

**Opium and the *Tufaan* of (Neo-)Victorian Imperialism:
Review of Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke***

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Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke*

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Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* is a vibrant multiplot novel describing the nineteenth-century Asian subcontinent with creative enthusiasm and deep historical insight. Aspiring to epic dimensions, it is loaded with both historical and imaginary characters from the nineteenth-century past and resembles a typical Victorian canonical novel in terms of its broadness of scope, which attempts to encompass a complete social and intellectual reality. *River of Smoke* imitates the omniscient sweep of the Victorian triple-decker format, while exposing the squalid underbelly of the triangle of the British imperial opium trade spanning several states and provinces of the Asian subcontinent. It is a neo-Victorian literary *tufaan* or storm of sorts, which uproots some of the chosen clichés on British imperialism in India and China. Initially at least, the storm imagery is central to the narrative: it saves the sentenced inmates of the *Ibis* vessel – already featured in Ghosh's earlier novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) – and spoils some of the invaluable opium carried in another ship, Bahram Modi's *Anahita*. It makes the rustic Dheeti perceive that even “a tufaan could have an eye” (p. 19), while the fugitive and convicted zamindar Neel Kanta Halder realises the efficacy of the description of a hurricane in a science journal he read in 1838:

a gigantic oculus, at the far end of a great spinning telescope, examining everything it passed over, upending some things, and leaving others unscathed; looking for new possibilities, creating fresh beginnings, rewriting destinies and throwing together people who would never have met. (p. 20)

The concurrence of Neel's views on the storm with the observations of "a handful of the world's most advanced scientists" (p. 21) symbolically expresses the disruptive, even revolutionary potential energy of hurricanes. It is also a reflection that reads like a metafictional comment on the process of postcolonial hybridisation and 'writing back'. Alternately, in the entire novel this statement functions as a key observation that emphasises Ghosh's intervention in the stable narrative of the imperial opium trade. Despite using the historical records of Commissioner Lin, the pictorial documents left by the Macanese painter George Chinnery, and the official ghettoization of foreign trade, Ghosh alters the flow of history by mining out a typhoon of characters and their multicultural experiences left out of these official histories. Moreover, he is also keen on establishing the 'neo-Victorian' aspect of this nineteenth-century narrative by introducing issues of contemporary relevance like drug-trafficking, globalisation and linguistic hybridity.

The plot is very complex and has multiple characters – it charts out the destinies of characters from the earlier novel like Dheeti, Neel and Paulette, among others, and elaborates the lives of the merchant Bahram Modi, the naturalist Robin Penrose and the artist Robin Chinnery, to mention only the principal few. Their stories are intertwined by the metanarrative of the opium trade, its ups and downs and the ravishing conflict over trading the drug itself. Some of these characters are successful in adapting to such a volatile and confusing environment and survive as the narrative ends (like Dheeti, Neel and Robin), while the towering merchant figure Modi gives up his life. It is a novel with a huge array of minor characters and episodes that link up with these major ones to convey to us the enormity of the Chinese trading world in the nineteenth century.

The novel re-invents the cultural phenomenon of Asian diasporic multiracialism and multiculturalism in one of its very crucial and originary moments in the Asian subcontinent. Its prequel, the much-acclaimed *Sea of Poppies*, displayed similar liberationist impulses by exposing the intricacies,

contradictions and complexities of British oppression in Victorian India, economic plunder re-inforced by the foreign powers, the narrowness and superstition of Indian village communities, casteism, poverty, gender hierarchy, untouchability and the notorious *Kala Paani*. This system ensnared Indian labourers with the promise of a new life and better possibilities elsewhere, but resulted in their being horded aboard ships like animals, as on the *Ibis*, to be exploited as little better than indentured servants, the horrors of which Ghosh describes with both outrage and sympathy. The focus of this sequel is mostly on two other ships, *Anahita* and *Redruth*. The former, a massive opium ship, belongs to one of the central figures in this narrative, a capitalist entrepreneur and drug baron Bahram 'Barry' Modi; the latter is a ship plundering the natural resources of the exotic East, owned by Robin 'Fitcher' Penrose, a British naturalist and a veritable conspirator with imperialism.

