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Historical Discourse in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is considered an iconic figure in English Literature owing to his singular unorthodox perception of history. To comprehend the history of a specific place and period, he primarily focuses upon the ordinary historically marginalised figures of the time. This research paper is an attempt to present the framework of Ghosh's style of representing the voice of the unvoiced other and in so doing, how Ghosh as an author differs from a canonical historian

Keywords: Historian- Novelist- Multiplicity of Voices- Opium Trade- Inhabiting a Place

1. Introduction

The fictional works of Amitav Ghosh have been granted several key awards and have been nominated or short-listed for even more. He is considered as one of the most important Indian writers in English of the post-Rushdie generations, within the wider tradition of South Asian fiction. His reputation rests mainly on the ambivalent nature of his fiction as both intellectually significant and topical, while remaining immensely readable for the wider public. In his fiction writing he has that rare blend of academic viability and popular accessibility which makes him the favourite of a large readership.

Ghosh is a keen student of social anthropology, one of the branches of anthropology that studies present-day human behaviour in societal groups. This comes across very pertinently in all of Ghosh's works. His profound intuition concerning history and culture of a place and its people is appraised to be at a professional level too. His novels become a melting-pot of ethnic pluralism of the past to which he lures both the initiated and the uninformed readers. There is often an indictment that authors are evading the pertinent concerns of the present in favour of writing about the past. However, Ghosh's work is not the kind of historical fiction that is under attack. The accusation is targeted against literary fiction set in the past, which is by its very nature, escapist. In the words of Mantel "It's as if the past is some feathered sanctuary, a nest muffled from contention and the noise of debate, its events suffused by a pink, romantic glow"(Mantel). However, this is not the way mellowed modern novelists perceive their subject matter. If anything, its contrary is true.

The past is not dead ground, and to traverse it is not a sterile exercise. History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it. The most scrupulous historian is an unreliable narrator; he brings to the enterprise the biases of his training and the vagaries of his personal temperament, and he is often obliged, in order to make his name, to murder his forefathers by coming up with a different take on events from the one that held sway when he himself learned the discipline; he must make the old new, because his department's academic standing depends on it. (Mantel)

Written on the scale of an historical epic, *The River of Smoke* (2011) is essentially an interesting study in cultures, traditional practices, human character, history, geography and demographics, while of course being an entertainer of the first order, capable of keeping the reader engrossed in the many layers of story-telling that unfold with each page. The visual effect that the author creates is so strong that any reader of the text would emerge as a live spectator in whatever is happening in novel.

2. Title: its Historical Significance

There is always a difference between a novelist using certain historical material and a historian using the same: even when they use the same materials, their points of entry are very much far apart. The "River" in *River of Smoke* is the Pearl River, which runs through Canton and the "Smoke" comes from smoking opium. There is a different kind of smoke that is referred to by the narrator in the last pages of the novel produced by the mob that poured into Fanqui town: "saw men running into the Maidan with flaming torches; they I broke into the factories and set

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fire to the go downs. I ... ran along the city walls until I reached the Sea-Calming Tower. From the top I... saw a line of flames leaping above the river; the factories were on fire and they burned through the night" (550-551). Towards the end of the novel when Commissioner Lin confiscates all the opium held in stock by the foreign merchants in Canton, the readers may have expected him to burn them and create smoke. Instead he has the crates opened, all the 20,381 crates worth many hundreds of tons of silver, the balls of opium broken, mixed with salt and lime and thrown into water filled trenches, from where they will mix with the waters of the Pearl River. There is no smoke in case and if one is worried about the pollution, Commissioner Lin has written "a poem, a prayer addressed to the God of the Sea asking that all the animals of the water be protected from the poison that will soon be pouring in".

The title transports the reader right inside the opium trade in the third decade of nineteenth century. *River of Smoke* is the second volume of a proposed trilogy. *Sea of Poppies* (2008) took readers first along the Ganges and to Calcutta, where the poppies are grown and processed to make opium. *River of Smoke* continues the story through to Canton, the floating and ephemeral city in which the covert opium market fuelled British colonialism and brought China reluctantly into the emerging politics of the world. Ghosh's story links the opium fields and factories of the Ganges and Calcutta with the trafficking of indentured workers to the sugar plantations of Mauritius and the smuggling of opium up China's Pearl River. We see Canton's network of alleys and harbours and islands through many eyes.

