

DOMINANT CHARACTERS, PLOT AND PLACES IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL, "RIVER OF SMOKE"

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Abstract

The novel, "River of Smoke" (2011) is the second of Amitav Ghosh's ambitious Ibis trilogy. The first novel is "Sea of Poppies" (2008) and the third novel is "Flood of Fire" (2015). The novel is a historical narrative about the opium trading, trafficking and addiction. It is yet another milestone and epoch-making historical novel in the history of Indian fiction which makes the readers reminisce of the bruised and pleasant past and their perpetuating repercussions even in the present. The extraordinary scholarship and erudition of Amitav Ghosh comes into display in narrating and storytelling of the novel. The novel is inundated with a host of scenes from different origins and cultures. The present article focuses on dominant characters, plot and places that this novel encapsulates in it.

Keywords: *Canton, China, British, opium, traders, addiction, drug, foreigner, sing-song girl.*

The novel is set in Canton in China, where opium is traded at large scale. Traders belong to several countries but most of them are British. They are amassing huge money and assets at the cost of causing indiscriminate addiction of opium to common people. The Chinese administrations are trying to put a ban on illegal imports of the drug, which has caused havoc on the well being of the Chinese population.

Major Characters, Plot and Places

The story of the novel revolves around the chief character Bahram Modi. Even though Bahram is indulged in trading of opium, he is a truly benevolent man. The nuptial tie between Bahram and Shireenbai was merely a marriage of convenience. Shireenbai is a superstitious woman and she has a great belief in miracle-mongering, palmistry and chiromancy. The living standard of Bahram was rustic and inappropriate in comparison with that of Seth's family and it was a cause of embarrassment for him. Even his in-laws were deeming him with an eye of contempt and derision. Bahram's mother is a widow but she is a woman of high self-respect and blue blood family. She makes a stiff opposition to the circumstances under which Bahram has to remain as a house-husband in the family of Seth because of the pitiable and wretched economic condition of her family.

All that Bahram needs is an opportunity to show his mettle and once he grabs it he glitters like gold. The very first visit of Bahram to Canton brings incredible accomplishment and success for him and his family. Now he is totally changed from old to new Bahram and in a short notice he becomes one of the most highly acclaimed businessmen of Bombay and a man of high esteem in Canton of China. He and his in-laws are jointly in the shipping business. His father-in-law suddenly dies and his brothers-in-law force him to retire from the Export

division. But he wants to buy the export division for which he was required to have huge money. To earn a huge profit, he decides to ship a huge consignment of opium to China, despite there is a ban on Opium trading issued by the Chinese officials.

The first time he visits Canton, he falls in love with a washerwoman and widow Chi-mei who is dwelling on a boat with her mother and daughter. He meets her for the first time in her laundry and after that her face keeps flashing before his eyes and a strong bond of affinity and love is drawing him towards her. She gives birth to his son Ah Fatt. Unlike other boys of Canton, Bahram never wants his illegal son to be a boat-child but he wants him a well read man. The rules and regulations of Canton give no more right to boat boys other than learning how to fish and sail and handle boats. As a result his mother Chi-mei exhibits no interest in educating her son. When he grows young, his anguish against Bahram is obvious for not getting a lawful name and right for being the son of his well reputed father. Ah Fatt is inquisitive to trip Bombay and India but Bahram is in no way prepared to accompany him into his ship as he is afraid that his elder wife and in-laws would come to know about all these immoral and hush affairs.

Bahram has been in China for a long time and he is now well acquainted with how and whereabouts of China. Napoleon Bonaparte, a French military and political leader during the latter stages of the French Revolution, is a prisoner on the island of China and he wants to meet Bahram personally to know what is politically and economically going on in China at present. But he is afraid of facing Napoleon Bonaparte alone and he decides to accompany his friend Zadig Bey who is well versed in French and world politics.

