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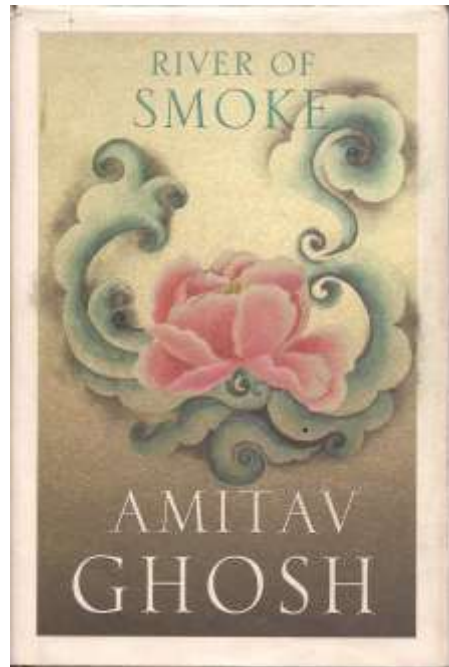
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## Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

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‘If there is a distinctive genre known as Indian Writing in English, then Amitav Ghosh is perhaps its most scholarly practitioner. Ghosh is a traveler in the physical as well as the metaphysical, a writer of formidable learning and intelligence’. (The Shadow Links)

### **Amitav Ghosh and His Works**

Amitav Ghosh, the contemporary literary master and a writer concerned with India’s place in larger international cultural networks, has been winning prestigious awards practically since he began to write. Right from his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to *Sea of Poppies* (2008) there is not a single novel which didn’t get an award. The Indian Government has also bestowed on him one of India’s highest honours, Padma Shri award in 2007. His classic style of weaving exhilarating narratives with a bit of pedagogy is what lends his writings their unmistakable appeal. He weaves indo-nostalgic elements in his unique and personal topics enriched with heavier themes.

### ***River of Smoke***

Ghosh’s latest (seventh) novel, *River of Smoke*, is the second in his proposed ‘Ibis Trilogy’. The two Novels *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* are set in and around the Indian Ocean just prior to the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. *Sea of Poppies* took us along the poppy fields of the Ganges where opium is grown and processed, while *River of Smoke* explores the streets of China where the opium is sold. But the amazing thing is that both of these are individual books that can be read on their own. As Amitav Ghosh himself says:

‘I never thought of it as a linear trilogy going from one to the other. When I started, I had no idea what would happen in the second book, just as now I have no idea what will happen in the third. It would actually be impossible to think about all that in your head.’ (Untitled Books, 44)

While writing *River of Smoke*, Ghosh got inspired by the *Alexandria Quartet* written by British writer Lawrence Durrell, because each of the four books of that tetralogy had a ‘tangential relationship with the other’. (Staff Reporter, July 02, 2011)

### ***Sea of Poppies***

Both books contain a kaleidoscope of characters, cultures and places. A masterpiece of Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* was ambitiously large in its ambition and narrative span. The novel was set between India and Mauritius, with a cast of Indians, Americans, Chinese and French who find themselves aboard a ship called the Ibis sailing across the Indian Ocean. Many were indentured labourers - unskilled workers who had sold themselves to work for years on the Mauritian sugar cane plantations in return for food, clothing and lodging. A storm alters their course, and *River of Smoke* takes up where that novel left off, following the travellers to the crowded harbours of China and the trading town of Canton. Some of the characters who were on the Ibis can be found in the *River of Smoke*, which commences with a setting in Mauritius before moving to Canton where it stays almost until the end.

### **Manchu Empire as the Backdrop of *River of Smoke***

*River of Smoke* conjures up Canton, around 1838-39, particularly the foreign merchants’ enclave and the Pearl River, both inextricably linked to the opium trade. The story revolves around the mucky opium trade operations and how that affected the lives in the multi-cultural, opportunistic town where life bustles at a maddening rate. In a way, the story is set against the backdrop of the Manchu Empire waking up to the economic and social damage caused by the opium trade and trying to ban import of the drug while the western powers who owed so much of their wealth to it, resist the move in the name of free trade. As British traders shamelessly import the drug inside China and the unsuspecting people become addicted to it, the government struggles to put an end to this illegal trade. Amitav Ghosh, in a sense, invites you to be a spectator to the events that lead to the first Anglo-Chinese Opium War (1839-42), which had far-reaching economical, cultural and political repercussions in the East.