The novel explores the various aspects of European imperialism in the Asian subcontinent with an unmitigated rigour and haunting vividness. While on the one hand, Ghosh brings alive the human complexity and colourfulness of the Chinese ports and trading communities, on the other, he does not spare the meanness and hypocrisy of the opium traders and the other so-called vendors profiteering from Western imperialism. This ambivalence is most evident in the representation of the rags-to-riches trader 'hero' Bahram Modi. It is appropriate that one of the main protagonists of this novel is a merchant figure, reinforcing the Victorian ethos of imperialism, mercantile and bourgeois predominance, the novel's many references to the good and evils of the opium trade and *laissez-faire* principles. Modi even manages to procure a member of the so-called aristocratic landed gentry, the Rashakali zamindar from Calcutta, Neel Kanta Haldar, who escapes the *Ibis* during the storm, as his *munshi* (finance manager) under the pseudonym of Anil Kumar Munshi. In a significant aberration, however, this merchant-figure is not a classic British bourgeois gentleman but a downtrodden Parsee boy at the mercy of his rich in-laws. So the narrative is about a Parsee merchant from India mimicking the classic Victorian British overseas merchant – a connection deliberately established to prove India's complicit involvement in the infamous Anglo-Chinese opium trade. With a considerable amount of credibility, the novel traces the rise and decline of Modi, his professional and personal struggles and dilemmas, and his engagement with the increasingly globalised opium

trade. Modi's introduction as a man in a storm-ridden ship, smeared head to toe with opium in its "raw, gummy, semi-liquid state" that makes him feel sudden "nausea and weakness" (p. 33), is suggestive of the troubles that lie ahead for him in Canton. Modi's ship, the *Anahita*, financed by his in-laws, carries not only "the most expensive cargo that Bahram had ever shipped" but also "the single most valuable cargo that had ever been carried out of the Indian sub-continent" (p. 45). Even if Modi's cargo is massive and his venture larger-than-life, he has an inauspicious start, with the storm causing major loss, both financial and emotional, ushered in by the death of his illicit beloved Chi-mei and the disappearance of their love-child, Ah Fatt. In fact, it is not just his mercenary ambition that earlier drove him time and again to Canton, but also his "lob-pidgin" (p. 74) with the widowed boat-girl Chi-mei, the mother of his only son. This affair is precipitated by the "shy, retiring" and "widow-like" behaviour of his "dutiful" yet "unenthusiastic" (p. 48) legal wife Shireenbai, his loneliness abroad and his secret desire for a son for maintaining the promise of futurity and self-perpetuation. The illicit romance between Modi and Chi-mei is strong enough to defy ethnic, linguistic and cultural barriers; indeed, the only image that comes to his mind while he is endangered is that of Chi-mei rather than his lawful wife and daughters. This "lob-pidgin" love story seems to assert that language and culture prove no insurmountable barriers as far as human bonding is concerned.

Modi is hailed as the most prominent and lavish among the opium merchants; in the words of Robert Chinnery, son of the painter George Chinnery, he is "one of the great personages of Fanqui-town and a splendid figure" (p. 215). Yet Modi's trading acumen and mercantile eminence is undercut by a fine sense of irony when his *munshi* Neel describes *Anahita* as a frivolous "pleasure yacht, a rich man's folly" (p. 127), casting doubt over Modi's decision to use it to carry such expensive cargo. While he is one of the few Bombay Seths to resist the British monopoly of opium in the Asian sub-continent (p. 484), he is nonetheless welcomed in the Europe-dominated commercial club of Canton with respect and awe: "he was as much a part of this scene as any foreigner could ever hope to be" (p. 231). His fortunes ultimately dwindle with the Chinese prohibition against the illegal opium trade and the ensuing Anglo-Chinese opium wars, when he recedes to a private world of day-dreaming about his lost lover: "He allowed himself to drift along, on the river of smoke, and when his sleep broke he was amazed

