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# RAMIFICATIONS OF HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL FORCES IN THE RIVER OF SMOKE AND FLOOD OF FIRE BY AMITAV GHOSH

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh is one of the significant contemporary writers who deal with different topics which are relevant to our times in a variety of ways. He is a novelist, essayist, travel writer, anthropologist, sociologist and teacher. He is a major social and cultural figure who has a number of works to his credit and having global reputation. His writings which began to appear in the 1980s are closely related to society. As a writer he is admired and appreciated by various categories of readers, ranging from children who go through his works as texts for study to researchers who find them to be important documents of contemporary issues. Ghosh's innovative experiments with language and form do not take away the clarity of his novels and that is the reason behind his popularity with the common reading public. His novels are not confined to the landscape of India alone; his portrayals cover the whole world and present various cultural milieus in fictional frames.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, Ethnography, Society, Sociology Exploitation, Marginalisation, Binary Oppositions Etc.

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**Introduction:** All his novels without exception are very interesting and deeply engaging. Each of them unfolds different narrative structures through which the stories are told. Common concerns like anthropology, ethnography, society, sociology, history and historicity unify his novels and link them to one another. He has enriched our understanding of history and has written effectively on some of the relevant issues of the contemporary world. Like Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh familiarized the world outside with Indian writing in English. He is the best writer of the post *Midnight's Children* saga in Indian English fiction. In a variety of ways his writings are deeply embedded within the society. His works have both the postcolonial structure and the precolonial and colonial structure. In his books he depicts colourful and culturally rich lands where the readers can easily enter and roam about at will.

The paper probes into the historical aspects found in the select novels of Amitav Ghosh. In particular it focuses on how human lives are invariably associated with and impacted by epoch-making events in history. The paper centres on the lives of the people and the society in which they lived during certain major historical events. It brings out certain hitherto hidden aspects of history and that too, importantly from the perspective of the common folk (victims) as portrayed in the select novels of Ghosh.

In *River of Smoke* in the letter of Robin Chinnery to Paulette there is a reference to Zadig Bey's statement. Once the streets and lanes of the Canton reminded him of the alien presence of the city's guardian deity who was an Indian goddess, Kuan-yin, who was a Buddhist nun. In Canton there was a temple and a mosque and the former was founded by Buddhist missionaries who had come to Canton from Southern India and the mosque was one of the oldest in the whole world which had been built at the time of Prophet Muhammad and it looked like a Chinese temple. Its tower was like the shrine of a Muslim saint in Bengal.

Ghosh states that in the past and a long time back the Chinese had accepted people from all over the world and thousands of Indians, the laws and banned the foreigners from entering the city. It was when

the Netherlanders under the guise of building a hospital attempted to build a fort to establish their power.

From that time onwards the Chinese adopted the tactics of stopping the supply of provisions to foreigners. The foreigners ran out of supplies and they abandoned the island. *Flood of Fire* presents the Chinese as practical people. In order to restrict the movement of foreigners in China they set up a special town for the Europeans in Canton, namely Fanqui-town. The presence of foreigners always reminded the Chinese of their past experiences. It was their past experiences that prompted them to build Fanqui-town. In *River of Smoke* Ghosh quotes from Lord Napier's book on his experiences of China. He describes the Chinese as possessing "A vast portion of the most desirable parts of the earth and a population estimated as amounting to nearly a third of the whole human race" (420). Even by the westerners China was regarded as a safe country.

Ghosh puts these words in the farewell speech of Jardine. He says, Here we find our persons more efficiently protected by laws than in many other parts of the East or of the world; in China a foreigner can go to sleep with his windows open, without being in dread of losing either his life or property, which are well guarded by a most watchful and excellent police; business is conducted with unexampled facility and in general with singular good faith. (405)

In *River of Smoke* there is a description of the Chinese way of ruling. They were firm in their stand and were not interested in interfering with the foreigners. Zadig Bey tells Bahram, "If you compare Chinese methods of ruling with those of our Africans, Persians and Arabs had lived shoulder to shoulder in Canton. In the past during the time of the Tang dynasty "The emperors had *invited* foreigners to settle in Canton, along with their wives and children and servants" (378). They were allowed to set up their own courts and places of prayer. They also enjoyed free movement within the country for a long time. A hundred years ago the Chinese officials changed our Sultans, Shahs and Maharajas, it is clear that the Chinese ways are incomparably better—government is indeed their religion" (202). Ghosh presents China as possessing a bountiful flora and having a high appreciation for their natural wealth. Botanically they were rich and they were reluctant to provide their resources to other countries. It is evident from Sir Joseph's statement to Fitcher.

