

Cultural and Historical Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a prominent writer of present times. In his writings, Ghosh deals with the effects of colonialism on contemporary societies and cultures. By depicting the modern postcolonial situation, he problematizes the dominant discourse of culture and history. My paper proposes to examine and explore the cultural and historical identity in *River of Smoke* from the perspective of postcolonialism. He is considered an iconic figure in English Literature owing to his singular and unorthodox perception of history. Historical identity is a reservoir of past events and incidents. One of those historical incidents is the Opium War (1839-42), which has been dealt extensively by Amitav Ghosh in *River of Smoke* (2011) in sequential manner. In his fiction, Ghosh meticulously deals with many things: the troubled legacy of colonial knowledge and discourse about formerly colonized societies and ideas, the ambivalent relationship to modernity of the so-called developing or 'Third World', and the formation and reformation of identities in colonial and post-colonial societies. The main purpose of this research paper is to examine in detail about the postcolonial traits with specific reference to the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: River, Smoke, Identity, Postcolonial

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011) is the second volume of his Ibis trilogy two others are *Sea of Poppies* and *Flood of Fire*. In *River of Smoke* historical events regarding to the opium trade with China are described in detail. The main plot of *River of Smoke* is set in Fanqui town, situated on a small piece of land used by merchants from other countries to transact business with local Chinese traders. The novel's story begins before one year of Opium trade. In this novel Ghosh has created a rich and colourful cast of characters drawn from diverse geographical, cultural and historical backgrounds whose common interest is to make money by doing trade with China. The novel's plot is set in Fanqui town, situated on a small piece of land used by merchants from other countries to transact business with local Chinese traders. When the story begins the time is a year before of the first opium war.

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At the opening of the novel three ships namely *Redruth*, *Anahita* and *Ibis* from *Sea of Poppies*- run into a raging storm off the coast of Canton, the Chinese port city. The ship, *Anahita* is owned by Bahram Moddie who is a son-in-law of Rustamji Mistrrie, a Parsi Opium trader of Bombay. The other ship, *Redruth* is owned by Fitcher Penrose who is on an expedition to collect rare species of plants from China, and the last ship, *Ibis*, is carrying convicts and indentured labourers to Mauritius. On board the *Ibis* are the two convicts Neel Ratan, a Bengali Zamindar, and Ah Fatt, a criminal from Canton who is half-Chinese and half-Parsi, addicted to opium and the only son of Bahram Moddie. Both escape from the ship along with many lascars.

River of Smoke is a voluminous novel of over five hundred and fifty pages and it's divided into three parts - Islands, Canton, Commissioner Lin - with eighteen chapters and more than twenty major characters. The naming of the tripartite division in this novel, *River of Smoke* denotes that the theme of the novel goes from the whole to the part, from the margin to the centre.

River of Smoke transports the traders to the opium market place with the clipper ship *Anahita*, owned by Bahram Moddie, a Parsi Bombay businessman which is secretly loaded with the illegal cargo of opium. The Chinese authorities are trying to prevent illegal imports of drugs from many countries' traders, as this drug has inflicted a plague of addiction on the population of China. In the words of Professor Banibrata Mahanta:

British opium trade with China is a surprisingly under represented area of inquiry. At the same time, it is of considerable significance in understanding the character and thrust of British colonialism. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis*-trilogy is a fictional attempt to chronicle this area. His *River of Smoke*, the second novel in the *Ibis*-trilogy, continues from where *Sea of Poppies* concluded. From the growing and readying of opium for trade to the uneasy logic of how Indian labourers were indentured, the story of the second book takes on from the procurement of opium in India to generating and consolidating a market for selling it in China. If unforgettable characters took the centre stage in the first part of the trilogy, in *River of Smoke*, issues are of primary significance. (Mahanta 2011: 154-155)

The novel starts with the narrative of Deeti, a character of *Sea of Poppies*, who is now an old woman, recounting to her grand children about her past life. She tells them about the great storm which they faced in their past life during their sailing to Mauritius in 1838 as migrants, and how the five crew members, one passenger and two convicts disappeared. Deeti tells them regarding the shrine which is related to her and how she saw a vision during the storm to see that the disappeared members were all well and alive.