to find that his arms were empty and she was gone.” (p. 301) – which eventually leads to his hallucinatory suicide (p. 546). Modi’s lost son Ah Fatt comes back to him, but even he does not acknowledge Modi’s love, considering him selfish, as when he complains of his treatment by Modi to Neel: “For Father ‘Freddy’ like pet dog. That why he pat and hug and squeeze. Father care only for himself; no one else” (p. 144). On the contrary, it is Neel who feels secretly guilty of abandoning his own family, while finding Modi’s conduct towards his illegitimate family “not just unusual but quite exceptional for a man of his circumstances” (p. 144). Merchant Modi enjoys the fruits of his labour – good food, lavish costumes, professional prosperity, recognition and leadership – but all of these prove as unstable and elusive as the opium trade, which brings him glory and ignominy in equal measure.

A comparable adventurous spirit is harboured by the typical Victorian British naturalist Penrose travelling in *Redruth*. His agenda is to tap the exotic natural resources of China and make them saleable and popular in the Occidental world: “[China] – a country singularly blessed in its botanical riches, being endowed not only with some of the most beautiful and medicinally useful plants in existence, but also with many that were of immense commercial value” (p.101). This imperialistic plunder of colonial territories underscores the omniscient greed of Victorian trading practices and re-inforces Victorian ‘scientific racism’. The exploitation of man and nature, as generated by both the opium trade and the selling of indigenous flora and fauna, brings out the monstrous impositions of Western colonialism, exposing the ‘civilising mission’ as sheer capitalist greed. Apparently innocuous, there is a deep-seated bourgeois covetousness in Penrose’s mind for obtaining the Holy Grail of Chinese nature, the rare flower known as the Golden Camellia, supposedly capable of curing consumption and “account[ing] for an enormous proportion of the world’s trade and one-tenth of England’s revenues” (p.101). In contrast with *Anahita*, the *Redruth* is “an extension of Fitcher’s very being (p. 75) – a sparse, thrifty and angular creation completely devised for profit not luxury. Penrose’s rivalry with the quasi-Scot Veitches and the ‘philistine’ attitude of his two sons, who have no interest in botany and regard plants as “no different from doorknobs, or sausages, or any other object that could be sold for a price on the market” (p. 81), underline the typical bourgeois ambience of the Victorian worldview. Joining him in his mission is the young French

orphan Paulette Lambert from the earlier book. Her French sensibilities at least are very much aware of Penrose's indifferent cruelty towards sea-animals; for example, when a breathing porpoise is found entangled in the sea-net, instead of releasing it, Penrose slaughters it and makes use of its fat. (p. 98). In contrast, the idealistic Paulette, inspired by her naturalist-father Pierre Lambert to believe that "the love of Nature had been a kind of religion, a form of spiritual striving" (p. 78), is genuinely interested in "apprehend[ing] the vital energies that constitute the Spirit of the Earth" (p. 79). Paulette and Penrose are polar opposites in terms of their attitude to Nature: the former represents nineteenth-century French naturalistic idealism, the latter conventional bourgeois practicality and utilitarianism.

Prevented from entering Canton on account of a law forbidding the presence of foreign women, Paulette must content herself with seeing a Chinese painting of the much-talked-about Golden Camellia, while Penrose, following in the footsteps of Sir Joseph Banks and Sir William Kerr, proceeds with his mission and business. Paulette's only hope of gathering knowledge about Canton is Robin Chinnery, her childhood friend and son of the painter George Chinnery, who promises to find the rare flower for her. The irony is weighted heavily against Penrose in the end – not only does his quest prove inconclusive, but in his own lifetime he is never able to enjoy his wealth, being preoccupied with relentless sea journeys: "he had no use for luxuries, and his wealth was a source not of comfort, but of anxiety – it was a burden, like a sack of cabbages that had to be hoarded in the cellar for seasons of scarcity" (p. 79). Another aspect that is brought to light here is Ghosh's particular neo-Victorian emphasis on the lost and suppressed narratives of women like Dheeti and Paulette, whose micro-histories have been previously overlooked by a male-oriented history of the opium trade. They are women who are not very money-minded but victims of a ubiquitous commercialism. Apart from Penrose's single-minded commercial naturalism, the importance of the natural and civilisational wealth of China to the West finds further expression in the commercial popularity of the postal cards containing picturesque snapshots of China, described by Zadig Bey as all the "rage" in Europe (p. 250), and in the practice of painted images of plant life being shipped along with real botanical loot (p. 254).

