

## Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*: Globalisation, Alternative Historiography, and Fictive Possibilities

Sanjukta Poddar  
Ashoka University

Fredric Jameson rightly calls globalisation the “proverbial elephant,” perceived differently by various “blind observers” (xi). Almost two decades since that statement, the phenomenon of globalisation continues to generate a wide array of opinions. In “Notes on Globalisation as a Philosophical Issue,” Jameson reiterates that an optimistic “decentering and a proliferation of differences” and a pessimistic “unification and standardization” are “indeed the two antithetical features of that elephant we are blindly attempting to characterize” (66). Two schools of thinkers have long dominated the cultural discourse on the phenomenon, aligned along the lines Jameson indicates, which, despite internal differences, have arguably ignored one or the other aspect of this behemoth. On the one hand, the more celebratory and optimistic assessment of globalisation and its related counterpart, cosmopolitanism, can be credited to Arjun Appadurai and Anthony Kwame Appiah, while a more cautious and critical stance is taken by Masao Miyoshi, Enrique Dussel, and Fredric Jameson himself, amongst others. However, a third view (Abu-Lughod; Behdad; Gupta), with its own internal variations, is emerging, which is able to offer more nuanced and updated arguments on the matter and move beyond polarised positions.

This paper enters this debate through a discussion of Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), the second novel in the *Ibis* trilogy. After a brief discussion of the various positions on globalisation indicated above, I examine how this text, an exemplar of historical fiction, engages with the conflicted phenomenon. In particular, I highlight two aspects of the long history of globalisation: the nature of transnational trade networks and their effect on host/captive nations; and the kind of mobility apparently facilitated under such economic and political conditions. The related aspect of cosmopolitanism is taken up as well, but within a revised framework. First, I argue that Ghosh's novel is a significant intervention which explores the long history of globalisation, charting its connection to forces of aggressive trade and colonialism (inaugurated with the European ‘age of expansion’ in the late fifteenth century), specifically during the early nineteenth century. However, it is also important to take into account other prior or parallel forms of global interaction beyond the Western expansionist narrative. Without these correctives, all forms of global trade, modernity and cosmopolitanism are reduced to being purely European constructs. Ali Behdad and Akhil Gupta's views are

harnessed to provide this alternative. Second, I read the text as a form of 'writing-from-below' which seeks to redress the universalist Eurocentric interpretation of History through the narration of an alternative micro-history which rests on the activation of sympathy and imagination rather than claims of 'authenticity'. Third, this article engages with the implications of globalisation on individuals and communities as portrayed by the novel and discusses whether any vision of an alternative or revised cross-cultural exchange is indicated by the author. Ultimately, history itself is held up for debate through the lens of fictive possibilities.

### 'The Many Facets of the 'Elephant'

In this section, I will outline the various perspectives on the debate. Walter D. Mignolo argues that the three main problematics which constitute the phenomenon of globalisation are: transnational capital; claims of facilitating greater access to networks of communication and mobility; and the effect on the nation-state. He writes:

Globalization, in transnational corporate lingo, is conceived as the last of the three stages of global transformation since 1945. In a more socio-historical vocabulary, globalization could be linked with Western expansion since 1500 and cast in terms of either Immanuel Wallerstein's 'world-system' or Norbert Elias's 'civilizing process' (32).

Nevertheless, Mignolo too is limited by a Eurocentric narrative of globalisation even while critiquing its European imperialist origins. For instance, as Behdad points out, though he claims to speak in a socio-historical idiom, the narrative falls back on Eurocentric events (such as the voyages of Columbus from 1492 onward) as its point of origin (67). This aspect will be elaborated upon shortly.

On the other hand, the celebratory discourse on globalisation views it largely as a twentieth-century phenomenon, peaking with "technological explosion, largely in the domain of transportation and information" (Appadurai 3), which facilitated speedy communication and mobility of an unprecedented kind. This is understood to have propelled access to manifold opportunities and mobility in people, products, ideas, culture, and finance (ibid.). While Appadurai, citing other scholars like Janet Abu-Lughod and Immanuel Wallerstein, accepts that global networks of exchange and communication have always existed, he still contends that the most current version is the one which can truly be termed 'globalisation'. Similarly, Appiah finds the related experience of cosmopolitanism to be a cultural product of the recent phenomenon of globalisation and an alternative paradigm of free cultural and social exchange (Appiah).