The botanical garden in southwest London at Kew possessed plants from various corners of the earth except from China. In *River of Smoke* China is described as "A country singularly blessed in its botanical riches, being endowed not only with some of the most beautiful and medically useful plants in existence, but also with many that were of immense commercial value" (101). The Chinese never allowed anyone to exploit anything from their country. They were well aware of the value of their own natural resources. They protected their resources with utmost vigilance. Attempts of gardens and herbariums from Holland and France to collect Chinese flora were not rewarded. Chinese gardeners and horticulturalists were extremely careful in protecting their natural treasures with the utmost care. Most of the colonised countries were at first attracted by European ornaments and toys. Such materials had no effect on the Chinese. Even certain attempts for bribery from the Europeans had no effect on them. Constant attempts of the Europeans to get viable specimens of the tea plant from the Chinese by offering huge rewards too remained unrewarded. In addition to protecting their rich natural sources in China the internal movements of the foreigners too were restricted. Missionary activities were prohibited throughout China because the Chinese policy of isolation and seclusion was found to be safe. Some Jesuits had the privilege to visit the interior areas of China.

In *River of Smoke* in a conversation between Fitcher and Paulette, they refer to a Jesuit, D' incarville, who was interested in plants. In China his movements were restricted and he was not allowed to collect plants from outside the city or to visit royal gardens. However he succeeded in bringing about a change to this pattern through botanical exchange and the plant 'touch-me-not' attracted the attention of the emperor. Fitcher remarks to Paulette that only a few Jesuits and a couple of naturalists who accompanied diplomatic missions in Peking had the opportunity to see the flora of the interior of China. Other plant hunters were confined to Canton and Macau alone where they were observed by the

authorities and nothing wild had existed there for a long time. In course of the novel, *River of Smoke* Ghosh gives an account of the geographical terrains of Hong Kong. During a plant hunting expedition Paulette and Fitcher find it difficult to collect plants from Hong Kong, because the island's surface is treacherous and the mountains are so tall. Since the soil is slippery each step has to be taken with the utmost care, for a misstep would lead to landslide. As a result of the speciality of this terrain in Hong Kong, it becomes difficult for Paulette and Fitcher to collect plants from there. At that juncture Baburao arranges two horses and then Paulette chooses to be in shirt and pantaloons for a comfortable ride. Her willingness to be in men's attire initially creates embarrassment to Fitcher, because in those days it was not acceptable in society for a woman to be in the clothes of a man. Culturally it is unfitting and his facial expression reveals it. "Fitcher's face went into a deep scowl, tying itself into so tight a knot that the tip of his beard came within a few inches of touching the twitching tips of his eyebrows" (275). Her determination to overcome cultural barriers enables them to proceed with their purpose.

Since the Chinese wanted to preserve their botanical resources, they never allowed any foreigner to learn their language or culture, for they knew, later it would lead to exploitation. But the constant presence of foreigners enabled the outsiders to become masters in the Chinese language. In *River of Smoke* Captain Elliott's translator is not a Chinese man; it is one Mr Rober Morrison, the son of a well known missionary who is in his late twenties. "He had spent most of his life in China and was regarded as an authority on the language and culture of the country" (51).

