



Opium Trade and Linguistic Hybridity in River of Smoke

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Introduction:

River of Smoke (2011) is the second book in the Ibis Trilogy. Sea of Poppies ends amidst a raging storm, rocking the schooner, the Ibis, and the crew of seamen, convicts, lascars and girmitiyas sailing forward in the course of transforming their lives. River of Smoke begins with the Ibis caught in the storm with two other vessels the Anahita, a well built cargo vessel owned by the Bombay based Parsi merchant, Bahram Modi, carrying the raw opium for sale in Canton and the Redruth, a Cornish vessel on which the Cornish botanist looks for rare plants, especially the mythical golden camellia in China. Some characters from the previous volume reemerge, they are Raja Neel, who joins as Modi's munshi, and Paulette accompanies the botanist, Penrose. Sea of Poppies mainly deals with the opium trade, its production in India and export to China. In River of Smoke Ghosh shifts his attention to the opium trade with China, particularly the coastal port of Canton. 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. 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). 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 Bhojपुरi and Creole that becomes Deeti's "personal idiom of expression" (RS 4). Hybridity and fluidity of movement thus lead to the rise of a global imaginary characterized by heterogeneity.

Opium trade:

Bahram Modi, the Parsi opium trader provides the details of opium trade politics. The revenue generated in the opium trade helps the British Empire grow. So the British compel the Chinese mandarins to keep open their ports, in the name of free trade. In his interview with BBC News Ghosh points out that opium was essentially the commodity which financed the British Raj in India. It is not a coincidence that 20 years after the opium trade stopped, the Raj more or less packed up its bags and left. The novel reveals the power politics and diplomacy of the British Empire behind the opium trade with China. The failure of the opium trade with China results into the Opium War.

Ghosh offers the deepening alternative view of history, especially the Opium War and the commercial and diplomatic relations of Britain with China. Ghosh's sympathies are largely with Chinese as they become the real victims of opium trade and Opium War. The opium trade was one of the shoddiest and shocking episodes in the whole violent history of the British Empire that exposes the hypocrisy, diplomacy and politics of Britain. It is consequently powerful economic interests, not moral considerations that influenced the debate on opium trade and opium war.

With references from diaries and paintings Ghosh manages to bring out the color and vibrancy of the ancient trading port. Fanqui-Town in Canton was the place where foreigners thirteen factories called different 'hongs' mainly the British, the Dutch, the Danish, the French and the American. Also, it was where the characters of the novel 'planned to despoil an entire people in the pursuit of profit', as Robin Chinnery, a gay Eurasian painter, describes the Foreign Merchants' enclave in a letter to his friend Paulette:

"In a way, Fanqui-town is like a ship at sea, with hundreds - no, thousands - of men living crammed together in a little sliver of a space. I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small and yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year.... Everywhere you look there are khidmatgars, daftardars, khansamas, chuprassies, peons, durwans, khazanadars, khalasis and lascars." (RS, 185)

Ghosh seems clearly fascinated by the history of Canton and, within it, of Fanqui-town, a tiny foreign enclave on the



edge of a formidable but mysterious civilization that is beginning to resent the corruption of its people by opium. The second protagonist of the novel Bahram Modi, who serves as much of the novel's energy, owes his life to 'Canton'. Probably the most memorable character in all of Ghosh's fiction, Bahram is captured in every possible mood, from opium-- induced hallucination to boardroom bluster, romantic rapture to Zoroastrian-inflected philosophical rumination. If there is one thing that reveals all the elements of Bahram's life, it is his language, which is silted with the sediment of many tongues — Gujarati, Hindustani, English, Pidgin, Cantonese. When the foreigners weren't eating or drinking or dancing, they invoked the principles of free trade to fight the mandarins who try to keep opium out of China.

River of Smoke vividly captures the critical moment in the history of global trade, as the tensions between the Chinese monarchy and the British East India Company rise to a perilous crescendo that will culminate in the devastating violence of the Opium Wars. The novel ends just before the time when Britain's Opium War against China began. It was more than a trade war or globalization through Amitav Ghosh's River of Smoke - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization gunboats. It was a clash of civilizations with a racial undertone.

The huge cast of characters in River of Smoke and the narrative carried by a number of voices show Ghosh's sophisticated command of dialogue: Deeti's engaging Creole; Neel's English which is so good that it irritates Bahram; the naive, frivolous voice of Robin Chinnery, a gay artist who writes gossipy letters to Paulette that provide an artist's view of Canton; and an omniscient narrator. This novel is in fact 'a monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalization — an era when people came into contact and collision, intermixing costumes, customs, convictions, consonants, couplings and cash'. The twisting of tongues energizes all of Ghosh's writing. It allows him to engage with quiet irony on the political counter to the commonalities forced on them by all of them being sub continentals in China. In the alien space of the Manchu Empire 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 Barrie 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. Bahram is a helpless individual at the mercy of the broad sweeps of politics and history. His self-defense against 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.

Indian tongues and arena languages:

Following from the earlier forays into laskari and pidgin language, the Anglo-Hindoosthani that peppers this chronicle once again shows a union of various cultures for the 'other' to be truly allowed a space in the politics of representation. The broken-down languages also bring forth the crisis that plagues not only the sensibilities of the characters, but also in the process of creation of historical knowledge, one that is constantly caught up in a state of flux. In this crisis of ideas, Neel ponders over the role of the intellectual. Neel's character from the first novel onwards takes on an interesting trajectory, from being the indifferent Raja, to being convict at sea, taking up the role of Munshi to Bahram and finally, in this, molding himself into the role of an advisor to the Chinese on Indian matters. While Neel's love for words and languages as well as cultures makes him an excellent narrator of the crisis of the opium war, he is also the frustrated intellectual who helplessly watches the destruction of not only a civilization, but also its future. His words, "Thoughts, books, ideas, words—if anything they make you more alone, because they destroy whatever instinctive loyalties you may once have possessed" (RS 83), bring out the inherent loneliness and angst of the intellectual in times of ideological emergency.

The text in River of Smoke is marked by a general and pervasive awareness of language issues and by a sense of the complexities of multilingualism and the interaction of languages: Indian tongues – Hindustani in general, Neel's Bengali, Bahram's Gujarati, also Tamil, Telugu, Oriya, Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani; Cantonese Chinese; Portuguese, French, English; Mauritian Creole; and the hybrid that is pidgin. The word 'pidgin' is said to have originated from the word businesses. There is a dialogue between the Chinese boy Allow and Bahram where the boy says, 'this time cannot do-pidgin in Canton. Mister Barry savvy, no-savvy ah?' (RS, 244) Here, it is clear that pidgin 'means business' not the language. And 'savvy', from the Portuguese verb 'saber', means 'know'.

After the reading of several more passages – including a witty sex scene which expertly drew on elaborate 19th century Hindustani phrases to communicate the intimacy of the two characters – the floor was opened to questions. One of the



employing the strategies of code-switching and vernacular transcription, Ghosh abrogates the Standard English thereby strengthening his anti colonial stance.

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