There is a difference between a novelist using historical material and a historian using the same: even when they use the same materials, their points of entry are very much far

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apart. The "River" in the novel, *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 this 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 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." (RS 550-551)

River of Smoke advances the story with the same characters who are found in *Sea of Poppies*, from Kolkata to Canton (now called Guangzhou) on the Pearl River delta, to China's emporium. The tale of this novel 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 Kolkata and Bombay, to Hong Kong and Canton, and even include a flashback vignette of St Helena and a meeting with its most historical resident, Napoleon Bonaparte.

The part one of the novel *Island*, starts with a description about Deeti's shrine which was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius. Ghosh correctly writes about Deeti:

The Colver farm was across the bay and towards the end of Deeti's life, when her knees were stiff with arthritis, the climb up the shrine was too much for her to undertake on her own: she wasn't able to make the trip unless she was carried up in her special pus-pus . . . (RS 03)

The detail about Deeti's religious beliefs in her earlier life is part of her cultural identity. Many of her beliefs, works and values derive from her cultural background where religion and deities play an important role. Deeti was desperate to go for a pilgrimage to the shrine even though she was suffering since a long time from arthritis because she is intensely religious. There are other religious elements also that are important in her life like the worship of Gods and Goddesses.

The Creole and the mixture of Bhojpuri become Deeti's personal idioms of expression during her pilgrimage, and so she uses a mixture of languages. Some mixed expressions are, Bhojpuri and Creole that become her personal idiom of epression: 'Revey-te! E Banwari; e Mukhpyari! Revey-te na! Hagle ba? (RS 4) Here Deeti is praying to God, Krishna.

Here she is telling her family members about her past life's incidents, how she was rescued by Kalua, her second husband, and how there were difficulties in her journey with Kalua. She gives birth to a male baby namely Girin by her second husband, Kalua. Deeti tells to her son, 'Looks, she said to her son: dekh-he is here, with us, your father. There is nothing to fear; he is by our side. . . That was how she began to draw the first of her pictures: it was a large-life-size image of Kalua. (RS 12) She tells them about Kalua that he was a very

brave and fearless man who always supported her in her problems and that she also like him. Deeti's separation from the Kalua is also described:

It had happened, they all knew, when Deeti and Kalua were on the Ibis, making the Crossing, from India to Mauritius with scores of other indentured workers. Bedevilled from the start, the misfortunes of the voyage had culminated with Kalua being sentenced to death for a simple act of self-defence. But before the penalty could be administered a storm had arisen, engulfing the schooner and allowing Kalua to escape in a lifeboat, along with four other fugitives. (RS 13)

Deeti is in a way documenting the past accidents of her life which happened during the crossing from India to Mauritius with Kalua and some more passengers. She is writing about three other Indian people, 'You can imagine the effect this had on us three Hindustani! Your grandfather and Jodu and I all thought Serang was making gadhas out of us'. (RS 23)

This novel is set mainly in the islands of Canton, which in the modern-day are called Guangzhou and Hong Kong. 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 of the Chinese, 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.

We should take cognizance of Ah Fatt's other name Freddy as this signifies the duality of his identity. Ah Fatt is rarely used by Bahram Moddie; he always calls him Freddy, a non-Chinese name. Ah Fatt's real identity was based on the area he was born in. Thus in China he was called by his Chinese name - Ah Fatt and in India and some other places he was called Freddy and Fremji Moddie.

