, who has returned to their hometown of Aymanam. Rahel decides to make the trip to India again, to where her life began, side-by-side with her fraternal twin.

The rest of the novel is told through a series of flashbacks, dealing with the introduction of the favored cousin, Sophie Mol, who goes to India with her mother to live with her father, Chacko, in the 1960's.  A series of events leading up to Sophie Mol's return, including Esta's rape, a Communist march, and tense interactions between the twins' mother, Ammu, and the family, are told out of order but ultimately lead to destruction. Found throughout the novel are events and characters that show the political turmoil facing India, also reminiscent of Roy's childhood and current political work.  Interwoven throughout the novel are themes of family, forbidden love, loss, friendship, and the distinction between "great things and small things.”