Ghosh's most outstanding contribution is his treatment of the diasporic environment – both human and geographical. The diversified and chaotic emerging multiculturalism of the "Acha-Hong" and "Fanqui town"

culture is indicative of both the cause and effect of an anachronistic Victorian globalisation ushered in through the trans-national opium trade. This aspect is clearly Ghosh's fictional intervention in the official story of China's refusal to let foreigner's 'mix' with the local population when, in practice, there was ample scope of cultural intermixing and hybridity. The two other major neo-Victorian aspects of this novel are the debate over the efficacy of the opium trade and the globalised multiculturalism ushered in by the worldwide network of imperial trade. The text proves its contemporary relevance by underscoring the mixing of cultures initiated through nineteenth-century imperial trade and its pros and cons. The Victorian opium trade was the most notorious drug-trafficking problem in the nineteenth-century, inviting explicit analogy with contemporary worldwide concerns over drug addiction and abuse, as well as both legal and illegal drug trades, not least the huge profits pharmaceutical companies derive from branded medicines, which often appropriate indigenous plant materials from developing nations. Recently, apart from Ghosh's *Ibis* novels, we notice the emergence of quite a few neo-Victorian historical works that touch on similar issues, for example, the comic series by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell, *From Hell* (1991-96), later made into a film by Hughes Brothers in 2001, featuring a drug-addicted detective, and novels like Kunal Basu's *The Opium Clerk* (2008) and Matthew Pearl's *The Last Dickens* (2009). The banned export and import of cocaine, marijuana and other deadly drugs in the present day can be compared to the conflict over the 'medicinal' uses and major abuses of the drug opium and its monopolistic trade, infiltrating the national identity of the otherwise reclusive Chinese nation, but also viewed as an internal threat to the Empire (for instance, via the spread of opium dens in Britain). Poppy growing was enforced on Indian farmers, much like the indigo plantation described in *Sea of Poppies*, with the opium traded in China to the ruin of its vast and teeming population. The immoral trading practice for individual and collective profit of the Europeans, mainly British, produced a slice of nineteenth-century history rife with immorality, deceit, international co-existence, collaboration, and enmity. Further comparisons with the present-day may be discerned in the author's concern for tracing the contemporary relevance of free trade, democracy and market power. Ghosh implies the democratising powers of free trade, whilst clearly opposing the debilitating exploitations of weaker/developing economies by more powerful capitalist

nations associated with globalisation. For example, the issue of twentieth-century natural despoliation, such as the strip-mining for 'rare earth minerals' in China today so as to empower the West's energy-efficient light bulbs and wind-turbines and furnish missile guidance systems, allusively reinforces his image of hypocritical economic practices.¹

At various points in this tripartite narrative, consisting of three distinct narrative sections, named "Islands", "Canton" and "Commissioner Lin" respectively, there are discussions over the history, consolidation, crisis, benefits and pitfalls of the opium trade. For instance, in the "Canton" section, Vico (Modi's professional left-hand man and assistant) and Modi are seen discussing the genesis of the opium trade and how the Chinese themselves are self-divided as to its continuation, "because there is so much money to be made, there is sure to be a lot of corruption" (p. 228); "Mandarins will not tolerate any change – or else where they will get cumshaw? [...] Those bahn-chahts are the biggest smokers of all" (p. 230). Even when Zadig Bey jibes at Modi for earning his luxurious lifestyle from the selling of opium, something Modi's mother would have found morally objectionable, Modi does not acknowledge his guilty involvement, instead citing his interest in the trade as an instance of clever opportunism which his father-in-law failed to take up, hence losing his business (p. 452). Similarly, when the exiled Emperor Napoleon questions Modi and Zedig Bey about the Chinese reaction to opium, they re-assert the duality of the Chinese response towards it (pp. 171-174); and most of the foreign traders arrogantly attribute the continuous survival of the opium trade to "the marvellous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy" (p. 420) of the Chinese race.