However, both Appadurai's and Appiah's assessments suffer from two serious drawbacks: first, there is a lack of analysis of the linkage between the current version of globalisation and prior forms of globalisation—whether of the expansionist variety which took off around 1500 or others prior to the period. Second, the structural

similarities of the economic, political and even cultural base of the phenomenon are being ignored. Further, such a perspective is based on a partial assessment which ignores the link between these ‘opportunities’ and enhanced communication and the material base of global capital which fuels them. Finally, this stance does not engage with questions such as how, by whom, and for whom such ‘exchange’ is facilitated, nor are its dynamics fully explored.

Enrique Dussel, somewhat similar to Mignolo, offers a different version of world-systems which partially revisits the moment of European modernity in the fifteenth century. He posits a universal narrative which finds the inclusion of AmerIndia in 1492 into the new world system central to European modernity. In addition, in his analysis of the contemporary situation, he looks beyond modernity and its progeny, postmodernism, to “transmodernity” which includes the erstwhile “peripheral” parts (such as AmerIndia) into this narrative, making an effective bid to break down the core-periphery binary (10). Similarly, Jameson connects and critiques present forms of globalisation to current American neo-liberal economic practices and cultural domination by contrasting them to the variety offered by moments of European modernity.

However, even while countering Eurocentrism and European modernity or offering more inclusive and alternative readings, these perspectives (Mignolo, Dussel, Jameson) continue to be limited in accepting Europe as central to the discourse. I agree with Behdad that the narratives of the late fifteenth century as the inaugural period of modernity—its originary moment as it were—and the west as its pioneer, remain unchanged, ignoring other global formations. While these approaches have enabled the charting of a somewhat more historicised perspective as well as a sustained engagement with the implications for culture, economics, politics, and the nation-state, yet a theoretical blind spot remains. Further, as Behdad comments in this regard, both these camps have been indulging in a vocabulary of neologisms, differences and disjunctures as well as being trapped within polarised positions, whereas exploring the continuities might be more productive (67-69).

The academic literature on globalization privileges the phenomena of change and novelty over those of repetition and restructuring, undermining thus the mimetically mediated nature of paradigm shifts and the interconnectedness of social orders. While technological advances have dramatically altered the velocity of global flow, the general structures of economic and political power do not differ that radically from their colonial counterparts (69).

A textual reading of Ghosh’s novel alongside historical sources will allow a further engagement with these perspectives.

The three key transnational networks Ghosh examines in the novel are: the movement of subalterns<sup>1</sup> who were part of the Indian Ocean travel routes; the triangular opium trade between India, China and Britain (particularly in the early eighteenth century); and the possibilities of exchange of flora and art. Through a close reading of Ghosh’s novel alongside secondary historical sources and opinions on the Indian Ocean trade as well as the first Opium War, I seek to

understand the author's revisionary project as counter to Eurocentric historiography.

In doing so, I am aware of the gap between historical fiction and history. This issue is mediated by understanding and theorising the gap as deliberate placement of authorial sympathy with the subalterns and with China—a nation often misconstrued as insular, conservative and belligerent (Edwardes; see also Marchant's article espousing a similar view on attitudinal differences), as opposed to the European norms of 'freedom' and 'progress'. In fact, these categories of freedom and progress themselves are problematised by Ghosh as Eurocentric essentialisms. While this narrative of Chinese obscurantism in the nineteenth century has already been challenged by historians (Hanes and Sanello *et al*), the inclusion of a sympathetic portrayal in a major fictional work on the Indian Ocean networks is a significant corrective within the domain of literature. Thus, Ghosh has attempted to widen the circulation of this version of events by siding with the Chinese, whom he perceives to be the underdogs of the Sino-British conflict. Interestingly, by reproducing primary historical sources within the body of the fictional text, he allows the readers to access these documents first-hand. He also provides them with a writerly space to formulate their own opinions beyond the author's stance. This constitutes a successful narratorial ploy to blur the boundaries between fiction and history so that historical fiction attains the potential of an alternative historiography that the author wishes to portray within his fictional creation. However, a note of caution is pertinent here as the author's fictional matrix might be successful in its critique while less so in the alternative possibilities it presents.