### **Learning from Opium Trade and Opium War**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

History of opium trade in China tells us that under the system established by the Qing dynasty to regulate trade in the 18th century, Western traders were restricted to conducting trade through the southern port of Canton (present day Guangzhou). Despite these restrictions, both sides learned how to make profits by cooperating with each other. As the volume of trade grew, however, the British demanded greater access to China's markets. Tea exports from China grew and these were done in exchange for silver.

Concerned that the trade was draining silver out of England, the British searched for a different commodity to trade for tea and porcelain. They found it in opium, which they planted in large quantities in India (Depicted in detail in *Sea of Poppies*). British merchants blamed the restrictions of the Canton trade for the failure to export enough goods to China to balance their imports of tea and porcelain. Repeated efforts were made by the British which resulted in failure. But the opium trade was so vast and profitable that all kinds of people, Chinese and foreigners, wanted to participate in it. So, opium flooded the country despite imperial prohibitions.

*River of Smoke* ends exactly on 06 July 1839. The novel's ending of just a day before the first riot began in Kowloon (07<sup>th</sup> July) clearly signifies that Ghosh wanted his readers to acquaint themselves with the what and why of the War, not the war itself. It's really surprising that the blood soaked history of this area is never evoked by historians. Ghosh himself says,

"Opium trade accounted for one-fifth of India's revenue (around 1839). But for some strange reason, this part of Indian history is missing from history books. I wanted to document it." (Chatterjee)

### **History with Minute Details**

Having all the qualities of a good historical novel, *River of Smoke* shows us history with every minute detail. From the fast crabs to the bribing of officials, from the kitchen boats to the newly formed families of the traders, from the Chinese Repository to the Canton Register, from the opium addicts to the High Commissioner Lin Zexu, from the formation of Chinese names to the nicknames of collective foreigners by the Chinese, Ghosh has very minutely depicted everything that happened in and around Canton while the Chinese emperor was determined to rid his

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

country of the opium plague; and while the British traders tried desperately to defend the financial engine of colonialism.

### **Central Story**

The story revolves around Seth Bahramji Naurozji Modi, a rich Parsi merchant, who sets sail from Bombay to Canton in China, with the largest consignment of opium in his 30 years of the trade. Despite his wife's superstitions, rumours of impending trouble in China and losing nearly 300 crates of opium in a storm, Bahram continues his journey and sails to Canton with a boatload of raw opium with which he hopes to enrich his ever-growing fortune. Apart from earning money and respect as a big businessman, he does this to meet his estranged half-Chinese son, Ah Fatt. But the authorities in China are trying to halt the illegal import of the drug and so his cargo must wait, along with that of the other, mainly British, traders in the waters just off the coast. As the Chinese authorities tighten the noose around the drug trade by preventing opium-carrying vessels from plying along Canton's Pearl River, Bahram desperately tries to find a way into the Chinese market. He is forced to choose between the good and the evil, between his love for Canton and his sense of obligation to family and investors in Bombay, and between British opium traders who vouch for 'free trade' and a conscientious American merchant, Charles King. He goes from being one of the most powerful Parsee businessmen in Canton to a desperate smuggler and finally ends as a lonely, helpless man, much like the consumers of the drug he trades in.

### **The City of Canton as the Protagonist of the Story**

However, in spite of the large number of characters, the main protagonist of the story remains the city of Canton - its people, its narrow lanes, its flower boats and opium dens, its markets and maidans and the fanqui town for foreigners. With references from diaries and paintings such as those of George Chinnery's, Ghosh manages to bring out the colour and vibrancy of the ancient trading port.

Fanqui-Town (The foreign merchants' enclave) in Canton was the place where foreigners reinvented themselves amid the rich interaction of commerce and miscegenation. It contained

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

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 laskars.” (*River of Smoke*, 185)

### **Importance of Fanqui Town**

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.

### **Emerging Principles of Free Global Trade**

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

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

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 triumph of Amitav Ghosh is that, as his voyage takes us to the secret recesses of the past, we realize how extraordinary events in history are birthed through the passions of ordinary men.

### **A Variety of Indian and Foreign Characters and a Variety of Speech**

Apart from Bahram Modi, the other characters of the story are as varied as the region, among them the disgraced young Raja, Neel, the Parsi opium trader, Bahram; his bastard Chinese son, Ah Fatt, the Cornish botanist, Penrose 'Fitcher', and the French orphan, Paulette. In fact, Ghosh's book is crammed with jargon, slang, characters and cross-cultural currents. Europeans might be in charge at Fanqui town, but Ghosh makes sure that subaltern voices are also heard, as loudly as that of their masters.