But the official attitude towards the trade as expressed by the Chinese ruling authorities, especially by Commissioner Lin, is quite harsh and unambiguous. Lin, who is otherwise "an incorruptible public servant [...] a scholar and an intellectual [...] memorialized in legend and parable" (p. 424), behaves like a "madman or monster" with "scant regard for human life" (p. 463), when he is ordered by the Chinese Emperor to stop the harmful trade. Similarly, in the formal congregation of opium merchants, the official oppression of the Chinese Manchu is condemned as "heathen" and "tyrannical" (p. 240) and "mankind's natural cupidity" (p. 241) is again asserted as the cause behind the continuation of this devilish trade. The irony is that all these reactions from the merchants badly expose their

individual greed and disregard for public good (p. 466, 543). So when a certain Mr King initiates a public resolution to refrain from the opium trade “fraught with evils, commercial, political, social and moral” and wants to establish “true Christian amelioration” (p. 387), his plea is completely ignored. On the contrary, in several of these consecutive meetings of the foreign opium merchants they fight tooth and nail to establish themselves as “crusader[s] in the cause of Free Trade” (p. 244). Yet with all the violence and difference of opinion it generates, this same vicious trade, in the author’s own words, also contains the seeds of nineteenth-century cultural hybridity and trans-racial togetherness: “The ties of trust and goodwill that bound the Hongists to the fanquis were all the stronger for having been forged across apparently unbridgeable gaps of language, loyalty and belonging” (p. 346). Ghosh’s re-invention of Victorian multiculturalism does not mean that he is comfortable with the ravages wrought by the opium trade which his narrative copiously describes; underlining the harsh truth that cultural hybridity cannot resist exploitation.

However, the richest parts of the novel are those where Robin Chinnery, who confesses to occupying “a privileged point of vantage” (p. 370), offers a picturesque overview of Chinese ports. Different people have varying interpretations about them; for example Modi perceives these brisk and diasporic urban places as a “jungle joke” (p. 61), and his son Ah Fatt speculates that among the Chinese the belief is current that “everything new comes from Canton. Better for young men not to go there – too many ways for them to be spoiled” (p. 145). Robin’s heavily descriptive letters aptly compare the Chinese business world of Canton with that of Calcutta’s topography and culture – a common link being that, under the grip of Victorian imperialism, both were enforcing cultural diversity by virtue of the erasure of boundaries between people from diverse parts of the world (p. 179-85, 206-220). He also notes the constant and paradoxical presence of filth and sin in the city, inevitable outcomes of commercial prosperity and over-population (p. 318, 350). In these (neo)-Victorian globalised trading cities the people experience an inexplicable and “mysterious commonality” (p. 193). Even Neel’s views correspond with those of the young and jovial painter when he observes that “Fungtai Hong was a world in itself, with its own foods and words, rituals and routines: it was as if the inmates were the first inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achhasthan” (p. 192). This enabling of cultural diversity is the most impressive thing about the opium

trade. So for the young Robin the Maidan near Canton's Thirteen Factories "is like watching a mela that never ends, a tamasha to outdo all others in chuckmuckery", always beaming with "brashness and energy" (p. 212, 260).