3. Setting

The first novel, *Sea of Poppies*, set a year earlier, conjured up the heat of the north Indian plains, shrouded in the violent red billows of Papaver somniferum, the British opium factories and the wharves of the silty Hooghly River from where the viscous, addictive stuff, packed inside clay balls the size of cannon shot—"foreign mud" in Chinese eyes—flowed to the paradisiacal Kingdom. *River of Smoke* carries the story, and some of the first book's characters, from Calcutta to Canton (now called Guangzhou) on the Pearl River delta, to China's emporium. The tale is set in the first quarter of the 19th century in the late 1830s, in Fanqui town, a small strip of land used by foreigners to trade with local Chinese traders, a year before the First Opium War between Britain and China. The discovery voyages sail from Mauritius to Bombay and Calcutta, to Hong Kong and Canton, and even include a flashback vignette of St Helena and a meeting with its most historical resident, Napoleon Bonaparte.

4. Tracing Historicity

Set mainly in Canton, which is the modern-day Guangzhou and Hong Kong, and linking together the story of the British and Indian opium merchants as well as that of an horticultural voyage to this flora-rich region, the novel offers intuitive understanding into the outcome of the opium trade on local and international politics, the consequences of opium smoking on an otherwise industrious character, Chinese diplomacy, British imperialism that prevailed, the shipping industry of the time, the Chinese landscape, floating townships on the Pearl River, Napoleon's exile, horticulture, landscape painting, and many more subjects.

4.1. Historicity and Predicaments

The author is drawn to the past because it provides instances of predicaments that are unique. These typical predicaments

reveal the human condition. For instance, in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, what occurred in ancient Rome is no more the key concern of the play. Shakespeare's interest is focused on the plight of Brutus, on the one hand, and Mark Anthony on the other. It is through their puzzling situations that he explores the themes of friendship, fidelity, sense of duty, and political justice. This is what goads the play: the predicaments are the vehicles that carry us into the past.

An example each from the novels of Amitav Ghosh can elucidate the point. The first is that of a character called Arjun in his novel *The Glass Palace*. Arjun is a light-hearted young man who joins the British Indian Army shortly before the outbreak of World War II. He has irresistible passion for women and cars; he has no time for politics. After the war commences, he is ordered to move to Singapore with his battalion. There, he slowly comes to understand that his position in relation to the army is not quite what he had imagined. The fact that he is an "Asiatic" is thrust upon him when he goes to certain clubs and parks: when he jumps into a swimming pool all the Europeans leave. Then he is told to go to Malaya where he takes part in the battle of Jitra, where the British forces suffer a disconcerting defeat. In the aftermath of the battle he suddenly finds himself confronting issues of his own identity which he had never thought about earlier.

The second example could be Bahram Mody, the protagonist of *River of Smoke*. Bahram finds himself in Canton in December 1838, taking part in the events that led to the outbreak of the First Opium War. Now, it is an established fact that merchants from the Bombay Presidency were an important presence in Canton in those months; the more prominent among them played important roles in those events - we know this from attested documents and other materials. Most of these traders were Zoroastrians, which is a religion with a very rigorous dictates of ethical precepts. Hence what would it mean for a person like Bahram to sign on to a war for the sake of profit? How exactly could he arrive at that decisive stand? The circumstances in which these predicaments arise are particular to those places and those moments: yet these are what give them their resonance. The real quandary in which he finds himself thus becomes the hearth that makes it possible to inhabit this moment, this history. It shapes the narrative and determines the design and the content of the book.

4.2. Opium Trade

The book is a midway point in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, which is his chronicle of the Opium Wars, the nineteenth-century struggle between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty over the future of trade in China. It is compendium of happenings and intrigues which are knit together as a novel in its own right though it reads as a very long preface to what one can only assume will be the outbreak of war in the third book that is yet to be published.

The making of the empire that began on such a large scale from the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century went conjointly with the development and advocacy of trade, commerce and industry by the empire builders. Some of the trade and industry that developed during the course of empire building turned out to be good. However some were not. The two of the most lucrative trades which flourished in that period were the slave trade and the opium trade. In both these, the empire builders were adroitly aided by the people they had been kept under their thumb. The slave trade could not have been carried out so facilely without the help of the Arab mediators and African slave-hunters. There was also the

mandatory cultivation of opium in India, at a terrible cost to the Indian peasantry and their sustenance, and the dumping of that opium in China required the active backing of many tens of thousands of Indians and Chinese. In the process, many of those Indian and Chinese intermediaries became affluent from that immoral trade. Many of Mumbai's philanthropists, well-known names like Pestonjee Wadia, David Sassoon, Jamsetji Tata, and Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, were all involved in the opium trade, which was where they made their money before moving on to disparate things.

