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CHINA AND COLONIAL IMPACT: A POST COLONIAL READING OF AMITAV GHOSH'S *RIVER OF SMOKE*

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Abstract:

The Europeans who established their colonies in various parts of the world were accused of eradicating native cultures and languages, misrepresenting their history, misappropriating their literature, swindling their wealth, deteriorating their environment, stereotyping the negative images of the colonized, making them addicts to liquor and other poisonous drugs like opium, degrading them as inferior creatures, exploiting them economically, considering them barbarians, victimizing them with racist prejudice, etc. At the same time, it is not denying the fact that colonialism became responsible for founding the modernization of the world. Colonialism encouraged the scientific enquiry of truth. It promoted exploring life with the spirit of reason and intellect. Science and technology progressed and it led to the improvement of material condition of man. The Europeans, with their naval expedition, found out new safe routes for the known places and discovered new places like America, Australia and New Zealand. They threw light on the Aborigines living in the dark continents. They discovered new plants and animals and invented new objects. They introduced the new discoveries and the inventions for the betterment of the world. Dissemination of knowledge has become possible because of colonialism. Yet, it is a charge against the Europeans that whatever, whether it is political or mercantile, they did had been in the interest of their own people living in their mother lands. Some communities and a few individuals of the colonized country also flourished during the colonial rule due to colonialism. In India, it is Parsi people who enjoyed great privileges provided by the British colonizers. The contribution of the Parsi people along with the British in the establishment of the port city of Mumbai cannot be left unrecognized. The Parsis were as skillful as the English people in ship-building as well as they performed as brilliant as the colonizer in dealing with trade matters and maritime exploits. River of smoke elaborately discusses the Parsi involvement in the opium trade with China along with the British by narrating the events and incidents that took place in the story of Bahram Modi. While concocting the life of Bahram Modi with his rich imagination, Ghost lavishly uses the historical facts of opium trade by the colonizers in China and its impact reflected in political and social atmosphere of China.

Key Words: *Colonizers, native culture, stereotype, historical figures.*

Amitav Ghosh has peopled the novel, *Riverof* S*moke* with historical figures and assembled and arranged historical events for the plot. In fact, it is a historical novel dealing with the plight of the nineteenth century China which was attacked by the British and the French in order to win open markets for their opium mainly cultivated in India. The greed of the colonizers and the reluctance to open the free markets for opium trade on moral grounds by the Chinese Government led to two opium wars during the middle of the nineteenth century. In the war, the port city, Canton where the trade concerns of opium were dealt was bombarded to the soil by the weapons of the British and the French soldiers. At last, China was opened for free trade, though China was not under the direct control of China. Abolishment of monopoly and free trade for the European merchants is the chief effect of colonialism discussed in *River of Smoke.* China has always kept an iron wall for the external world but it was demolished by the colonial powers with

their selfish economic motive. Ghosh's use of historical facts with historical characters demands a new historicist reading.

While Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* the first book of the *Ibis* trilogy deals with the causes and consequences of migration, the circumstances in which various people from various parts of the world left their native land and the mental agonies and physical tortures they had undergone in the hands of the whites during their journey in the midst of the ocean, on shore and offshore, the second book entitled *River of Smoke* narrates the achievements, gains and the loses of the migrants in the alien lands after their departure from their homeland by ship. In the *River of Smoke,* in addition to the voyage of the Ibis, the author has focused on the happenings in two more ships- the *Anahita* and the *Redruth.* Hence, in addition to the characters mentioned in *Sea of poppies* such as Deeti, Neel Rattan, Paulette, Kalua, Ah fatt, Jodu, Bob Nab Kissan, the list of travelers includes people belonging to the whole world such as an Indian born Parsi opium trader, Bahram Modi; an American trader, Charles King; a Chinese commissioner, Lin Zexu; a lover of plants and flowers belonging to Britain and botanist, Mr. Penrose; a western artist, Mr. Chinnery; an eastern artist, Lamqua; Lamqua's apprentice, Jaqua; Sir Joseph Banks and his apprentice Kerr; Chinese nursery owner, Punhyanal a gardener, Ah Fey and the curator of Kew garden. This kind of assemblage of people belonging to different countries and various races speaking in distinct languages itself is an effect of colonialism. The theme and the plot of *River of Smoke* revolve around the causes and the consequences of opium war. The opium war fought between China and Britain had not been a sudden one, but the result of a long time combat between the Chinese concern for the health of its people and the selfishness and the greediness of the British. Only parts of Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Tibet, China, Siam and Japan had never been under formal European government (Fieldhouse,373).

