"Contrapuntal Reading, Orientalism and the Rewriting of Histories: A Saidian Approach to Amitav Ghosh's River of Smoke"

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy constitutes a socio-historical study of colonial India. This study offers a critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* through the theoretical lens of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, examining how the novel engages with colonial representations and explores imperial knowledge systems. Through the historical context of the nineteenth-century opium trade, the narrative traces across transnational spaces shaped by commerce, cultural contact, and colonial dictatorship. The main focus of this paper is to address how imperial histories have traditionally privileged Eurocentric perception while rendering colonised voices peripheral or invisible.

In the lens of Saidian framework, the paper presents that *River of Smoke* actively resists Orientalist modes of observation by dispersing narrative authority across several cultural perspectives. Ghosh's use of different linguistic voices, shifting centralisation, and interlinked personal histories challenges the coherence of imperial discourse and reveals the constructed nature of colonial knowledge. The novel further explains how cultural exchange and commerce functioned not only as economic enterprises but also as ideological traditions that sustained imperial control, even as they produced spaces of cultural negotiation and hybrid identity.

***River of Smoke* depicts the empire as a site of contestation rather than unilateral power. The study posits that Ghosh's novel presents itself as a literary investigation in light of Said's critical work, focusing on an alternative historical consciousness that retells suppressed stories and complex inherited understandings of colonial modernity.**

Keywords

Amitav Ghosh; *River of Smoke*; Edward Said; Orientalism; Colonial Discourse; Postcolonial Historiography.

Introduction

Historical fiction provides a critical space in which writers revisit the past not as a fixed archive but as a dynamic field open to reinterpretation. By reworking historical events through narrative imagination, novelists generate new meanings that resonate with contemporary concerns, reshaping readers' engagement with history. In this process, the novelist's voice assumes interpretative authority, mediating between recorded history and lived experience. Amitav Ghosh occupies a distinctive position within this tradition, as his fiction consciously challenges dominant historiographical practices by interrogating how historical knowledge is produced and circulated. As Edward Said argues, Orientalism functions as a Western discourse of power that constructs the East as inferior and exotic (Said, *Orientalism*, 1978).

Reading in the light of Edward Said's critique of imperial discourse, Ghosh's historical writing—particularly *River of Smoke*—emerges as a sustained effort to dismantle Eurocentric constructions of the past. Rather than reproducing imperial grand narratives, Ghosh adopts a polyphonic and transnational narrative mode that foregrounds marginalised voices and alternative cultural perspectives. His reimagining of the nineteenth-century opium trade exposes the cultural and ideological mechanisms through which the empire justified its economic expansion, revealing history as a contested and uneven terrain shaped by power relations.

As a major figure in contemporary postcolonial literature, Ghosh depicts straightforward and authoritative modes of storytelling. His stories explore colonial authority, displacement, and cultural conflict while simultaneously tracing their afterlives in modern global structures. *River of Smoke* functions not only as a historical novel but also as a critical discourse that represents the history with ongoing socio-political realities. Linda Hutcheon, in A Poetics of Postmodernism, describes such works as "historiographic metafiction"—a term that captures how postmodern writers reconfigure historical discourse by blurring the boundaries between

history and fiction. According to Hutcheon, these narratives represent a shift in contemporary historiography, where history is no longer seen as a fixed account but as a construct open to reinterpretation. Ghosh's works exemplify this restructured view of history, revealing how literary fiction can serve as a powerful medium for historical inquiry and critique.

River of Smoke, the second book of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy, opens the historical incidents of the Indo–Chinese opium commerce by unrapping the already formatted bricks through which the empire has culturally been represented. A fictional Fanqui Town—a fragmented enclave built for foreign merchants beyond the jurisdiction of Chinese authority—the River of Smoke unravels the moment of chaos and stress immediately preceding the First Opium War. This trading zone functions as a symbolic contact space where imperial commercial power, materialistic desire, and cultural conflict intersect. Through this fictional environment, Ghosh throws light on the complex relations that structured Orients trade, exposing the bitter reality of the empire not as a civil society but as a ritual system sustained by economic flexibility and cultural misinterpretation.

The novel's unfolding navigation sequence, in which the *Ibis*, *Anahita*, and *Redruth* are stuck by a storm near Canton, presents as a metaphor for the titling of imperial order. Each ship presents a different connotation of colonial greed: the *Anahita*, owner and Parsi trader Bahram Moddie, represents the moral faultiness of vernacular participation in aristocracy such as imperial capitalism; carries opium and the *Redruth*, owned by the botanist Fitcher Penrose, represents the imperial motive of knowledge under the guise of rationality; and the *Ibis*, formerly a slave vessel presently transporting poorer labourers, become the witness to the human transportation that shows colonial economic estability. These all Ships are merely the product of what Edward Said opened as the cultural and material networks through which the empire naturalises its authority.

