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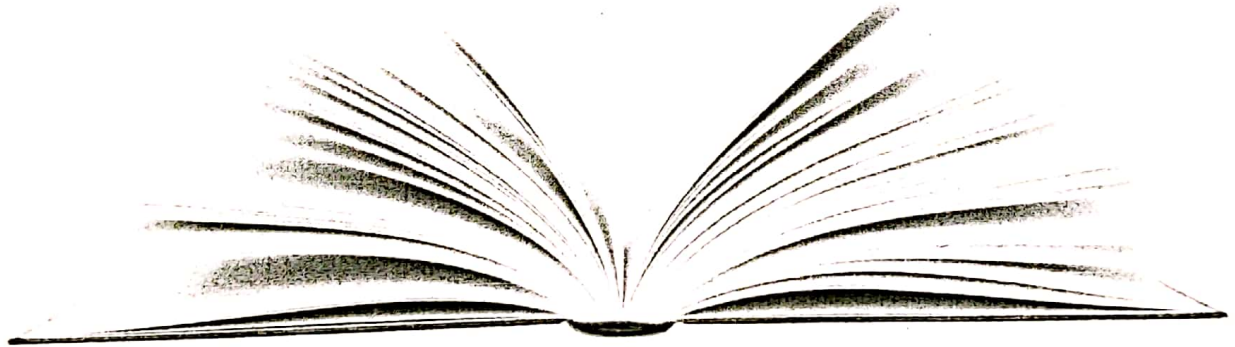
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SWATIDHAN PUBLICATIONS





## River of Smoke: A Critique on Opium Trade and Commerce

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Amitav Ghosh's projected Ibis trilogy grows out of his comprehensive historical research about the mid-nineteenth century opium wars between China and the Western powers led by Britain. The European powers, cloaking their greed under the rubrics of free trade and internationalization of commerce, attempted to open the Chinese markets to the vicious opium trade. *Sea of Poppies* ends with the escape of the convicts from the Ibis which is in the grip of a fierce cyclone in the Bay of Bengal. *River of Smoke* begins in the wind-swept cliffs of Mauritius with "La Fami Colver," Deeti's clan, marching in ritual procession to her "Memory Temple." The repressed, exploited young woman from a remote Indian village establishes a matrilineal community in Mauritius after serving out her indenture along with eight of her shipmates. With the creation of an indentured community of "ship-siblings from the Ibis" (RS 11), culture flows between national boundaries undermining the modern narrative of a homogeneous nation. A product of this intercultural negotiation is the strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Creole that becomes Deeti's "personal idiom of expression" (RS 4).

Deeti's semi-mystical experience interweaves the beginning of both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*. In the first novel, she has an instinctive knowledge that her vision of a tall-masted ship on the ocean is a "sign of destiny" (SP 3). In the sequel, she insists that it was not chance but destiny that leads her to the site of her hidden shrine in Mauritius. Deeti's prescient drawing of the Ibis on a green mango leaf amazes her daughter Kabutri, and she even puzzles herself with the "sureness of her intuition" (SP 9). Her sketch is so authentic that the narrator comments in an aside that "[L]ater, even seasoned sailors would admit that her drawing was an uncannily evocative rendition of its subject" (SP 10). Significantly Deeti's creation of her private universe takes place in the inner sanctum of her puja room. Her pursuit of art reaches its high point in Mauritius where she paints the walls of the cavern later known as "Deetiji's 'Memory-Temple'—Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir" (RS 8). Deeti thus continues the indigenous traditions of art she learned from her grandmother in her native village Madhubani, famous for its gorgeously painted walls and decorations. Unrepressed by her patriarchal in-laws, she relentlessly pursues her art in her inner shrine, her private domain. In Mauritius too, she has carved out her "puja room," "a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back" (RS 7). The members of Deeti's indentured community dispersed within the island and abroad would mobilize once a year to make elaborate preparations for their annual pilgrimage to Deeti's Memory Temple. This Temple becomes a cultural strategy of identity formation. Robbed of a past, a history, a culture, the descendants of Deeti's clan have developed a culture that draws its energy from displacement, heterogeneity, syncretistic.

The saga of the patriarch Kalua's deliverance from the Ibis, given a mythical dimension by Deeti's paintings, is an event recounted by the Colver clan. This narrative is to them what "the story of the watchful geese was to ancient Rome—an instance when Fate had conspired





with Nature to give them a sign that theirs was no ordinary destiny" (RS 13). Deeti's uninterrupted pursuit of her art in a foreign space illustrates Ghosh's non-normative concept of the South Asian diaspora which is oriented around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations. For Deeti, drawing is her "principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories" (RS 10). Deeti thus carves out her own strategies of survival in an alien land as culture becomes transnational.