While the trade was carried on at Canton the foreign merchants were not permitted to reside there throughout the year. During the summer months, or from the end of one trading seasons to the beginning of the next, the traders retired to Macau, which was in the nature of a Portuguese leasehold, although Chinese jurisdiction was maintained. When they returned to Canton they were forced to leave their wives and children, if they had any, at Macau. This served to emphasis the temporary and precarious nature of their stay.

Moreover, each foreign trader had to be "Secured" by one of the Hong (Chinese) merchants. This meant that he could buy and sell only through him, buying at the minimum the Hong merchant would consider and selling at his maximum. On his side the "security merchant took care of all payments to the officials, relieving the foreigner of the task of meeting the innumerable petty exactions which burdened the trade. These of course were figured in as part of the price finally agreed upon.

The members of this community lived, while at Canton, in a restricted area just outside the city walls. They had their residences over their ware houses and offices in buildings called "Factories", from the name "Factor" given to the permanent representative of the foreign firm. These places expose the typical multicultural atmosphere with the colonial impact. Fanqui town housed the factories- not the manufacturing places but merchant trading centres of the Europeans and other foreign traders such as Indians and Americans. These factories exhibited the colonial impact in the style of architecture and the customs followed there. Robin Chinnery writes in his letter to his childhood friend Putly about the factories that they exhibit the architectural style of both the Chinese and the English that had been adopted in the construction of universities like Oxford. Chinnery further writes that the British factory has a chapel with a clock tower and most of the European factories have flags flying in front of them.

The different flags of various European countries flying in the foreign soil are an evident proof of their influence on the country in their purpose. The presence of a chapel inside the place meant for trade, in addition to proving the English people's faith in Christianity, implies the colonizers' typical inclination towards converting the other people to Christianity.

In China, all people coming from Hindustan to work with the English for the opium trade were

considered as a single unit not only by the foreigners but by themselves irrespective of belonging to different castes, races and religions and speaking different languages. Amidst all the evils, it is one of the positive impact brought by the colonizers to make the Indians feel being united in diversity. This kind of a sense of feeling of commonness among the members of a group of people becomes the foundation for the formation of bigger assemblages or groups. And, thus, new countries were created with that sense and the colonial rule facilitated occasions among the colonized people to have that sense. And, the third world countries were formed. The formation of the third world countries is always attributed to colonialism.

The novel *River of Smoke* revolves around the trade of opium in China during the middle of the nineteenth century. While the sale of opium brought huge profits to the British, it deteriorated the health of the Chinese people. Realizing this fact, the Chinese authorities had decided to ban opium. Amitav Ghosh mentions the words of a Chinese official written to the Emperor about the evil effects of opium: "Opium is a poisonous drug, brought from foreign countries. To the question, what are its virtues, the answer is: It raises the animal spirits and prevents lassitude (132).

China took all kinds of measures to stop the sale of opium in order to save the lives of people and to protect the economic stability of the country. But, every impediment in the way of the trade was crashed and crossed by the Europeans. And, when the sale was legally banned by the government, smuggling began to take place. Already, stocks of opium had got accumulated in the godowns of the foreign traders particularly, the British traders got tensioned and the very thought off the loss likely to be incurred due to the ceasing of the trade made them crazy to go any extreme even of declaring war against China. Mr. Slade, in *River of Smoke*, gives historical examples to justify the war that might be declared by the English for the sake of profit.

When the European and other foreign traders encountered various obstacles in the form of seizure of the opium stocked by them, demand of the Chinese commissioner for the surrender of the traders who had involved in the drug smuggling and the legal ban on the business, the Chamber of Commerce convened a meeting to discuss the problem. And Amitav Ghosh, through the discussion, revealed the standpoint of the Europeans with regard to the trade deal.

It was discussed that as the trade had been highly profitable, it could not be abandoned just because of the obstinacy of the Chinese authority. Hence, some suggested that they could form a settlement in The Bonin Islands recently seized by the British government. I was one of the "inappropriated spots" (RS, 422) located between Japan Japan and Formosa. It is an example of the colonial attitude of the whites to occupy and enjoy other's lands. But, forming a settlement in the Bonin Island was not accepted by those who did not wish to leave Canton where they had their business deals for two centuries. They considered the arguments of the Chinese as dogmatic. And it is the colonial attitude to interfere in the internal matters of any country in order to meet their selfish ends. And, at last, it was decided not to leave Canton but to take steps for free trade. As in any other colony in order to establish free trade in China for their own selfish ends, the English went to the extent of going for a war without considering its destructive effects keeping their eyes only on material benefits.