The novel focuses on Ah Fatt's Parsi father, Seth Bahram Modi. His opium-laden ship, the *Anahita* heading for Canton, endures the storm in the Bay of Bengal. However, the Chinese Emperor takes immediate steps to uproot the curse of the opium trade on his people. What begins, for the likes of Bahram Modi, in possibility and freedom, ends in chaos and prohibition, with the trade suspended by the Chinese emperor's determination to purge his country of an opium plague and British anxiety to safeguard the financial mechanism of colonialism.

It is clear that the author did in-depth research on the history of Southern China and the opium trade, to the unfortunate extent that throughout the book the characters become simply a mouth-piece to report on what he has discovered. The whole lot of the tools such as descriptive letters and elaborate narratives about the history and architecture, which, while meticulously researched, took over from the characters and stories that made *Sea of Poppies* so wonderful. In the *Sea of Poppies*, the readers were shown how the British agents forced Indian farmers in the Gangetic plains to grow opium to the exclusion of all other crops, and then buy it from them at very cheap rates. However, the opium which Bahram carries to Canton on the *Anahita* is not opium from Bengal, but freely grown opium from the Malwa which was then ruled by Maratha states such as the Scindias and the Holkars, subject to British suzerainty. It makes sense in a way, since the Parsees were the most conspicuous among Indian opium merchants with the exception of a few Bagdadi Jews like David Sassoon. *River of Smoke* reminds the readers of David Mamet's play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, exploring the thin line between trade and deception. Merchants suspire after the market and the deal, quite like the present day, and can hardly forgo the huge profits a drug cargo can proffer. Profit is like any other drug. There is also much profit in China's mysterious floral blooms, in tea, spice, and the botanist's grail, a plant supposed to rejuvenate and reverse aging. All the botanists earnestly sought to fill England's gardens with hydrangeas and its treasury with gold. However, Ghosh is hardly didactic; he understands these cravings and strives to be sympathetic and subtle. As smugglers of the drug, the foreigners have ruined tens of thousands of lives. This is an immediate threat to China and in the novel one is not allowed to forget these important facts of history. Commissioner Lin's 1839 open letter to Queen Victoria on the subject is quoted. In this tinder-box ready-to-ignite -atmosphere, where Christian piety and free trade are the deceptive watchwords, the letter had no immediate impact whatsoever. One has no empathy towards the rapacious traders in their turmoil. When opium cannot be sold in Britain, how could the merchants refuse to comply with Chinese laws for "it has been the custom for Fanqui town to govern itself". Bahram is very much with the Western merchants in this regard, though he is man with a heart and does feel guilty about what he does. In any case, these are not stories out of which the British weaves a clean image. The principal casualty in *River of Smoke* is a Parsi merchant whose

sad verdict on the value to future generations of Indians of his own labours and that of his peers in the days of the East India Company is clear: "Was it just ... so that these fellows could speak English, and wear hats and trousers, and play cricket?" As the tensions between England and China over the destiny of the opium trade escalate, Bahram embodies the human cost at the heart of the mounting conflict. Caught between the demands of two empires—geographically, politically, and financially—he is at once a victim and its ambassador. Although he is a major merchant in his own right, Bahram's status as a colonial subject renders him expendable to the British merchants with whom he keeps company. As his confidant Zadig Bey observes, "Bahram- bhai, you are not an American or an Englishman. You don't have any warships behind you. If the Chamber had to surrender you or Dent [an Englishman], who do you think they would pick?" His eventual deterioration into opium addiction brings about a proliferation of the endless debates about freedom of trade at the hall of the British East India Company a moral gravity the novel otherwise lacks.