Anhita, an opium carrying ship, is struck by a storm and almost ten percent of total opium is destroyed by it. Bahram struggles against the onslaught of storms. The storm has created a horror into the psyche of Bahram. He feels heavy pressure from his investors in Bombay and other parts of India for disposing of the large amount of opium on board his ship, Anhita. Amid hue and cry of embargo on the trading of opium, Bahram comes across Allow who is now deeply involved in small scale smuggling of opium and by the time this meeting of Bahram with Allow takes place, Chi-mei has already died. Bahram is such a long trader of opium that he doesn't want to take any notice of the small fry like Allow. But Allow is well aware of his caliber, so he is adamant to follow and flatter Bahram like a shadow. One day Bahram is stranded in such a situation that he is left with no option other than taking the help of Allow's boat. Allow is well aware of the weakness of Bahram and she is none other than Chi-mei and he tries to push Bahram into flashback of his meeting with Chi-mei. When Bahram is not melted through this malicious and nefarious design, he is given an offer of another sing-song-girl to quench his corporeal requirements but Bahram vociferously rejects such proposition of Allow. In the end of the novel, Bahram Modi dies due to an opium infested dream.

The phrase ‘sing-song girl’ is echoing in Canton where entry of foreign women are strictly prohibited and foreign traders miles, years and countries away from their wife or girl friends fulfill their bodily necessities with local women of easy virtue popularly known as sing-song-girls. This being the reason Canton is flooded with bachelors of variegated kinds, conditions and cultures. This being the reason for all the incidents of immorality and vice is taking place in the novel. The most victim of such banning is Miss Paulette whose eyes trickle with tears when she comes to know through Fitcher Penrose that she would not be able to visit Canton. This is the reason, while she remains stranded in the Outer Islands, she is getting updates about every goings and happenings of Canton through letters from her childhood friend Robert Chinnery. A great chunk of the novel is flooded with letters that Robert Chinnery writes to Miss Paulette describing vivid pictures of why, how and whereabouts of Canton.

Mr. Robert Chinnery is a professional English painter and he has been bestowed upon special responsibility of finding rare plants for Fitcher Penrose. Even amid the hours of opium crisis he doesn’t refrain from performing the task assigned to him though it is another thing that by the end of novel he is unable to trace out the rare plant which Fitcher Penrose is in dire need of.

Mr. Jardine is in his late forty and still bachelor and has been in Canton for more than a decade. He is a powerful and influential man in Canton and the largest player in the trading of opium in the Chinese market. He is not only an adept trader but also skillful and proficient in setting up approach and rapprochement with the people of various classes and cadres. Chinese authorities are disappointed with William Jardine because he is expanding opium business from one region of China to another and they are planning to send him out of China and Mr. Jardine is wise enough to go through the impending situation and before he could have insulted and ousted he himself announces to leave china and he produces a lame excuse that he will have to return to England to engage himself in wedlock as Chinese government doesn’t allow entry of any European woman in Canton. All members of Canton’s General Chamber of Commerce wish him best of luck in finding the suitable bride.

John Slade is the founder and editor of the newspaper, “Canton Register”. He is a daring fellow and for making vociferous and raucous remarks he was well known as Thunderer. Mr. Slade is one of the strongest and vociferous members who plead trading and trafficking of opium in a legitimate and rightful manner. But at the same time he turns diplomatic too and advises all members to observe restraint and lets the Chinese take first the aggressive and offensive steps against illegal opium trading.

Besides “Anhita” and “Ibis”, “Redruth” is another ship which is notably talked about in the novel for transporting plants across the seas and it is owned by a Scottish botanist Frederick Fitcher Penrose. The ship is the unique creation of Mr. Penrose who has infused his heart and soul into her creation. It is named after the birth place of Penrose’s wife and permeated with the greenery of

outstanding and curious plants and they are suitably placed into sliding boxes of glass which are like miniature greenhouses. The ship is loaded and renovated with all the extraordinary and bizarre facilities and conveniences. The plants are representing every part of the earth and they are methodically arranged by no less than the possessor of the ship, Mr. Penrose himself.