A precious moment occurs when Neel Rattan Halder and Ah Fatt run during the storm, an example of that fractures the straightforward movement, where the pace is a series of interrelated trajectories. The novel's tripartite structure—"Islands," "Canton," and "Commissioner Lin, draws a contrapuntal movement from the scattered surroundings of imperial mindset in the form of trade to the political point where Oriental aggression is rationally depicted. This continous transparancy Said's insistence on understandin empire as a process that operates simultaneously across margins and metropoles.

The multilingual characters like Paris, Bengali, Chinese, Americans and European creates a huge historical fragmented aura that forms an interpersonal, intrapersonal and transnational explanation and narration to Orientalists. Ghosh wisely uses the narrative technique where he presents East or, in Said's way, orientals as a passive Object of Westerners' or Orientals' desires and actions, where the writer divides narrative power to each cultural domain and thereby succeeds in his purpose of unfolding the reality. The title *River of Smoke* itself represents a strong critique against ideological hegemony, which is spread and normalised by imperial discourse.

Fundamentally, the work tries to keep a balance with the flow of narrative structure as the opening scene of sequential order unfolds the conflict through memory, hatred, digression and some shocking movements as the story goes on. The latter section follows the linear approach of sharing some events that lie at the focal point of the story. The cultural and rational conflicts must be sensed as the narrative going on as Bahram Moddie's narrative approach, introduced through Neel's act of unconscious to consciousness, holds the novel's depiction of complex nature, desire, and historical incidents. Read through a Saidian lens, *River of Smoke* represents a pure, straight-to-counter-historical narrative that unfolds and untriggers the Orientalist representations and recuperates timid and suppressed voices, exposing empire as a fragile and contested formation rather than a stable civilizational force.

River of Smoke sails to the readers in the depths of the 19th-century opium trading system, as the clipper ship Anahita, owner Bahram Modi, a Parsi merchant from Bombay, is ready to sail with a covert cargo of opium. This unlawful commerce forms the apex point of the novel's unravelling of the tensions, as Chinese authorities sense their loopholes in the smuggling of narcotics by traders from various nations. The tempting addiction caused by opium has fractured China, turning the drug trade into a national crisis. As Professor Banibrata Mahanta aptly notes:

> The British opium trade with China is a surprisingly underrepresented area of study. However, it is crucial for understanding the nature and impact of British colonialism. Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy provides a fictional exploration of this topic. The second novel in the trilogy, *River of Smoke*, picks up where *Sea of Poppies* left off. It delves into the processes of growing and preparing opium for trade, as well as the complex dynamics surrounding the indentured labour of Indian workers. This novel traces the journey from procuring opium in India to developing and consolidating a market for selling it in China. While 'Sea of Poppies' focused on unforgettable characters, 'River of Smoke' emphasises significant issues. (Mahanta 2011)154-155).

There is a profound comparison between an author who utilises historical literature and resources and a historian who engages with the same resources. However, both may reference identical spots, events or literary sources and documents, their understanding, approaches, intentions, and the themes that lie beneath the surface. In Amitav Ghosh's 'River of Smoke', the title itself has a rich meaning; the "river" indicates the Pearl River that flows through Canton, an important artery in the dazzling trade network of the time. On the other, the "smoke" symbolises the opium being consumed—a valid intention that anchors the work exploration of the

complexities of the illicit opium trade and its impact on youth and socioeconomic ramifications. The consequences of destructive smoke we found as the story moved on it indicates a painful reminder of the volatile intersection of culture, commerce and conflict, keeping unwanted, harrowing recollections of an unchecked policy of trade that affects individuals and ignites broader societal unrest.

> "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)

The novel begins with the title Island, an introduction of 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)

In continuation of this, Shashi Tharoor remarkably identifies the presence of cultural essence in the novel 'River of Smoke'. He opined that, 'The novel explores and shows and celebrates the happiness of cultural diversity, authenticity, culinary mingling, the mongrelisation of language [and] the mixing of peoples across old barriers... a monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalisation'- Shashi Tharoor, Washington Post. All masculine characters dominate the circle of transnational movement in this work, characters such as Neel Rattan Halder, Ah Fatt, Bahram Modi, Robin Chinnery, and Fitcher Penrose, who unclosed oceans driven by trade, survival and perseverance, or imperial ambition. On the other hand, women migrants are surprisingly few, limited primarily to Deeti and Paulette. This numerical imbalance significantly restricts the scope of gender-based cultural exchange, underscoring how mobility itself functions as a site of power.