There's an eloquent scene when Bahram is invited to join the Canton Chamber of Commerce for "it was the custom . . . for the Committee to include one Parsi". Greeting his friends in the chamber, he embraces them, knowing that "such exuberance might be looked upon askance in a European but in an Oriental of sufficient rank it was likely to be seen rather as a sign of self assurance". Other details from the life of the all-male Canton trading enclave are fascinating, too: the men dance with each other at parties, and love affairs flourish between some of them, all but openly acknowledged. Jardine of Matheson leaves Mr Wetmore reluctantly to go home to marry in England (Mr Wetmore is soon found to be consoling himself with someone new). The brute bullying and crass confidence of the Chamber in its negotiations with the Chinese might feel as if it is done with too broad a brush – but much of it comes verbatim from the newspapers and pamphlets of the period.

4.3. The Historian and the Novelist: Distinctions

In depicting a character readers can easily notice a principle of economy in operation. Everything that goes into the book must link the readers' grasp of the characters' predicaments--for instance, imperial politics, world trade, the development of weaponry and so on do not figure as if by right. It is also not very necessary to know what Arjun studied in school or where he had his initial sexual experience. However, they ought to be informed about the debates on Indian independence and about the war raging around him when he was growing up. Similarly in the case of Bahram, the details of the ways in which he relates to his own community, to the English and to the Chinese are crucial to their understanding of his predicament. His relationship with his friends in Bombay, for instance, is secondary and unimportant - not for Bahram himself, but for the writer and reader.

It is interesting to observe how a historian and a novelist treat the subject of history. A novelist's relationship to the past becomes substantially different from the historian's because the former approaches history through the characters he creates. This goes without saying that in most respects the novelist's understanding of the subject is far less comprehensive, far less accurate than that of the historian. However, the novelist who has created his character proceeds with an intuition, to demonstrate the logic of how a certain character would apprehend the events of history. Viewing it this way, we find that there are also some respects in which

seeing the past through the prism of a character's experience allows for a kind of wholeness which is unavailable to the historian.

In *Sea of Poppies*, the readers were shown the desperate cast of indentured slaves, stowaways, and seamen at sea on the *Ibis*, heading for Port Louis. In the turmoil of a storm into which the passengers of the ship were hurled, a band of captives managed to free themselves by fleeing to escape to Singapore. The second volume of the trilogy picks up with Deeti, the widow saved from the fires of self-immolation at the beginning of *Sea of Poppies*, now the respected elder of an extended clan in Mauritius - La Fami Colver. Her memories form the novel's outer structure into which Ghosh goods his most fascinating characters for three of the other *Ibis* shipmates: Neel the bankrupt Raja; Ah Fatt, his opium-addicted cellmate; and Paulette Lambert, the aspiring botanist. Given the cumbersome number of characters with whom Ghosh was juggling at the end of *Sea of Poppies*, his bizarre ploy here is to add two key principals: Ah Fatt's father, Seth Bahram Modi, a rags-to-riches opium merchant hailing from Bombay, and Robin Chinnery, a dazzling painter and childhood companion to Paulette.

While *The Sea of Poppies* concentrated on characters from India, particularly from Bengal and Bihar, *River of Smoke* is mainly located in China, around the teeming harbours and the markets that traded opium. Mimicking the grand canvas of an historical epic, it follows its storm-tossed characters to the alleyways and busy waterways of 19th century Canton in China. As we launch into this incredible sea-to-land jaunt, we are goaded on to an amazing world of boat-markets, flower-girls, women who run a small boat- restaurants, and people who have come from different parts of the world to sell goods particularly opium. We are also shown Chinese ceremonies and festivities whose pageants, sights and smells are sure to enchant and linger long in the mind of any reader. In these crowded harbours and markets of China, the traders flout the efforts of the emperor to bar the trade of opium. The ships from India and Europe continue to keep exchanging their cargoes of opium for boxes of tea, porcelain, silk and silver. The plot breeds many characters and they get planted in the scene. These include a wealthy merchant from India, an amateur botanist out on a mission to find rare plants, a replica painter of half-blood who strives to remove the stain of being born a "bastard" and being abandoned by his "father", a wealthy landlord who is now on the run and so on. All characters come together to create a world of hyper reality, of charm and magic, set in an exotic land, in a bizarre time. Their presence on the scene has specific objective: some in pursuit of love, others seek wealth, a few seek a legendary flower, and still others are out there to reclaim what they have lost. All these characters who come together to create a story within the larger plot necessarily turn the novel very complex and uncanny. Besides, his characters are all well-rounded: their back stories often forming interesting little tales by themselves. Ghosh writes about characters who generally do not figure in history but he firmly sets them in the history of Canton.