Equally loud and clear is the voice of the Chinese mandarins, especially that of the High Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu. 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 Kreol; Neel's English which is so good that it irritates Bahram (his eventual employer); 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'. (Tharoor, July 10, 2011)

The twisting of tongues energizes all of Ghosh's writing. It allows him to engage with quiet irony upon the political nunning counter to the commonalities forced on them by all of them being sub continentals in China.

### **Pervasive Awareness of Language Issues – Form and Function**

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,

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

Marathi, Kachhi and Konkani; Cantonese Chinese; Portuguese, French, English; Mauritian kreole; and the hybrid that is pidgin. The word ‘pidgin’ is said to have originated from the word ‘business’. There is a dialogue between the Chinese boy Allow (Ah-Lau) and Bahram where the boy says, ‘this time cannot do-pidgin in Canton. Cannot sell. Mister Barry savvy, no-savvy ah?’ (*River of Smoke*, 244) Here, it is clear that ‘pidgin’ means ‘business’, not the language. And ‘savvy’, from the Portuguese verb ‘saber’, means ‘know’.

The dialogue passages in pidgin stretch the readers’ linguistic abilities with an alien syntax all but unrecognizable to native English sensibilities, as in conversations in that idiom. For example, in the scene where young Bahram takes the torn turban cloth of his senior Seth to the Chinese washer woman who later becomes his beloved; the dialogue in pidgin has every reader laughing, wondering, as they gradually understand how languages melt into each other:

‘Mister Barry, chin-chin. What thing wanchi?’

Li Shiu-je have done too much bad thing.’

‘Hai-ah! What thing have done ah?’

‘Have cuttee cloth.’

‘What-place cloth have cuttee ah? Mister Barry can show?’

‘Can. Can.’ (*River of Smoke*, 70)

Immediately after this, profanities begin to pour from angry Bahram’s mouth for his senior in Hindusthani, Bahn. *..od! Mada...od!*

## **Melting Cultures**

Ghosh also tells in detail how the cultures in the town melted into each other. The Indian reader is much surprised to find that the most popular Indian snack ‘samosa’ used to be ‘a Xinjiang specialty called a samsa.’ (*River of Smoke*, 191) The famous editor, critic and former visiting Professor at JNU, New Delhi, Christopher Rollanson comments on the book:

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization



The second part of Ghosh's trilogy is not only an absorbing and rewarding work of fiction: it is also an exploration of communication across linguistic and cultural barriers, across what the text itself calls "apparently unbridgeable gaps of language" (Rollanson, 8-14).

### **Attention to Details**

Ghosh's rapt attention to detail anchors the reader firmly within the world of his story which takes place nearly two centuries ago, and yet mirrors the contemporary moment in vital and uncanny ways. The rhetoric of free trade that is embraced with messianic fervor by the foreign traders in Canton could have been taken directly from current discussions of globalization. And the illusory ideals of liberty and freedom which were called upon to justify the Opium Wars remain with us today in the resurgent ideology of neoliberalism and the imperialistic military interventions of Western powers.

### **We've Always been Global Citizens**

Globalization is mainly a socio-economic term and has become synonymous with the economic development of a country. It is a continuous process through which different societies, economies, traditions and culture integrate with each other on a global scale through means of communication and interchange of ideas. Through *River of Smoke*, we come to have a better understanding of how different people of various countries came into contact with each other through trade; and their cultures and languages got amalgamated.

Amitav Ghosh clearly conveys through the book that people have always been global citizens by being successful traders for centuries. The open mindset of 'men' can be observed in the unusual world of Canton as they dance with each other even when they were not gay. So, the present age cannot be called the only age of globalization. This way, Ghosh reminds us that globalization is not a discovery of our own times, *River of Smoke* lands the reader in an ex era of globalization across oceans and rivers, where people of various cultures, customs and languages meet to do business and get transformed in many ways. As far as 'Indian Writing in English' is concerned,

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization

the book may be seen as a particularly significant instance of the novel ‘mutating from the postcolonial into global’. (Rollanson)

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 7 July 2012

Daisy, Ph.D.

Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* - A Tribute to an Ex-Era of Globalization