### *Girmityas, Convicts and Lascars*<sup>2</sup>

Antoinette Burton, in a discussion of the first novel of the *Ibis* trilogy, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), aptly terms Ghosh's practice of fiction as the writing of "world histories from below" (Burton 71), an epithet which can be extended to the second book of the trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011), as well. This text is as thoroughly researched as any academic work on the subject of opium trade, but what distinguishes Ghosh's novel is the author's ability to sympathetically imagine and articulate the lives of characters who would otherwise remain mere footnotes to events in 'world history';<sup>3</sup> in this instance, events leading up to the First Opium War. The exhaustive range of characters in the novel—both fictional and real—render a detailed worldview of early nineteenth-century India and China, and peripherally, Mauritius. In addition, Ghosh employs the narrative technique of polyphony (one he uses in *Sea of Poppies* as well) to recreate the late 1830s, in particular the oft-ignored global networks of indentured labourers, ill-treated *lascars* (sailors), penalised convicts, fugitives and other subaltern players in the transnational opium trade.

*Sea of Poppies*, the prequel to this novel, charts the protagonist Deeti's and her 'low-caste' lover Kalua's decision to become

*girmitiyas* (derived from the English word ‘agreement’ signed by indentured labourers) in order to escape the factional caste, class and gender violence rampant in their village in Bihar. It concludes at the beginning of their sea journey aboard the *Ibis*. The non-linear narrative of *River of Smoke* opens several years in the future, about fifty years ahead from where *Sea of Poppies* had left off, before going back to the events aboard the ship and what follows for some of its characters. Deeti, now the matriarch of the “Colver” (anglicisation of Kalua’s name) clan, visits her memory temple in Mauritius. There, she recounts the journey from India to Mauritius and the incidents that took place on the fateful *Ibis*. Through such memorialisation, also concretised in the physical structure of Deeti’s ‘memory temple’, Ghosh invites the readers to witness the perils of the difficult marine transportation and the extreme working conditions on the plantations. The point I wish to highlight here is that while Deeti and Kalua, like thousands of others,<sup>4</sup> were willing participants in the trade, the author effectively questions the historical and structural compulsions underlying such a ‘choice’ as well as the ‘mobility’ it facilitated. By reading the sea journey and situation in Mauritius alongside the events of Deeti and Kalua’s lives in Bihar in *Sea of Poppies*, I argue that Ghosh is able to effectively narrate the reality of many *girmitiyas* like them and how the rise in migrant labour was often due to the agrarian conditions in these provinces.

In this regard, it is pertinent to mention Ranajit Dasgupta’s discussion of the ruination of the agricultural economy of the provinces of Bihar and Bengal under British colonial rule. He writes that it was the destruction of local resources that acted as the initial trigger which subsequently launched a series of incidents leading to the migration of labourers from India to Britain’s maritime colonies (Dasgupta). Huge tracts of arable land in areas under British control—Bengal, Bihar and Malwa, were held captive to opium cultivation enforced by the British and their Indian cohorts—the *zamindars* and the traders. Combined with the effects of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 and drought, several farmers and share-croppers were forced to become *girmitiyas* in sugar plantations in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean, again controlled by the British (*ibid.*). Discussing this mobility, Lommarsh Roopnarine argues that it was not the oft-cited and apparently objective economic causalities such as “push and pull” *market* factors that were solely responsible for such migration.<sup>5</sup> Such a view suggests that this mobility was extrinsic to British colonial rule. Countering such a view, he writes:

India as a dispatching colony experienced uneven development because of British colonialism. Foreign penetration and imperialism disintegrated and dissolved the traditional economic and social structure in the countryside, rendering massive population available for recruitment (103).

This revisionary understanding of economic history is clearly portrayed in *River of Smoke* throughout the narrative. Read closely, the novel indicts any version of these events that seeks to bypass the systemic culpability of colonialism and imperial financial flows which

led to these routes of migration to be established in the first place. In this regard the narrative successfully plays the role of critical historiography.

In a further critique, Deeti recalls for the members of “La Fami Colver” (1) and the readers’ benefit the exploitative background of the Mauritian plantations before the arrival of Indian labourers. This site was rooted in the employment of African slaves and later, with the abolition of slavery, transitioned to the employment of *girmitiyas* like herself (National Archives of Britain). As an illustration, Deeti narrates the horrific tale of mass suicide of the fugitive slaves (*marrons*), who mistook soldiers sent to inform them about the abolition of slavery in 1834 (ibid.) for a search troop out to capture them. “That the soldiers *might be messengers of freedom was beyond imagining*—mistaking them for a raiding party, the *marrons* had flung themselves off the cliffs” (11, my emphasis). The inclusion of this seemingly marginal anecdote in the text is significant as it highlights the prior trade in slaves and their forced transportation to European-owned plantations in colonies such as Mauritius. The replacement of slaves with *girmitiyas* like Deeti and her shipmates from newly-acquired colonial territories in parts of Hindustan can be seen as an effective continuation of the pre-existing system of exploitation and domination. This discussion reinforces the argument that the flow of people cannot be perceived as voluntary mobility but a coercive migration of human capital under a capitalist globalised system, already established in the Indian Ocean area by the early nineteenth century. Throughout the novel, Ghosh subtly forges a network of characters with fascinating life stories which double as histories of the transnational movement of people under British imperialism.