There is a proliferation of the historical research on the foreign enclave in Canton in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These studies concern many detailed studies of politics, imperialism, trade, botany, and art. But the foreign enclave in Canton was a tiny place - a quarter of a mile in length and half that in width - and everybody knew everyone else, at least by sight. The traders danced with each other on social occasions and they spent a lot of time together.

The same merchants who were making fortunes in trade were also patronizing the arts and collecting botanical and zoological specimens. It becomes very easy to lose sight of the geographical limits of the enclave when one reads historical monographs on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canton. This is because the protocols of historical research impose certain constraints. Hence if a novel is shaped by its protagonists, a historical monograph is shaped by its subject and the issues it elaborates. For a historian studying trade in Canton, the place is a busy port but for the historian of science, it is a city with innumerable nurseries while for the art historian, the city is nothing but a gathering of studios. In the novel we get a moment's glimpse for example, inside a ship's cabin - and Ghosh can't resist explaining how a copper tub is "attached ingeniously to the ceiling, with removable trivets". While the story of Bahram is the main focus of the novel, the novelists goes into other details which a historian would hardly be interested in. For instance, he shows his predilection for food. Bahram likes to eat "a Xinjiang specialty called a samosa...": "these were small triangles of pastry, stuffed usually with minced meat: baked in portable Uighur tandoors they were sold hot in the Maidan . . . and were spoken of familiarly by their Hindusthani name - samosa". Every element, no matter how small, in the novel's world opens up to divulge the further worlds stacked up behind it. This limitation is also strength because it provides a focus of inquiry. While this delimits the range of materials, it authorises the professional historian the right to assert claims to verifiability if not to truth.

A novel dwelling on history, on the other hand, cannot render just certain thematic profiles. Hence, in rendering a setting through the eyes of its protagonists, the novelist is able to set itself the task of recreating the wholeness of the experience which is to say the wholeness with which the protagonists apprehend the facts of history through head and heart. This project would hardly be possible or even conceivable, if historians had not laid the foundations for such apprehensions. Thus from the many historical monographs and studies on Canton, a novelist dwells on questions that interest him most: building on the available historical data what was it like to be actually *present* there? Or what was it like to be present in that place for a period of time, say a day, a week etc.? Then these visualisations are pieced together by author mainly relying on diaries, memoirs, letters, newspapers, and other sources which may not be a primary source for a historian.

Kate Grenville in her *Searching for the Secret River* (2006) acknowledges that her attempts at canonical historical research were impeded by the dearth of evidence for her ancestor's life. In a key scene she becomes disheartened in her research at the Public Records Office in London and decides that she will visit instead "the places where the past had happened and experience history" as if it were happening here and now (Grenville 47). Hence historical accounts rarely provides answers to questions relating to the details of a particular setting for an event like the time of the day, the conditions of weather and landscape, or the descriptions of people of a place. Such questions are not of great importance to historians. However, for an author, such questions are relevant when he/she tries to inhabit a setting. There is of course one branch of history for which these moments and features are as important and which look at the past much the same way as an author. This is military history, particularly when it gives accounts of battles. There is here a striking overlap. The questions issued and the details discovered are very similar: the terrain, the weather, the equipment, the

clothing, states of body and mind - all of these as much interest a military historian as a novelist. There is also another point to this commonality and it concerns the treatment of time. Military historians furnish, at least in part, with critical moments and decisive turns. A battle may be considered as the perfect instance of a climactic event. It is the other of a representative or routine moment. Generally the extraordinary and unique moments constitute a novel; the routine moments of a character's life rarely get the same attention. That is to say, both the military historian and the novelist deal with the rugged margins of the temporal continuum. On the other hand, most historians deal with "unruffled" time in which decisive moments are consolidated or ignored. The axle of time which has the potency to produce generalizations and summations deals with the extraordinary and unusual. They cannot be relied upon to make inference.

4.4. Accumulation of Cultural Material

Though a historical novel is never meant to be deductive, it would, because of its nature and scope, teach the reader some history as well as sweep him or her along with an unfolding narrative. Few historical novelists do this as well as Amitav Ghosh who invests his vast learning at the service of his powers as a great storyteller. His *River of Smoke* in this way engages with the extensive sweep of history, in particular the convoluted chain of events that paved the way for the first Anglo-Chinese opium war of 1838, without ever letting the reader to forget the ways in which these headline facts had myriad and disastrous ramifications for millions of individual human lives.