Sea of Poppies focuses on the transportation of Indian indentured laborers to Mauritius and exposes imperial machinations to wrest control of the Indian economy. River of Smoke traces the complex chain of events leading to the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839 between China and England. The immoral trading practices of the West in general and the British in particular bred deceit, hypocrisy, and exploitation. The rhetoric of the democratizing powers of Free Trade under the pretext of which they carried out their nefarious activities animates River of Smoke as it did its prequel. European colonialism was a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise inextricably tied with capitalism. The novel explores the relationship between the ideology of imperialism and its functioning through the practice of colonialism. Not unsurprisingly, in the several consecutive meetings of the foreign opium merchants, English entrepreneurs passed themselves off as "crusaders in the cause of Free Trade" (RS 244). Like Captain Chillingworth in the first part, Mr. Charles King, "one of the few true Christians" (RS 219), is disillusioned with this vicious opium trade and exposes the colonizer's duplicity. Though they endlessly affirm their intention to bring Freedom and Religion to China, they resort to "the most absurd subterfuges" (RS 354) which breed corruption as hundreds of Chinese officials are bribed to safeguard the safe passage of opium. When he urges in a public resolution to refrain from a trade that is "fraught with evils, commercial, political, social and moral" and desires to establish "true Christian amelioration" (RS 387), his plea is instantly rejected.

The European belief that free trade and the internationalization of commerce would create wealth for all nations and produce a new peaceful world order is contested by the Chinese administration that rejects the idea that trade could elevate human society. The newly appointed Commissioner of Canton, Lin Zexu surprises foreign merchants by announcing that the opium trade is over and ordering them to surrender their stock. Consequently, a "good" and "honest" Commissioner, the "best officer in country" (RS 267) "an incorruptible public servant ... a scholar and an intellectual" (RS, 424) is disparaged as a "madman or monster," who has ordered two executions and has shown that he has "scant regard for human life" (RS 463). The unfazed Lin demands the protesting British to hand over the prominent opium trader Lancelot Dent.

The British merchants argue in a circular fashion that the devastation wrought by opium among the Chinese has nothing to do with them; yet when the Chinese government seeks to limit the entry of the drug they cry foul, claiming impedance of their natural right to trade. The problem of the Chinese administration is further complicated by the complicit involvement of Indian and Chinese merchants profiteering from British imperialism. While British colonial expansionism couples with capitalist aggrandizement to seize political powers in Asia, it also opens up wonderful private opportunities for native entrepreneurs.

The British merchants attribute the overwhelming success of the trade to the "marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy" (RS 420) of the Chinese race. That this discourse smells of Western arrogance is hinted at by none other than Napoleon himself when he prophetically states that "[W]hat an irony it would be if it were the opium that stirred China from





her sleep" (RS 174). Bahram's frequent travels from Bombay to Canton provide the narrative the opportunity to explore the in-between spaces, the Derridean interstices, through which an individual crosses the borders between ethnicity and transnationality.

In the alien space of the Manchu Empire, however, Bahram discovers his alter ego: "In Canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona, one that had been previously dormant within him: he had become Barry Moddie" (RS 52). While Barry Moddie is "confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful" in Canton, when he returns to Bombay his "other" self would be shrouded and "Barry would become Bahram again, a quietly devoted husband, living uncomplainingly within the constraints of a large joint family" (RS 52). Bahram's successes as an opium merchant are balanced by his failures as the fruits of his labor prove to be elusive. He suffers a huge financial setback because the storm in the sea damages both his ship the Anahita and the massive cargo of opium. Arriving in Canton's Fanquitown or Foreign Enclave, the helpless Bahram fails to dispose of his cargo because of the stand-off between the adamant Chinese authority and the British enforcers of Free Trade. His situation becomes more complicated when an arrest warrant is issued against his name. The gifted entrepreneur with a luxurious lifestyle feels tormented with the idea that the Chinese security are scrutinizing him at every nook and corner of Canton: "Everywhere he looked, eyes seemed to be following him: although he strode along as fast as he could, the two-minute walk seemed to last an hour" (RS 494). The most decisive blow is struck when the British, in a strategic move, decide to surrender their stock of opium to the Chinese. Bahram, who professed to be "the most loyal of the Queen's subjects" (RS 453) is shattered with a sense of betrayal because the entire edifice of his sense of the world and his place in it proves to be an illusion.

The English merchants used all means, from rhetoric to brute force, in order to convince those who opposed their line of thinking. They perpetuated their ideology in various garbs. Religion, politics, economics, and ethics were all ingredients went into the making of the pot-pourri used to convince all the races all over the world. Burnham, Jardine, Dent etc. are few of the most prominent voices that espouse the philosophy of a white exploiter. They are the forces of darkness to which Bahram sells his soul. He regrets this when he is eventually betrayed. With his debts rising high and prospects for the future receding, Bahram takes shelter in his private world of dreams about his lost Chinese lover which culminate in his hallucinatory suicide in the Pearl River: "she seemed to be looking up from under the water's surface, smiling at him, beckoning with a finger" (RS 546). Bahram is a helpless individual at the mercy of the broad sweeps of politics and history. His self-defense to Napoleon when asked about the ethics of opium-trade reveals how Bahram negotiates with his sense of self and evaluates his position in the wake of capitalist ideology: "Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him—his friends, his family, his servants—by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by" (RS 175). By focusing on the trials and tribulations of a character caught against the whirlwinds of forces beyond his control, the narrative portrays a broad and many-sided picture of the everyday life of the people.



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