At last, in order to cope with the "present difficulties", a war was waged. In the war, "Canton was bombarded by British and French gunships". And the foreign factories were fixed by the Chinese mob. At last, as per the wish of the British, free trade was opened. Thus, though China was not under the direct control of the British government, it had to yield to the trade wisher of the English by removing all hurdles in the way of free trade by collapsing its iron walls. Thus, China also had encountered the Colonial impact in its economic and moral life. The victory of the British in the Opium war revised the trade policies of China. In the same way, individual lives also had undergone tremendous transformation due to the trade done with the support of the Colonizers. Bahram Modi, an Indian Parsi trader's life is an example

The Parsi people were dear to the British due to absence of divisions and distinctions among them. Being a minority group as refugees in an alien land, Hindustan, they did away with all the anomalies of

divisions accept the practices of priestly class. They remained a unified group. The English, being fed up with the innumerable disparities in the name of caste, creed, culture, language in the Hindu community, were pleased to work with the unified community.

The role of Parsi people in trade and commerce during the colonial period and their gradual development along with the expansion of the colonizer's power has been well represented by Amitav Ghosh who has actually narrated the fact of Parsi's upper hand in ship-building, manufacturing and engineering and their export concerns through the fictionalized character of Bahram.

Bahram belongs to a middle class family. He is a calculative expedient who has made use of the opportunity of marrying the very rich girl of the Mistry family. Shireenbai, the bride actually has been betrothed to another rich boy of a reputed family but he died in an accident. Thus, Shireenbai has lost the luck of marrying a rich boy. The Mistry, in spite of their wealth, cannot go for the bridegroom of the same status, as the proposal is the second one. They opt, now, hence, for Bahram Modi who belongs to the middle class but respectable family. He is also good looking, educated and of an appropriate age. But after marriage, he has to come to live in the Mistrie mansion and enter the family business. Bahram's mother is not interested in the marriage as she believes in her rustic wisdom that the son-in-law as the house-husband in father-in-law's home will be treated as a dog. But, Bahram is able to foresee the undreamt of opportunities in the marriage and so he accepts Shireenbai. In the Mistrie house, he is looked not as a great person.

The high society Parsi people are good at English proficiency. Speaking in the colonizer's language is generally considered to be a mark of civilized person, This attitude to English language prevails to the colonized during colonization and after Independence from Britain. Ghosh writes with reference to the language of Bahram; "…his rustic Gujarati and inadequate English were something of an embarrassment within the urbane confines of the Mistrie mansion" (49).

Language is one of the cultural shades of man. Parsi, after their arrival to India, were ready to learn English on their own, being displaced people who had to survive in an alien land with its resources, while the native Indian were stick to their mother-tongues. This is one ot the reasons why Parsi people were preferred or given privileges by the English. Repeatedly, in novel after novel, through different characters, Ghosh points out the power of English language among the colonized people during and after colonization. Even Bahram, while interviewing Neel Ratan Haldar to be appointed as his munishi, examined his English proficiency by making him read the magazines.

Parsi people are ambitious one who during the colonial rule excelled to Europeans even in ship-making. Europeans used to call the Indian made vessels "country boats" or "black-ships". But, Seth Rustamjee, Bahram's father-in-law had the aim of building ships asgood as the vessels made by the Europeans-the colonizers. He achieved that also. Thus, Rustamjee Seth represents that group of Bombay based Parsi people who worked along with the Britishers prospered as well. Amitav Ghosh's record of the historical fact that the involvement and innovation in the art and science of ship-building during the colonial period reflects the colonial impact on the maritime interests of the community.

Not only in ship-building, Parsis competed with the East India Company all leading trades which included the export of Opium. When Bahram was not interested in accounting and other technical works, he expressed his desire of establishing an export concern of opium. The profit earned from opium made the East India Company try to get monopoly over opium trade. But he cannot get acceptance from his father-in-law at once. He argues that the traders "have been doubling and even tripling their investment with every consignment they send to China" (51). Bahram's preference of Opium trade and his argument in defense of it is based on the profit at the cost of human life are very much influenced by the colonizer's policy of life. Colonizer's only aim was to earn money at any cost.

Bahram's argument with his father-in-law recalls the historical fact of British's stand in opium trade which led them to fight with a big country. His talk also reveals the truth that the colonizers actually had

made the colonized addicts to drugs and doing so they earned money without having mercy on people who, in turn, become poor and died.

Colonizers followed the same obnoxious method everywhere in order to flourish in their trade. While people like Hukam Singh, husband of Deeti died because of the evil impact of the business tricks of the British, people like Bahram Modi follow the tactics adopted by them. But, it cannot be denied that both of them are negatively influenced. Bahram is the representative of the Parsi people who are very much influenced by the western ways of business dealings with which they flourished in the field of trade. Rohinton Mistry in this novel *such a long journey* has given glorious comments on the British rule because obviously under their rule thy enjoyed a lot. He further satirizes post-Independence rule in which he finds hurdles in the way of Parsi development.