Apart from indentured labourers, the fictional *Ibis* on its fateful journey from Calcutta to Mauritius was carrying another group whose bodies and lives were regulated by colonial hegemonic practices—convicts being transported to offshore prisons such as those in Mauritius. I propose that this transportation too was part of the routine administrative and regulatory mechanism employed to control the native populace. By the 1830s, the British exercised significant administrative and juridical control over acquired territories (Anderson). The criminalisation of deviant, incendiary or powerful groups, as well as their attempted segregation, were steps towards such control (ibid). As part of such regulation, the British had instituted statutes such as the Permanent Settlement Act for the seizure of the property of native elites and peasants and control over their corporeality. Under such regulations, *zamindars* were first transformed into pliable agents and mediators who had little responsibility towards the peasants in terms of improvement of the land but complete responsibility towards the Company in the matter of collection of taxes. Encouraging such absentee landlordism often led to further ruin of agricultural land and labourers, already burdened under the forcible cultivation of indigo<sup>6</sup> and opium. A drop in production led to a fall in tax collection on the part of the landlord and in case of a lapse in their duties, the infamous Sunset Law (Spear) ensured their utter ruin and

the consequent transfer of their estate to the East India Company. One such case, recounted in *The Sea of Poppies*, is that of Raja Neel Ratan Halдар —loosely based on a real character<sup>7</sup>—a gullible *zamindar* who falls prey to this colonial statute through the machinations of the wiley *gomastha* (an intermediary and agent often with conflicting loyalties). Again, a fictional re-creation of lives under colonial rule becomes Ghosh's mode of integration of critical historiography within his work, opening up these life-worlds for an imaginative reception. In the novel, Neel is one of the convicts being transported to an offshore colonial penitentiary aboard the *Ibis*. He is also one of the principal characters who is shown to have the potential to change, once he is beyond the pale of collusion and participation in colonial practices, through his own experience of 'subalternisation.'

Discussing the practice of punitive incarceration, Clare Anderson writes that Mauritius was one among several "penal settlements" where convicts were put to work on "infrastructural labour projects" (1).<sup>8</sup> Situating this perspective adjacent to the novel, I posit that long-term British colonial control over the penalised body was ensured through the *modus operandi* of transportation of convicts and undesirables to other colonial acquisitions in the neighbourhood. This served the dual purpose of sanitisation of the mainland as well as provision of cheap labour in the upcoming island colonies (Anderson). In this case as well, there is very little choice in the movement of people over such long distances. Rather, such practices perpetuated and consolidated colonial control across nations through their forcible integration into a transnational network of imprisonment, penalisation and labour.

Meanwhile, the third significant constituent of this mobile populace, the *lascars*, though only peripherally mentioned in the novel, remain crucial to the discourse. *Lascars* were non-European sailors drawn from various parts of South Asia and Africa, comprising ethnicities such as Malays, Bengalis, Goans, Filipinos, Arabs, Kutchis, Tamils, Malayalis and others who plied the sea routes around the Indian and Arabian Oceans for centuries (Ghosh, "Of Fanas"). Ghosh comments in an article on *lascars* that "the lives of the *lascars* should be of more interest today than before because they were the first Asians and Africans to *participate freely and in substantial numbers in a globalised workspace*" (ibid. 56, my emphasis). He indicates further that the multilingual Lascari used for communication among these sailors drew openly from the native tongues of this linguistically diverse population. I find that the interesting word here is "freely" and this open linguistic exchange beyond colonial hierarchical patterns indicates the possibility of an alternative pan-Asian and African ambience and lifestyle. The mobility of the *lascars* was not wholly controlled or impelled by the rigid constrictions of power and dominance displayed by the other (forcibly) mobile populations discussed so far. Having said that, a note of caution must be included. The colonial framework within which this network was located and the influence of that framework cannot be ignored. For instance, the demarcation and hierarchy among the sailors seems to have been stark,

as evinced on board the fictional *Ibis*. Only Europeans could captain ships while the *lascars* could never rise above the level of *serang* or boatswain (ibid.). On board the *Ibis* too, the captain is an Englishman and the Second Officer an American. In an illustrative case of the common fate of these sailors, Jodu, a *lascar*, is caught in a Chinese raid of the crab boats which smuggle opium from the harbour in Macau to inland Canton. This reflects the implication and suffering of *lascars* due to their often unwitting participation in the trade of indentured labourers as well as opium. Though these subordinate seamen often find means of subversion at least in the novel, in reality, the situation might not always have been so. In other words, the apparent freedom of a seafaring life in a “globalised workplace” was also severely constricted by a number of structural injunctions put in place by the imperial and colonial system. As such, the lives of each of these ‘mobile’ groups continue to evince traces of their systematic manipulation by instruments of colonial control often geared towards the motive of profit.