After a chaotic opening in Mauritius, most of the novel is set in Canton. It is here that the novelist scrutinises the power struggle between the Chinese authorities, who doggedly pursue their determination to stamp out the opium trade in China, and the British and other merchants whose opium-laden ships converge on the city of Canton. By focussing on the cynical pursuit of self-interest by the British who make vast profits out of drug-trafficking, the novelist places the novel squarely in the anti-colonial tradition. However, Ghosh is too intelligent a writer to get on his moral high horse. His novel is not a furious tirade against drug-trafficking or against the hypocrisies of the colonisers, but it is a depiction of a panoramic history, rich in period detail and peopled with plausible characters.

This sheer accumulation of material does on some occasions in *River of Smoke* appear to burst the seams of fictional form. The storyline can get lost amid the overwhelming interest and foregrounding of its context. In *Sea of Poppies*, the heaviness of the novel's past-world was counterpointed by several tenacious and focalizing storylines: a Raja vulgarised as a common prisoner, a young Hindu widow escaping from being immolated with her husband's body, a black American sailor passing as white, and so on. Bahram's story in *River of Smoke* doesn't show the same dynamism, although some strands of plot left over from the first book are picked up. The Raja, for example, escaped and, while in disguise, finds work as Bahram's munshi or secretary – but these strands never quite recover the verve of their first appearance.

4.5. Geopolitics

Geopolitics refers to the way a country's size, position etc., influence its power and its relationship with other countries. On one level, the novel that emerges from this constructive geopolitics is an impressive feat of research, animating the hybrid customs of food and dress and the contending

philosophies of the period with cultured and delicate precision; on the other it is a factious act of empathy, viewing a whole panorama of world history from the "fallacious" and marginal point of the historical perspective. However, from the point of view of the narrative it is a real strategy which is also fabulously entertaining. Ghosh gives the reader an awesome measure of information concerning opium trade, Asian art, Chinese customs, painted gardens, bird's nest soup, trade and diplomacy, the transport of live plants across the globe, and Napoleon. The narrator provides all this information in the context of an intriguing plot set against the backdrop of episodes leading to the First Opium War (1839-1842) and makes the story very palatable to the reader.

4.6. Anti-imperial Vision

Some reviewers have commented on the novel that it reads like a crossbreed between a Capt. Hornblower tale and a Victorian epistolary novel. However, the novel's distinctly anti-imperial perspective subverts both types. Yet, what is more obvious is that the novel retrieves a story appropriated for long by those hardy and adventurous lot who ultimately turned out to be conquerors - those who forced their will on foreign lands, subdued or uprooted their denizens, replaced their agriculture with detrimental cash-crops and thrust harmful poisons on them for profit. They imposed all this with the power of the gun and masked their heinous deeds by rhetoric of civilization and culture, and most ridiculously posing themselves as agents of divine purpose. And yet Ghosh masks his vehemence by averting needless earnestness, easing his narrative with nuggets of data and insight, from the Uighur sources of the Indian samosa to the role of Canton in fashioning a common sense of an Indian national identity among disparate trades.

Possibly there is most befitting and judicious delay executed in the movement of the plot, as the Canton opium traders are prohibited from disposing of their cargo. The readers are made to await new developments in the deadlock between the Chinese authorities and the forces of Free Trade. Bahram's fate is his utter helplessness in the face of adverse developments. He is a gifted entrepreneur, intelligent, resilient and capable. Yet, he is also a puny little man, at the mercy of the forces of history and politics. He is shown to be the most disadvantaged person, both in terms of the uncompromising hierarchies of the Parsi community in Bombay, where he is a lowly son-in-law in an affluent family; and in terms of his affinity with the Canton foreign traders. The novel subtly acknowledges that the nuances of condescension and exclusion can work out its procedures in the unique world of the foreign trading enclave, and in this pre-Indian Rebellion time of race relations.

4.7. Globalisation

Ghosh's books have often reminded the readers that globalisation is not something that is suddenly discovered in the twenty-first century. He has demonstrated for instance, the links between the medieval merchants of the Nile and India which was the backdrop to his finest novel *The Glass Palace*. Emigration and commerce are the tides on which his characters are carried this way and that to adventure and abstention, adversity and advantage, prosperity and misfortune, and failure and achievement.