Paulette Lambert and Fitcher Penrose discuss about the identity of Pierre Lambert, the father of Paulette. Her uncle was Paul Lambert, a professional botanist. She tells him about him, 'It is the work of my . . . my uncle. He was a botanist and he taught me everything I know. Alas he died before he could finish the manuscript, so he left it to me' (RS 44). Once again he begins to stammer and stutter, 'Why, sir . . . he was the brother of my father . . . so I . . . I am his nephew, Paul Lambert. His daughter, Paulette, is my cousin.' (RS 44)

As already mentioned, the novel *River of Smoke* is set during the opium trade of the early nineteenth century. Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is a voyage through epic power struggles between the East and the West—a complex history that continues to resonate throughout the world. The first novel of this *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, took readers to the Ganges and Kolkata, where the seductive opium commodity was cultivated and processed. The cast of characters included Neel Ratan Halder, a pampered raja convicted of embezzlement; Paulette

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Lambert, a French orphan masquerading as a deckhand; and Deeti, a widowed poppy grower fleeing her homeland with her lover, Kalua. Continuing their sagas while introducing intriguing new characters, *River of Smoke* takes us to the opium marketplace via the clipper ship *Anahita*, which is secretly loaded with perhaps the most valuable cargo ever to leave India, and the *Redruth*, adapted to Paulette carrying Frederick “Fitcher” Penrose, who is determined to track down China’s priceless horticultural treasures.

River of Smoke wanders through the gateways between various dimensions of cosmopolitan existence around the Pearl River during the years leading up to the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century. In this novel the city of Canton, which is situated on the banks of the Pearl River, becomes the representation of a cosmopolitan multicultural society. In a letter Robin writes to Paulette: “I have the impression that the village is to the Pearl River what Budge Budge is to the Hooghly – a ramshackle cobbily-mash of godowns, bankshalls and customs-khanas.” (RS 179) In Canton, the Indian opium traders like Bahram Modi and his munshi, Neel Rattan adapt to a new multi-culture. The opium trade in China brings together Indians and British traders with the Chinese; and Neel Rattan and Ah Fatt, son of Bahram Moddie get involved in this opium trade. Both make their appearance in this novel. Ah Fatt’s parents belong from two different culture, so he is half-Parsee and half-Chinese likely mixed-kind-boy. At the centre of the opium trade is Bahram Moddie, who is a frequent visitor to China. Amitav Ghosh follows this trend of writing, where he writes in English but makes the language his own in his writings. Salman Rushdie further suggests that:

Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to the Indian themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we can’t simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free. (Rushdie 17)

Amitav Ghosh writes about a multicultural world in his writing where the birth of a new language becomes essential. To represent such a society Amitav Ghosh uses the new language that emerged by mixing different languages.

Amitav Ghosh in both novels like *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, shows globalization and cosmopolitanism through trade and travel, and movement to different parts of the world either as indentured labourers or for trading. He shows in his novels that how different cultures mix to create a multicultural society or community, in the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* and in the multicultural society in the Fanqui town in *River of Smoke*. In the course

of this, Amitav Ghosh presents a vivid blend of different languages. Though he focuses on the opium trade in India in his *Sea of Poppies* and in China in *River of Smoke*, it seems as though he has brought the whole world within this narration.

River of Smoke concentrates more on opium trade and how it remained the root cause of the financial bankruptcy in India and China. Ghosh introduced certain new subaltern characters namely Ah Fatt, an illegitimate son of a rich Parsi opium trader Baharm Modi and a Chinese boat woman in Canton Chei Mei. He symbolizes the pathetic conditions of Chinese opium addicts who lose their life and belongings because of the illegal flow of opium inside China. The horrific life of Ah Fatt is exposed when he speaks about his useless and aimless life to his life-long friend, Neel. For him there is no value for Canton fishermen boy inside China, “What use was calligraphy to him when boat people were banned by law from sitting for Civil Service examinations?” What was to do with boxing and riding lessons when boat-people were barred even from building houses ashore? She wanted him to grow up like any boat-child, learning to fish and sail and handle boats. (RS 89) During this period Bahram meets one of his old friends namely Zadig Karabedian. They had met each other during the course of his successful business twenty-three years ago in Canton. Ghosh writes:

“Zadig was a watchmaker by trade and travelled often to various ports in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, to sell clocks, watches, music boxes and other mechanical devices.” (RS 64)