The issues I have attempted to highlight in this section are first, that the movement of goods, human beings and capital is not specifically a twentieth-century phenomenon. While Ghosh chooses to revisit the eighteenth-century as the setting for his fiction and discourse, historians and anthropologists have indicated the presence of such flows even earlier; for instance, Abu-Lughod discusses the global economy and world system of the thirteenth century and Gupta, the trade in spices in the Arabian Sea which flourished between the seventh and fifteenth centuries. However, Gupta also clarifies the difference between the present forms of globalisation and the earlier ones. The difference between the two is important for our discussion. According to him, the earlier instances of cross-cultural trade and contact were usually not conducted under the overarching auspices of systemic coercion, forced labour and economic exploitation. I argue that while these elements might have existed, they were not instituted on such grand scales as in later imperialistic enterprises, nor did they involve massive territorial appropriation. In addition, the mobility under discussion (in the early nineteenth century) varies significantly from any prior formation and cannot be viewed as a mutual cross-cultural exchange since the conditions and circumstances under which the flow occurred were often coercive, exploitative and asymmetrical. This will be interrogated further in the next section.

### The Conflicted Space of Canton’s *Fanqui*-Town in the 1830s: Opium, *I-Says* and *Abchas* <sup>9</sup>

One trend in historiography has sought to construct the events leading up to the First Opium War as solely the product of China’s obstinacy and protectionist behaviour, a view which persists to this day. For instance, Philip Allingham writes on the popular academic website, *Victorianweb*, “The Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars were the *direct result* of China’s isolationist and exclusionary trade policy with the West”



(webpage 1, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Leslie Marchant attributes the event to civilisational misunderstanding and “attitudinal differences” (webpage 1) between the two powers whereby resistance to the principles of “free trade” by Chinese Confucian beliefs was the prime cause. Till the 1980s, such a view held credence amongst Chinese historians as well (see Hao and Wang in *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. II). While these views have been met with resistance within historiography (see for instance Blue; Hanes and Sanello; Brook and Wakabayashi), I argue that Ghosh is reiterating this resistance through historical fiction in order to provide a more balanced perspective on the event.

In order to do so, Ghosh provides a deeply detailed imagination of daily life in the *fanqui* town of Canton. While he relies on archival material to construct his narrative, his tale is based on generating alternative possibilities rather than claims of historical authenticity. Canton, the tiny sliver of land at the tip of the huge mainland, was also the only port where foreigners were allowed to live and where opium could be traded, and constitutes the main site of Ghosh’s narrative. He attempts to facilitate a holistic view of the situation in 1838 leading up to the First Opium War. In this section, I examine various episodes culled from parts of the novel alongside historical sources, to understand how Ghosh employs micro-narrative as an alternative historiographical source.

In one of the many conversations in the text, Zadig Bey (an Armenian-Egyptian clockmaker) recounts for Robin Chinnery (an Anglo-Indian painter)<sup>11</sup> the long history of mutual contact between China and the larger body of foreigners. The subject-positions of these characters is also worth noting since it is precisely with such creative wanderers, who are without stake in the aggressive trade or military nexus, with whom authorial sympathy seems to lie. Arguably, they constitute the chosen mouthpieces who inform, comment on, critique, or ventriloquise the author’s opinions. Zadig and Robin discuss how this relationship had taken an acrimonious turn in the late eighteenth century, particularly due to the intrusive martial and commercial actions of the Europeans. The conversation is reproduced by Robin in a letter to Paulette, his childhood friend.

But how is it possible, I said, that people from Hindustan and Arabia and Persia were able to build monasteries and mosques in a city that is forbidden to foreigners? It was then that I learnt it has not always been thus: there was a time, said Zadig Bey, when hundreds of thousands of Achhas, Arabs, Persians and Africans had lived in Canton. Back in the time of the Tang dynasty (they of the marvellous horses and paintings!); the emperors had *invited* foreigners to settle in Canton, along with their wives and children and servants. (131)

However, Robin writes that in the eighteenth century, the Dutch, under the guise of constructing a hospital, had built fortifications, drastically changing the dynamics of this interaction.