Bahram, at last, is given permission. He established the export division of opium on his own effort. The export trade proves successful and Bahram gets opportunities to go to places like Canton in China. So far, he has remained a good for nothing so-in-law in father-in-law's houses. Now, he is a changed person with his victory in business. He is given the privilege of using the sip, the *Anahita,* built by the own hands of his father-in-law. While, in Bombay, he seems to be a dull person, in Canton, he becomes a successful active person: "In canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new person, one that has been previously dormant within him; he had become Barry Moddie, …" (52).

This change of identity due to dislocation is traced in almost all displaced people. Bahram's case suggests that the rise and development of Parsi community always corresponds to the rise of the Britishers. The change brought in the personality of Bahram is so tremendous that he is able to avail a companion congenial to his emotions and feelings and beget a male child for which his legal wife, in India, has done innumerable poojas and other superstitious practices. In a way, it can be said that the opium trade established by the English in China not only has enriched their own material wealth but also flourished an elect few like the Parsi people and individuals like Bahram.

The people who happened to migrate during the colonial period, mostly, had a second family unknown to the native land. Either a moment of happiness or a time of sadness makes man fall into a second life. Bahram who departs India as a dull man but with great ambition earns a lot of wealth and name in opium business in China, yet remains there a grave man but with certain dignity that lacks in India. But, he is completely broken when in china, he hars the sad news of the demise of his younger sister he does not have anyone to share his burden in heart. He is in dire need of someone consolation in his condition of isolation in the alien land. In such a situation, Bahram gets this form chi-mei. Though Bahram derives immense joy from chi-mei and their joy doubles with the arrival of the half breed son Ah Fatt, his typical Indian sensibility, despite being a Parsi, inherited due to long stay in India as groups, he feels uneasy about the relationship. But his friend Zadig, an Armenian by origin but settled in Cairo, does not consider it very seriously but only casually. His family has close business connection with Aden, Basra, Colombo, Bombay and several ports, in the far East, including Canton. This kind of touch with Multi-cultural atmosphere might have made him an easy-going man. On the part of Bahram, such a friendship is possible for him only due to opium trade established by the colonizers. Colonization in a way, made possible for people belonging to different cultures and countries to maintain cordial friendship among them. Multi-cultural and multi-ethnic practices were followed indiscriminately. Indians, irrespective of religion race and caste, consider single marriage practice as a traditional and decent one. But, Zadig is able to talk about the second family very casually and asks Bahram about it and also justifies it while Bahram feels embarrassed.

The talk of Zadig is a boast to Bahram. He reveals to him his secret heart which he would never open in India. Such second lives mostly end in the creation of a new mixed race. Throughout colonial history, in each and every region of the world such mixed people arose as well as suffer. Anglo Indians in

India are the offspring of the English man and the Indian woman. They have been granted constitutional privileges of having reserved seats in the parliament. In spite of being negligible minority, they enjoy such rights in India. But, in the west, where equality and fraternity are glorified as democratic ideals, the mixed breeds are mercilessly treated in an obnoxious way. For example, when French men started exploring North America, particularly Canada got united with the Aboriginal women of Canada and the result is the rise of a new race called 'Metis'. The pity about their life is that they can live neither as an aborigin nor as a white. They are not accepted in the white community as half breeds. In the same way, Amita Ghosh also refers to the plight of mixed people in a subtle and implicit manner through the character of Ah Fatt, whom even his own father is not ready to recognize in his own society among his kith and in.

Though Bahram has participated in almost all rituals and rites performed for getting a boy child by his wife in India and felt very happy over the birth of a male child to chi-mei, he is unable to introduce Ah Fatt as his son.

Bahram's life and adventures in China is an evidence to show that the colonial influence is reflected not only in a country or society at large but also in the lives of individuals. The colonial impact in the form of opium trade has changed the course of life of a moody, simple, gentle, pious, sensitive to community rules, obliged to kith and kin, man who has become active not only in his public life but also in his private life. He becomes resourceful enough to buy a ship and courageous enough to have another woman to satisfy his physical and emotional needs in the alien land. If trade and commerce had not been established beyond the territories and oceans by the colonizers, such transformation might not have happened in the personality and life of Braham Modi.