Seth Bahram Modi is presented as a self-made man and the most successful and acknowledged Parsi merchant in Fanqui town. Bahram's ship, the *Anahita*, is built in Bombay by Parsi shipbuilders, which Ghosh tells us is a lustrous and elegant

three-master that competes with the swiftest American and British built opium carriers. Bahram lives life to the full: he eats well, dresses well and can claim to have met Emperor Napoleon who was imprisoned by the British at St. Helena along with his Armenian friend Zadig. Unlike other Indians in Canton who crave for Indian food and make a long bee-line to Asha-didi's boat for some Indian dishes, Barrie Moddie, as the Westerners call him, is shown to enjoy all the local delicacies including sugar-cane sweetened caterpillars.

4.8. The Orientation of a Historian and a Novelist

The arguments in the above pages demonstrate that a novelist's relation to the past is entirely different from that of the historian's. The work of a historian can commence only with a concept of a recoverable past for the simple reason that a historian necessarily has a sense of responsibility to this past. However, a novelist perceives this past through the eyes of his characters because his responsibility is to the characters he has created. The task before a novelist is to recreate their experience as faithfully as possible. The implication is that the author ignores certain kinds of historical material. For instance, the author would hardly pay any attention to secular inclinations in cotton prices over a period, say, one hundred years. However, he has of course to pay a close scrutiny to abrupt fluctuations in price, and also he has to try to make an appraisal of the way his characters would possibly respond to them. Owing to this difference in perspective, the historian's past could have more wholeness of sweep than that of the novelist's. Charles Tomlinson's a little poem titled "Swimming the Chenango Lake" can illustrate the difference. The poem has two parts thematically. The swimmer initially stands on the bank of the river and reads the water's "wealth of ways", 'a water' which "is a consistency, the grain of pulsating flow". The poem begins with the image of the light and movement on the surface of the lake and the reflection of clouds on it, likening the water to a crumbled silk. The opacity of the element, its resistance and its constant movement are highlighted. The swimmer then leaps into water, "scissors the waterscape apart/ And sways it to taters". Now he understands that "to swim is to take hold/ On water's meaning, to move in its embrace/ And to be, between grasp and grasping free". The difference between a historian's perspective and that of the novelist is like the difference is between observing the autumnal water from the shore and experiencing it from within the waters. The subject of the two actions i.e. observation and participation is the same in both cases. However, a swimmer, has, at every moment a million different choices.

4.9. On the Issue of Inhabiting a Past Setting

To inhabit a place is to be able to look at it, to experience it through one's five or more senses, breathe its odours, to consume its foods, to nourish one's eyes on its sights, hear its multifarious voices, to experience the cuddling caress of its breeze and many more. The novel as a form is marvellously capacious enough to accommodate just anything. In a historian's study of trade, there is no place for banquets and gardens. However the novelist confronts no such restrictions. If these are aspects of his characters' experience then they all legitimately belong to the work. The immense resource of the past and the present offers infinite variety of details. It is left to the discretion of the author what is to be included and what is to be discarded.

The old foreign enclave in Canton which is the material world of the *Ibis* Trilogy is a lost, utterly unfamiliar world. This

world was particularly visually and otherwise a mixture of an extraordinary range of styles, influences, and tastes, which even astonished experienced travellers. History tells us that this foreign enclave was destroyed in 1856 and it was never reconstructed. A new foreign concession was created, on a reclaimed mud bank under completely different circumstances, after European domination had been firmly established. Since the former foreign enclave had been founded under a different dispensation, in order to make it habitable, the author had to recreate it, layer-by-layer. Here Ghosh relied on a remarkably detailed visual record of the foreign enclave left behind by the Chinese and British artists who worked there. The author possibly may have included what might have interested him.

Shortly after the ending of novel's actions we are informed about the historical details of the First Opium War when British gunboats enforced a treaty opening Chinese ports to international trade to tell the reader what it all added up to and what its consequences were:" For nearly forty years, British merchants led on by East India Company, have been driving a trade in violation of the highest laws...The course has been pushed so far as to derange its currency, to corrupt its officers, and ruin multitudes of its people...All ranks from the Emperor, to the people of the humblest ranks, have felt its sting" (537). This and other umpteen validations from historical records somehow succeed in taking the reader back inside the chaos of a time to experience it again in the present. The author's grasp of the detail of the period is so exhaustive that readers cannot possibly recall all the things he displays to them, not the least to hold on to all the life-stories of all the characters he introduces. Both *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* teem with cabinets of curiosities, crowded with particulars that hold a story of their own. In an interview with the author, he asserted that "the principal reason why storytellers turn to the past is because history is replete with compelling human predicaments"(An interview with Amitav Ghosh).