European interest in invading other countries is explicit in Ghosh's imaginative description in *Flood of Fire*. After the Chinese defeat in the opium war, Europeans initiated an exploration into Chinese history. After the war under the direction of a young lieutenant several graves were opened and sepoys were exploring their contents. Kesri felt disgust and was disturbed at this sight. To him Captain Mee says, "He's making a study of Chinese customs and practices. That's all " (570). Ghosh in *River of Smoke* presents Flower boats as one of the main attractions in Canton. These were the largest and showy vessels on the Pearl River in Canton. Their appearance seemed like figments of the imagination. At night they turned to be floating palaces of entertainment. And in the morning at the bright light of the day they appeared to be "More tawdry than gaudy, humbled by the sun and ready to accept defeat in their unwinnable war against mundanity" (410). Along with the picturesque description of the boat, it is told that the inside of the boat "Was fogged with the smell of smoke – of tobacco, incense and opium" (410). All sorts of illegal activities too occurred inside the boat. In *Flood of Fire* Ghosh describes the condition of ordinary people in Canton. In Canton only the foreign merchants and business people mattered. Ordinary people were not properly educated and therefore they were unable to come to the limelight. It is stated, "In Canton even ordinary boat-people are treated like outcasts" (135), and these people were Cantonese working classes. Bahram wants to provide good education to his illegal son at Canton. The boat people were at the bottom of the social ladder. "Shore Cantonese consider the boat people to be a different and inferior race, but they are actually best regarded as an occupational (or residential) subculture" (285), observes E.N. Anderson in his article "The Folksongs of the Hong Kong Boat People".

*Flood of Fire* also gives a glimpse of the Parsi religion and people. Parsis were very strict with regard to the observance of their customs and practices. In *Flood of Fire* during the time of Freddy's burial, one of the relatives of Bahram, the Parsi merchant Dinyar expresses his displeasure in burying Freddy near the tomb of Bahram, because Freddy belonged to another community in the social system. At that juncture Shireen reveals the parentage of Freddy to Dinyar. In order to justify the illicit relation of Bahram, Dinyar speaks of the isolation that merchants like him experience in their journey. In such circumstances he also is not bothered about the moral side of Parsi religion. Here he neglects the moral precepts of the Parsi religion. He claims that their wives live in Bombay amidst family members with every comfort of a home. Here like many merchants he too has not bothered about the isolation that women face in the absence of their loved ones. In reality it is not so, for Shireen too experiences loneliness in the absence of her husband in her house, for in her house the servants outnumber the family members. "Shireen felt herself to be drowning in the peculiar kind of loneliness that comes of living in a house where the servants far outnumber their employers" (13). Later Shireen's decision to get

married to Zadig Bey shocks him, for if she does so, as per their religious laws, she would be cut off from the community permanently and she would be declared as a social outcast. But Dinyar concedes to her decision to marry Zadig Bey for she threatens him that in case he disagrees, in Bombay “Many Parsi families are going to find out that they have unknown relatives in China. And yours will be the first” (566). These words compel him to accept her decision.

Most of the time the merchants like Bahram and Zadig Bey are away from their home. As in the case of Bahram in the life of Zadig Bey he too has two wives. The first one in Egypt stays in the midst of many relatives at Cairo. The second one is a widow he met in Colombo and he has tender feelings and concern towards her. Through these two instances Ghosh sheds light into the moral life of the merchants during that time. In *River of Smoke* through certain illustrations Ghosh depicts the after-effects of foreign invasions upon the life of the people. Wars change the course of events and the life of people. French invasion of Egypt brought about certain changes in the life of the Egyptians. Zeinab Abdul-Magd in his article “A Crisis of Images: The French, Jihad, and the Plague in Upper Egypt, 1798 – 1801” states, As for Napoleon Bonaparte himself, making his decision to invade Egypt was based on a belief in the essential role of the military in achieving republican goals. He called for the spread of French liberties in the world, despite his criticism of democracy and masses’ participation in government. (326) It had repercussions on the life of the people. In the case of Zadig, after the invasion he starts to learn the French language and then becomes skilled in horse riding, which is something denied to them as Christians. This invasion also helps him to learn the basic lessons of trade from a French watchmaker. Ghosh observes that, as a result of this war, the life of certain people was completely changed, some have become interpreters for the invading army.

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