Another aspect of this world is the vibrant, confusing but exhilarating 'carnavalesque' mix of languages it produces, with the foreign merchants, referred to as "*daaih-baan* or *tai-pans*" (p. 55), conducting their trade in an impure and random mix of English, Portuguese and Hindustani words in a pidgin or patois language (p. 171, 221-224), which prompts the educated and refined Neel to plan a book on the variety of the language of commerce in Southern China (p. 272).² The language issue is as crucial to this novel's celebration of cultural hybridity as it has been to most post-colonial novels about multicultural lives. If Ghosh is interested in suggesting temporal 'mash-ups' effected by neo-Victorianism, he is equally enthusiastic about the issue of linguistic 'chutneyfication' popularised by Salman Rushdie. Neel also feels intrigued by Modi sense of being at ease with an impure language, which came out "in braided torrents of speech, each rushing stream being silted with the sediment of many tongues – Gujarati, Hindusthani, English, pidgin, Cantonese" (p. 221). Words like 'chai' (tea in Cantonese), 'samosa' (a fried snack in Hindusthani) and 'falso' ('fraudulent' or 'false' in Portuguese) expands Neel's lexicon, allowing him to participate in a process of linguistic 'creolization'. Another very general but inescapable feature that Ghosh mentions about the politics of linguistic hybridity in southern China is the preference given to a patois business language over pure Chinese or English. The advantage of using this language was democratically available to all, since it not only comprised Cantonese but also English, Portuguese and Hindusthani words, that is words partially understandable to its various users who were equally reliant on the help of professional interpreters or 'linkisters' (p. 171). Ghosh's utilisation of the impurity of language in the novel itself offers a complex mix of Hindusthani, English and Chinese low life and respectable language.

Again Robin is surprised to discover further cross-country affinities, as the "tutelary spirit" of Canton proves none other than a "bhikkuni from Hindustan"; here also lived the Kashmiri monk Dharmyasa and the most famous Cantonese Buddhist monastery was founded by Bodhidharma, a native of Madras (p. 377). Unfortunately, for both Robin and Neel – the Calcutta-connection and their love for the hybrid culture of Accha Hong are not to be missed – the accommodating and buzzing world of the Accha

Hong and the Thirteen Factories get repeatedly ravished by the pre-opium war violence, such as the cruel public executions of Punhyqua and Allow. Indeed, Robin has a premonition seventeen years earlier of the destruction of this incredible place, depicting it in an 1839 engraving (p. 552). The nostalgic and emotional value of this hybrid world is so attractive to its inhabitants that Neel pays quite a high price to obtain Robin's painting as a manifest memory of a world that brought India and China so closely together and gave so many distraught lives a fresh dimension (p. 553).

River of Smoke is a novel which repudiates the "forces of evil" that "celebrate their triumphal march through history" (p. 553), by supplanting the British Victorian metanarrative of the opium trade with localised micronarratives of people and places ravaged by it. The plot, characterisation and climax of this novel create the impression of immense variety and dizzying chaos similar to the historical context of the opium wars in China; simultaneously they show promise of yet another exciting and erudite sequel to this (neo)-Victorian episode of the nineteenth-century presaging twentieth- and twenty-first-century diaspora, globalisation, multiculturalism and their attendant dangers, such as drug-trafficking, continuing economic exploitation, and armed conflict over resources. Ghosh's biggest success is his ability to trace the right balance between the Victorian historical data and evidence he uses and the neo-Victorian fiction he re-imagines, constructing some resonant and often unsettling continuities and discontinuities with the novel's prequel, leaving scope for more to come. His omniscient grip over the narrative, a partial reversion to Victorian narratorial practices on his part, and the wealth of background historical research, as documented in the elaborate "Acknowledgements" section of the book (see pp. 555-558), prove that the sheer mastery of story-telling of any contemporary historical novelist can still make Victorian history relevant to us.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Charles Keyes, 'With Chinese monopoly, U.S. should create rare mineral reserve', Security Clearance Blog, CNN (U.S. edition), 22 Sep. 2011 (viewed 1 Oct. 2011), <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/09/22/with-chinese-monopoly-u-s-should-create-rare-mineral-reserve/>.

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2. The proposed title of Neel's book is very intriguing: *The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising a Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language of Commerce In Southern China*. In the 'Acknowledgements' section Ghosh notes that Neel "was not so fortunate in stumbling upon Elijah C. Bridgman's *A Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect* (S. W. Williams, Macau, 1841). He subsequently gave up all hope of publishing his own *Celestial Chrestomathy* and took the work in a different direction" (p. 556).