From then on the Chinese knew the Europeans would stop at nothing to seize their land—and one thing you have to say about the Chinese is that unlike others in the East they are a practical people. When faced with a problem they try to find

a solution. And that over there was their answer: Fanqui-town. It was built not because the Chinese wished to keep all aliens at bay, but because the Europeans gave them every reason for suspicion. (132)

Thus, Ghosh attempts to deconstruct the image of inherent Chinese insularity towards foreigners read in acts such as the restriction of trade through the sole port of Canton; prohibition of entry into the walled and fortified city of Guangzhou; the non-existence of diplomatic relationships and allowance of limited commerce mediated by the *Co-hong*.<sup>12</sup> Through the mode of detailed discussions and conversations among the characters, Ghosh indicates his belief that these acts were not the norm but cautious, deliberate and gradual measures taken by the Chinese from the late eighteenth century onwards to control the belligerent and acquisitive attitude of the Europeans.

As such, Ghosh posits fiction as a rectification of prejudiced historiography, by providing an alternative version of events within the fictional matrix. The tool of polyphony rescues his work from presenting a hegemonic view of China, since internal dissidents such as members of the Co-Hong, the publisher of the *Chrestomathy*,<sup>13</sup> and Robin's lover are also afforded some expression, even if it remains limited. To bulwark this attempt, Ghosh draws heavily on primary historical sources such as Lin Zexu's (the new governor of Canton province and a direct envoy of the Emperor Duangong) letter to Queen Victoria, records of conversations between members of the Co-Hong and the European and American merchants, and edicts issued by the Chinese government, in order to expose the economic base of the conflict. Hypothetically, direct citations of these sources within the narrative are attempts to indicate an alarming parallel to the globalised trade markets of today. Ghosh himself draws attention to such similarities:

And today when people talk about the doctrine of free trade, they do it as though it were this thing without any history, as though it had nothing preceding it. And yet, this doctrine comes to us soaked in blood and soaked in criminality. (Alford, interview with Ghosh)

This aspect of trade is foregrounded in an episode from the novel wherein in 1816, Bahram Modi, the Parsi opium trader from Bombay, and Zadig Bey have a fortuitous fictional meeting with Napoleon Bonaparte, imprisoned on the island of St. Helena. In a conversation with the "Emperor," they present the details of the triangular relationship between India, Britain and China (57). They mention how the initial legitimate trade between China and Britain—mainly in tea, silk and porcelain—was very profitable for the Chinese and skewed the balance of trade in favour of China due to the huge demand for tea in England. Hanes and Sanello explain that while the Chinese accepted payment only in Spanish taels, all British efforts to expand the export of goods beyond the existent commerce in tin and calico were rejected by the cautious and self-sufficient Chinese nation. In 1793, Britain's first envoy to China, Lord Macartney, tried to make overtures of friendship and trade by offering gifts to the Qianlong Emperor. The Emperor rejected the gifts and replied: "I set no value on strange or

ingenious objects and have no use for your country's manufactures," rebuffing all efforts to expand imports (ibid. 157). In their continued aggressive efforts to capture the Chinese economy, the British started exporting increased amounts of opium to penetrate the resistant market and within about forty years, it became the most valuable overseas commerce for Britain (Blue). Ghosh informs the readers via the same fictive conversation that while opium was not introduced to China by the British (its medical usage had long been known there), it was the high amounts of the British export of this product which in turn dangerously expanded the market. Ultimately, these aggressive commercial moves helped opium to percolate down to the commoners and formed a ruinous addiction. For Britain, this resulted in the favourable reversal of the balance of payment but as mentioned already, the consequences for India and China were catastrophic (58-59).

Read simultaneously with historical accounts, the text makes apparent that the conversion of China into a huge market for opium simultaneously involved the greater ruination of parts of India—an exploitative chain informed by imperial hegemony. Once the monopoly of East India Company over trade with China was abolished in 1813 (ibid. 6), traders from other nations such as America and Holland, as well as India—the Parsis in particular—became participants in the trade. Some Chinese businessmen, mainly the members of the Co-Hong, were also part of the trade. Ghosh dramatises the debates and negotiations which took place in Canton between the mandarins (Chinese bureaucrats) and opium traders in the days leading up to the war. He weaves fictional characters with those drawn from life to depict the Anglo-Sino war as one largely forced by Britain in order to gain from the continuation of the opium trade. The novel reserves its absolute censure for the leading opium traders of Canton such as Matheson, Jardine and Dent, figures from history who have been re-imagined based on documentary evidence. Ghosh also reproduces extracts of several speeches made by them as well as others such as John Slade, the owner of *Canton Register* (a contemporary English newspaper), to show how they self-righteously defended the smuggling of opium and its illegal trade (120). Also presented are the speeches of the miniscule anti-opium lobby led by Charles King, an American trader who dealt in only legal goods (121).