The westerners are responsible for a number of discoveries that have changed the courses of history. For example the discovery of the American continent and Australia brought changes not only in the life of aborigines living there but also it has its own political impact at international level. The U.S.A played a major role in the formation of the U.N with a view to imparting peace to the world. Ironically, it had caused the major damages by using the atomic energy in World War II and made Japan, the only country which was not conquered by any colonial power of Europe, the worst victim of the war. It is the paradoxical condition of the colonial accomplishments. There is a great progress in the field of science and technology but at the cost of environmental purity and natural resources and the aboriginal life which depends on nature. There is a development in the area of industries and trade at the expense of the health and wealth of the colonized. Yet, it is an undeniable fact that knowledge dissemination with the discovery of new places, new objects, plants, animals, cultural ways of life and people themselves became possible because of the colonial rule.

Amitav Ghosh, in *River of Smoke,* brings into light, the colonizers' interest and achievement in the field of plant life, through the personality of Mr. Ferderic Fitcher Penrose, an English man. Ghosh has actually made his imaginary characters wander along with the historical persons and this gives the novel a coloring of biography or history.

Penrose, in spite of being a trader who earn money from plants has his own typical scientific spirit in search of rare plants in the Far East and introducing them in other plants of the world. In such an endeavor, the researcher forgets his own self, neglects other petty needs related to personal appearance and many a time disregards him family. His obsession with the observation of the plants at his feet has been portrayed by Ghosh. Scientific pursuit of knowledge and involvement in scientific pursuit of knowledge and involvement in scientific experiment are like doing penance. In his interest in plant collection and preservation, Penrose had to spend most of his life time in the colonies of England leaving his wife in England.

During his expedition with the plants, in addition to adopting the methods followed in various countries, he himself introduced innovative ways to preserve them. He is a true colonizer not to miss anything to enrich and enlarge his resources in connection with this collection of the plants. Penrose is an

evidence to show that one of the effects of colonialism is knowledge dissemination resulting in monetary profits. Penrose got the opportunity of visiting china because of the influence of Sir Joseph Banks, who, in turn, had taken the decision of sending researchers like Penrose to China for collecting plants with aim of obtaining materialistic benefits due to the East India Company's large establishment in China for dealing with its flora wealth. The adventures of Penrose represent the scientific pursuit on new things which have changed the medieval world into the modern world.

One of the chief effects of Colonization is the rise of new races by the union of the male and the female belonging to two different races. Amitav Ghose, in *River of Smoke* mentions the conditions of these mixed race children born by the contact of people of various countries because of the colonial rule and the colonial trade. The experiences of Ah Fatt, the son born to the Parsi Indian and the Chinese woman and the children of George Chinnery begotten by the Indian woman as children represent the plight of mixed race children who are not mostly recognized as legal heirs of their parents. Not only the children but the women who gave pleasure to the men were not recognized. This is the plight of almost all second paramours belonging to other races and their progeny. And the colonial history has brought into light the fact that only the men folk of the white society had joined the women of the oppressed community in the colonized country and became responsible for the creation of a new race, which, in consequence, is not recognized a respectable class of the mainstream society. Contact between two countries led to union between two races resulting in new race which suffers once again under the colonial yoke.

Spread of English language, one of the chief consequences of Colonialism has been, as usual in any other novel is also mentioned by Amitav Ghosh in *River of Smoke*. Neel Rathan, who had already appeared in *Sea of Poppies,* had his role in *River of Smoke* also. He had been rich as a *zamindhar*. But because of the cunning plans of some English men, he had lost all his property and was taken as a prisoner to Mauritius by the *Ibis*. He escaped and joined Bahram Modi as his Munshi. He got this position because of his proficiency in English. Not only in language but also in dressing and manners, the colonial influence was realized. Bahram Modi's friend Zadig was an Armenian but due to his touch with the Whites, his manners of life had changed. Bahram wondered at Zadig exclaiming: "You've become a white man! A sahib"(RS, 105); Zadig was dressed in English fashion.

Zadig's reference to the use of English attire is a kind of cultural change caused by the Europeans and also his belief in the fruits of assimilation in the society which had been dominated by the whites. Amitav Ghosh also refers to Cricket game, the English national game played by the Indian boys. Bahram Modi had great admiration for the English fluency of Dinyar. But, being a tradition bound man and vexed by the impediments found in the path of his business, he just wondered disapprovingly: "And what was it all for, Zadig Bey? Was it just for this; so that these fellows could speak English, and wear hats and trousers, and play cricket?" (RS, 527)

Thomas Babington Macaulay in his Minutes, 1835 points out that the education system should be introduced in such a way that it must make the Indians English in their taste and sensibility. And nearly two hundred years of the colonial rule has made his wish fulfilled and it has been proved by Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke.*

Works Cited

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