By his origin Zadig was Armenian but his family had settled later in Egypt. Being a professional traveller he was fluent in many languages, including many Hindustani languages too. Ghosh describes the encounter between the two in the following manner, “They were both in their mid-thirties and they discovered, to their great surprise, that they had more in common than would seem reasonable for two men who had grown up continents apart.” (RS 66)

Ah Fatt grows up and learns about his parents and his family in Bombay. He also knows about his father’s personal ship *Redruth*. Ah Fatt, Freddy is resentful about his father because he did not take him along to India and tells Neel about him: “I wait until Uncle Barry come next time, and when alone, I ask: Is true you are Father, and Yee Ma is Mother? At first he say, no, not true. But I ask again, and again, and then he begin to cry and admit everything” (RS 90). Amitav Ghosh writes how Ah Fatt continues telling Neel about his father:

When Father come, I say: take me, take me to your ship, and he turn red, shake head. He afraid if he take me then ship will carry news back to Bombay. Elder Wife will find out about me and there will be trouble. Ship not his, he tell me; belong to father-in-law and brothers-in- law. He like paid servant and must be careful. (RS 91)

Amitav Ghosh has therefore used Bahram Moddie as a peg to hang many identities. In fact, he is very much aware of the role that his identities are playing in India and when he reaches Chinan taking to his business. He changes his name, and his language and actions denote a self-consciousness of the identities that shift and change according to situations as he moves to different nations and cultures.

After escaping from the ship to Canton, Neel Rattan and Ah Fatt are looking to reconfigure their identities. The most obvious marker is their physical appearance and so they decide to visit the weekly clothes market in the Chulia Kampong, where they buy shoes and clothes to make their a new identity by dress.

The illicit romance between Chi-mei, second wife of Moddie and Bahram Moddie was strong enough to defy ethnic, linguistic and cultural barriers. The image that comes to Bahram's mind when he is endangered is that of Chi-mei rather than his lawful wife Shireenbai, a wealthy daughter of businessman and his daughters in Bombay. This 'lob pidgin' love story between Chi-mei, a Chinese woman and Bahram Moddie clearly asserts that language and culture prove no insurmountable barriers as far as human bonding is concerned. It is because of this that he becomes in the words of Robert Chinnery 'one of the great personages of Fanqui-town and a splendid figure'. (RS 215)

In Port Louis, it is during his visit to the Botanical Gardens at Pamplemousses that Penrose meets Miss Paulette who is working there in order to take care of her father's professional loving botanical garden. They talk to her about his relationship with Fitcher, the father of Paulette. Ghosh writes:

It had happened over thirty years ago, when Fitcher was on his way back to England after his first voyage to China. The journey had been a difficult one: his old-fashioned 'plant-cabin' had been damaged in a hailstorm; the plants had been spattered with seawater and battered by winds. Having already lost half his collection, he had made the journey to Pamplemousses in a state of despair. But there, in one of the storage sheds near the garden's entrance, he had made the acquaintance of Pierre Lambert: he'd removed a few panels from the casing of an old wooden trunk and replaced them with panes of thick glass. He gave Fitcher two of these cases and would accept no payment. (RS 58-59)

Certainly the above paragraph is the depiction of the creation of a new kind of space that was made possible due to colonialism. Here the sense of discovery had dispersed many curious men of intellect over the length and breadth of the empire. In fact there were many empires and their citizens criss-crossed each other.

At many places in this novel there are discussions about the history, culture and identity, practices of the Chinese. In fact there is constant stereotyping of the Chinese as a nation and about their cultural identity. Vico, Moddie's personal assistant, discusses the genesis of the opium trade and blames the Chinese themselves as responsible for it 'because there is so much money to be made, there is sure to be a lot of corruption.' (RS 228)

Amitav Ghosh concentrates on the opium trade to depict how it became the root cause of changes in the trade between China and India. Thus its role in the formation of the two nations has been highlighted by me in this paper. Furthermore, *River of Smoke* succeeds in emphasizing that mobility and travelling, commerce and trade as well as the various types of migration in each character's life are facts of colonial history that have exerted their own influence in shaping new and emerging identities.

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