Read through a Saidian lens, such unequal movement reveals how imperial systems privilege masculine agency while marginalising women's participation in global histories. Apart from this imbalance, migration in the novel is not common and monolithic; each character's action is motivated by different motives and desires and their compulsions that shape their engagement with new cultures. Bahram Modi and Zadig Bey migrate initially for economic gain but afterwards it remain selectively detached from the host culture, carefully preserving social status and reputation in their homelands. Their reluctance to assimilate reflects what Edward Said identifies as the imperial subject's anxiety over identity and authority. In contrast, Deeti and Paulette migrate not for profit but for self-definition. Freed from the constraints of patriarchal surveillance in their native societies, they actively reconstruct cultural practices in new spaces, forging identities untethered from inherited hierarchies. Ah Fatt and Neel, however, embody forced or survival-driven migration, where adaptation becomes a strategy of endurance rather than choice.

The work further discloses how culture shapes an identity for an individual or social level and plays the role of an instrument of subjugation and suppression, particularly for women and marginalised communities. Social rules and regulations regulate affirmative behaviour differently for men and women, giving the privilage to the men cultural license while imposing restrictions on women's autonomy.

Cultural traditions and practices such as polygamy among male traders witnessed in the form of Bahram Modi's marriages to Shireenbai and Chi-Mei, and Zadig Bey's abandonment of his first family, exposed how patriarchal privilege is normalised within colonial commerce. While women are revered symbolically as goddesses, their lived realities remain marked by neglect and emotional erasure, revealing a contradiction between cultural representation and social practice.

The partiality based on gender equation is a one-of-its-kind injustice that is further reinforced by colonial rules and regulations, for example, the restriction against European women entering Canton, which transforms women's presence into a perceived threat. Such discrimination and exclusions align with Said's argument that empire controls space and bodies through cultural and legal discourse. "Cultural subversion also extends to class and race: marginalised communities within India face systemic oppression, while colonial rule replicates this hierarchy on a global scale, subjecting colonised populations to economic and psychological domination.

By pointing out these interconnected forms of cultural exchange, cultural conflict and exclusion, *River of Smoke* opens the limits of colonial cosmopolitanism. Ghosh's narrative to the point, shooting the mark of the uneven distribution of mobility, voice, and agency, demonstrating how the empire constructs cultural connection through domination rather than reciprocity. In doing so, the work exemplifies the multidimensional postcolonial condition, aligning with Said's critique of imperial power as a system sustained by cultural, gendered, and economic asymmetries.

In *River of Smoke*, Amitav Ghosh presents migration and cultural exchange as deeply uneven processes shaped by the interconnection of mutuality relations. Read through Edward Said's theoretical framework, and the perception that is shaped by him, the novel discloses how mobility itself becomes a flag bearer of power, largely accessible to men while always restricted for women and other marginalised groups. Male characters dominate transnational movement for trade, science, or survival, rationality on the other side, female migration is rare and heavily regulated, exposing the gendered hierarchies embedded within colonial structures**.**

The novel further illustrates that cultural exchange under the empire is neither open nor reciprocal. Economic migrants such as Bahram Modi and Zadig Bey engage selectively with host cultures, carefully preserving status and authority rooted in their places of origin. On the other hand, women like Deeti and Paulette, whose displacement is driven by the search for identity, liberty and autonomy rather than profit, reconfigure cultural practices to construct new identities beyond patriarchal constraints. As said's opined, Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'."These contrasting modes of movement and adaptation underscore Said's assertion that imperial power operates through cultural control as much as through political dominance.

Ghosh also exposes the contradictions of a society that symbolically venerates women while systematically silencing their voices and regulating their bodies. Practices such as polygamy, spatial segregation, and moral exclusion reveal culture as a mechanism of subjugation rather than protection. Similarly, the marginalisation of lower classes and colonised populations mirrors these gendered injustices on a broader global scale.

Ultimately, *River of Smoke* functions as a counter-discursive narrative that dismantles imperial and patriarchal myths of progress and cosmopolitanism. By foregrounding silenced experiences and unequal exchanges, Ghosh aligns with Said's critique of empire as a fragile construct sustained by domination, revealing the enduring legacies of colonial power in shaping identities, cultures, and global relations.

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