Opium Trading and Wars

The new commissioner in Canton, Lin Zexu has been famous for his dry honesty and absolute integrity. He is determined to root out the trading, transporting and smuggling of opium into Canton. He issues warning after warning against trading of opium through a series of letters written in Chinese which is interpreted by professional translator Mr. Fearon to the members of the General Chamber of Commerce in Canton run by foreign traders. Commissioner Lin issues an ultimatum to all opium traders to surrender all opium on board of their ship and in the case of failing to do so they must remain ready to face the consequences.

The members of foreign traders cudgel their brain to dispose of the impending crisis imposed by Commissioner Lin. Mr. Dent comes up with a great idea of dealing with such threats and he plans to tell Chinese authority that this is such a grave and important decision that it cannot be taken in hot haste and it requires plenty of time and serious deliberation. Mr. Dent thinks that if he could carry this matter for long, Commissioner Lin would automatically turn lenient on the issue of Opium as “An ultimatum is easy to issue but difficult to act upon” (437). Such idea of Mr. Dent is applauded and welcome by every member of Chamber of Commerce and Mr. Burnham especially is disproportionately excited and he calls this idea a genius of stroke and in the intoxication of enthusiasm he goes on to promulgate: “Let us see if this Commissioner’s bite is as bad as his bark’ (437)

Mr. Inns is famous in the novel for his notorious acts and he is transporting opium despite a severe and strict ban on opium smuggling has been declared by Commissioner Lin. In a raid made by Chinese administration and soldiers, he is caught red handed indulging in opium trafficking and they order him to leave Canton in no time and without any terms and conditions. But Mr. Inns is adamant not to leave Canton despite all attempts of pleading and requests by Chamber of Commerce fails to convince him and ultimately the president of Chamber of Commerce conveys the message to Chinese authority that Mr. Inns is not the member of the organization run by them and therefore they have no jurisdiction over Mr. Inns. But the fact is that all foreign traders clandestinely do their trading of opium through Mr. Inns despite the restriction on the trading and trafficking of opium is on the peak.

Mr. Charles King, an American trader, is on good terms with mandarins – the Chinese merchants in Canton and he is also a member of Canton’s General Chamber of Commerce to represent the views of foreign traders to them. But instead of supporting the issues of foreign traders, he works in disobedience of

them and hand in glove with mandarins. He has been against the trading and smuggling of opium by the foreign entrepreneur right from the beginning to the end of the novel. He openly supports the strict and stern official measures to be taken by the Chinese against the trafficking of drug and opium by foreign traders in China. While the rest of the members are resolute and immovable in their decision to not yield to the authoritarian call of Commissioner Lin to surrender all opium in possession of them, Charles King makes his all attempts to let the decision go in the favour of Commissioner Lin. Because of such an attitude he has been at loggerheads with hot headed people like Mr. Slade and Mr. Burnham. In a counter reply to Mr. Charles King, Mr. Burnham raises a question on the masculinity of Asian itself and he further claims that opium is required to bolster their potency and they are indispensably susceptible to the opium. Thus Mr. Burnham is of the view that the western traders of opium are doing an obligatory and congratulatory work rather than earning disproportionate assets by trading opium and thereby spoiling the life of millions of innocent: "Effeminacy is the curse of the Asiatic" (468)

The opium fiasco has resulted in a war like situation in Canton. Commissioner Lin made all the opium of foreign traders on board of their ship damaged under his watchful supervision and he kept all foreigners confined to camp until all opium was surrendered.

Conclusion

Like the first novel, "Sea of Poppies" of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy, the second of it, "River of Smoke" too ends on a tragic note. The novel pushes the readers into the flashback of sense, sensibility and psychology of 19th century world when opium was a moot point of debate and dispute. Going through the whole book between the lines one can effortlessly come to the conclusion that the novel has been written meticulously after a great deal of learning, research, traveling and exploration. Though living in plenty, Ghosh has thought of shanty and he has included themes from all strata of life where village-town, rural-urban, male-female, rustic-refine etc equally play their role in furthering the plot of the novel.

Reference

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