The trading lobby's relationship with the sympathetic British government of the day is also noteworthy. Initially, the lobby had hailed Adam Smith's principle of "free trade" as the justification of business in contraband goods and refused any governmental intervention on either side. They had vehemently argued against the Chinese government's injunctions claiming that they were merely catering to a pre-existing demand for opium. This logic, of course, ignored the fact that it was the ready availability of opium and its addictive nature which led to its extensive use and demand that only increased with time—a fact evinced by the action of the novel. Hanes and Sanello observe: "The fact that the opium found no eager buyers in China in 1782 suggests that it had not yet become a nation of addicts,

although that would change dramatically in the next century. Indeed, fifteen years later, the British were importing four thousand chests per annum into China” (89). The dubious standards of Britain in the matter is made apparent again when Bahram narrates the tale of how the British government ruined the ship-building trade of the Mistrys in India through unfair trade limitations, ignoring their own vaunted principle of free trade.

Again, Ghosh attempts to posit the version of events he favours by highlighting the duplicitous standards of the British traders. To draw these events within the fictional matrix, he dramatises them through the use of archival material as well as historical accounts often blurring the limits between fiction and primary sources. Closely following such sources (mentioned earlier), the same British merchants who had advocated governmental non-interference at an earlier point appeal to Charles Elliot (the Trade Superintendent and British Resident) for help when they are trapped in Canton by the Chinese government. The latter, represented by Lin Zexu, orders the traders to stop the trade in opium at Canton. Ghosh reproduces the letter sent to Queen Victoria by Zexu, ably translated by Neel, now a munshi and a multilingual translator. Zexu writes (in Neel’s ‘translation’ of the letter):<sup>14</sup>

It appears that this poisonous article is manufactured by certain devilish persons in places subject to your own rule. It is not of course either made or sold at your bidding, nor do all the countries you rule produce it, but only certain of them. We have heard that England forbids the smoking of opium within its dominions with the utmost rigour. This means you are aware of how harmful it is. Since the injury it causes has been averted from England, is it not wrong to send it to another nation? How can these opium-sellers bear to bring to our people an article which does them so much harm for an ever-grasping gain? Suppose those of another nation should go to England and induce its people to buy and smoke the drug—it would be right that You, Honoured Sovereign, should hate and abhor them. (186)

He questions the differential policy of the English wherein the export of opium was banned in England but the English remained active in its production and trade in China. While the English government maintained an overt stance of condemning the trade, it was they who turned a blind eye to its continuation, and even facilitated its production in India under the control of the East India Company. Similarly, Elliot apparently toed the official line and complied with Chinese orders, only to return the next year to lead the war against China. Clearly, Ghosh is commenting on the importance of the opium trade to the British as it was their most profitable business and the authorities could not abandon it. There is an implicit isomorphism suggested between the interests of the trading lobby and that of the British government. This view gains credence from the fact that trade pre-empted territorial conquest and colonization as in the case of Opium Wars. As Zadig Bey observes to Bahram, the fact that the conflict is between two strong nations did not justify British action against China. “In life it is not only the weak and helpless who are always treated unjustly. Just because a country is strong and obdurate and has its own ways of thinking—that does not mean it cannot be wronged” (74).

The most significant subject-position in *River of Smoke* is that of the Indian Parsi trader Bahram Mody.<sup>15</sup> Having traded in Canton for several years, he has ignored any moral compunctions he may have felt about the ramifications of his participation in the opium trade. The fact that people from all over Hindustan in Canton were collectively called “Achha” (which implies “bad” in Chinese; ironic, since in Hindi it means the opposite—‘good’), even though they had little similarity in language, appearance or customs and certainly did not regard themselves as citizens of one nation, is significant. It reflects the fact that the Chinese were aware of the involvement and role of ‘Indian’ merchants in this exploitative trade. As a citizen of another colonised territory and one who condemns British commercial practices in India yet continues to participate in the illegal trade in opium in China, Bahram is censured heavily for his hypocrisy on the issue of “free trade.” He deliberately chooses to remain ignorant of the irony of participating, profiting from and extending the same principles and practices of exploitation to another nation through his trading activity. In the novel, when Charles King calls upon him to agree to the ban on opium, he ignores the ethical for financial safety. While his subordinate, Neel, now having gained insight through his own experience as a displaced ‘raja’, contextualises Bahram’s participation as the result of constricted circumstances created by colonial economic stipulations, the opium trader is ultimately unable to forgive himself.