4.10. Provision to Multiplicity of Voices

The author ensures that multiplicity of voices is not suppressed to let a single voice dominate in the novel. Just as in the *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh's *River of Smoke* is loaded with characters, their jargons, their slangs, and cross-cultural currents. The diction that history's marginalised lot employ makes the novel sound very authentic. However, the author does not let them drive the novel, though they add certain flavour to it. For instance, pidgin, local patois and slang are employed to make semblance of reality. The number of aliases that some of the characters have is another riveting facet of this book. Europeans might dominate Fanqui town, but Ghosh ensures that subaltern voices are heard as loudly as that of their masters. Equally audible is the loud and clear voice of the Chinese mandarins, especially that of the High Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu, who is sent to Canton with a specific injunction to put an end to the opium trade which is costing China dear. Ghosh's respect and admiration for Commissioner Lin at times culminates in breathless awe.

4.11. On the Question of Affective Bonds

The success of the narrative is in establishing certain relation between the affective bonds that the author cultivates for his characters and those the novels cultivate with readers. These bonds often go beyond religious, social or cultural divisions. There are the historians like Natalie Zemon Davis and Jonathan Spence who have spoken very powerfully about

emotions. Generally affect is an aspect of the past that is more easily accessible to the novelist than to the historian. It is often not very desirable for the professional historian to make allowance for the emotions, and intimate interpersonal relationships which at times drive historical events. We cannot also categorically state that affect has little effect on history. For instance, it is a fact that emotion sometimes plays a critical role in events. Hence its total exclusion leads to incomprehensibility of certain important events.

The First Opium War, was an event with far-reaching consequences for the world. There were some amazing facts about Canton and the first Opium War. The foreign enclave in Canton was considerably a small place. It becomes clear from the standard historical accounts of the war that the war was a product of a "deep" history and it was actually set in motion by a small number of players, in the span of a few months. Yet, there the so called objective account seemed contradictory and incoherent and it was impossible to make sense of what exactly had transpired. This is where an author can resuscitate the picture seeking what the actors were doing and saying from moment to moment. It is then that the scene would emerge which easily accommodates a group of people who are hectoring, lying, wooing, bullying, and jockeying for advantage. Ghosh has only supplied the missing links and allowed the characters to invent themselves.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, the novel's strength lies in how thoroughly Ghosh blends his historical research with his fictional fantasy. Each new situation that he presents and each new character he develops is made integral and appears best in all their sensual freshness. The judgements of historians concerning opium trade are judiciously deferred. When the novel documents an unsavoury episode and era, with addiction, smuggling, exploitation, trade barriers and penetration, gunboat diplomacy, cannons and cottage industries and huge economic engines, there is a tendency to lapse the story of this ugly opium trade into certain moralising post-hoc gloom. Ghosh's historical perceptions are generally rendered deftly, without any of the haranguing effect of reflective moralism. It is true that writer's sympathy for the Chinese authorities is definitely revealed in the narrative. However, there is no trace of senseless lament for the loss of past purity. Instead, the novel is an enthusiastic tragicomedy enacted before the readers' imagination. The writing relies on cultural history coming down on the side of the rich intimacy of the hybridity born of cultural contact, of ports and traders, of the legitimization or bastardisation of language in port and pidgin slang, and of sexual encounters that obliterate "the shadow lines" of race and convention.

The novel rekindles a little-known chapter of colonial cultural history that seem to have some bearing on our globalized present considering China's muscular new financial and mercantile presence on the global stage: the intricate bonds of trade, a rapidly emerging China, the West's imperialist weltanschauung challenged, the rising of globalised ethical consciousness. What *Sea of Poppies* lacked in artistry, this novel whipped up with the unsullied craftsmanship of its storytelling. In *River of Smoke*, by contrast, Ghosh seems to be overcome by sights and smells of 1830s Canton. He is at home in his own narrative ecosystem, and we can only hope that in volume three, Ghosh finds his new bearings in yet another voyage of the *Ibis*.

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