Ironically, he falls victim to opium addiction at this desperate stage, implicating himself in the same evil he has promoted for so long. In his opium-induced vision, he confesses to his bursar Vico that he had sold his soul to Ahriman, the embodiment of evil in the Zoroastrian faith he is a practitioner of. His sense of guilt leads to suicide when he drowns himself in the “river of smoke” of his own creation. The novel ends at this point but history documents that Jardine, Matheson and others—the largest stakeholders in the opium trade—returned to England and lobbied successfully for military intervention in China, which led to the war and even greater ruin for the Chinese (Hanes and Sanello). Deploying authorial discretion, Ghosh envisages a more ethical end for the fictional character of Bahram Mody, which redeems him in the eyes of the readers while allowing facts to speak for historical characters such as Matheson and Jardine.

The last section of the article discusses possible avenues of a constructive and alternative exchange beyond the one controlled and informed by exploitative and authoritative structures. It is important to distinguish the two forms of cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism since there has been a dangerous development in current times wherein the champions of globalisation laud the apparent mobility of people, ideas and culture as a facet of “cosmopolitanism” while simultaneously forwarding exploitative economic projects.

## Possibilities of an Alternative Cross-cultural Exchange: Nature, Art and People

For this section, I refer to Akhil Gupta's essay wherein he discusses "discrepant globalisations" and "cosmopolitanisms," an anthropological and historical revision of these concepts. Gupta's essay is informed by the awareness of the pejorative links between mercantilism, territorial acquisitions, and globalisation which were further concretised by the rationalising impulses of the European Enlightenment. His critique of globalisation reifies these concerns but does so by positing an alternative paradigm of global contact which includes economic and cultural exchange actualised in vastly different conditions, prior to the formation of the hyphenated entity—the modern nation-state. By delinking the idea of cosmopolitanism from its present oppositional position vis-à-vis the nation, he is able to recuperate the positive connotations of the term on its own merits. Referring to the work of Sheldon Pollock on medieval India and travelogues from the fourteenth century, Gupta also argues that an understanding of globalisation and cosmopolitanism as a recent phenomenon (Appadurai and Appiah), is a-historical. Further, he contends that such a stance displays a limited understanding of the history of trade and international contact, which only serves to moor it more firmly within the constrictions of a Eurocentric Enlightenment genealogy that bypasses prior formations. While it remains a limited attempt since cosmopolitanism is Eurocentric in origin and draws its legitimacy from Enlightenment discourse, particularly Kantian philosophy, it is crucial that novel forms of theorising global contact are proposed, especially at the level of individual actors, to avoid the proverbial risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.<sup>16</sup> What his stance enables is, first, a critical engagement with present forms of globalisation and cosmopolitanism and second, the opening up of the possibility of alternative paradigms of relationships between individuals, if not nations, based on practices (and not the mere rhetoric) of mutuality and respect.

Discussing the Indian Ocean trade network between the seventh and fifteenth centuries (before the disruptive arrival of the Portuguese), Gupta comments,

Not only did these networks lead to an incredible exchange of ideas, technologies and goods, they also brought people from different lands into contact with each other, often for extended periods of time. This created centers of cosmopolitanism that, in their extensiveness and reach, were comparable, and perhaps even more intensive, than anything we can observe in the world today—at a very different moment of globalisation. (7)

Gupta's alternative version of cosmopolitanism is a useful category to think through the three arenas of cross-cultural relations Ghosh constructs within the novel. Its difference from other forms of cosmopolitanism lies in the deft manoeuvre, almost a sleight of hand, that Ghosh is able to manage. On the one hand, he is critical of macro-formulations such as globalisation and cosmopolitanism and on the

other, he indicates the possibilities of alternative modes of global contact at the micro-level, particularly at the level of characterisation. Thus, I argue that Ghosh is presenting the possibility of vibrant networks even within a moment of rupture constituted by the First Opium War that reflects his belief in such instances. Of course, such belief remains open to further questions, such as how broad were the contours of this possibility and how wide the access?

In this regard, Ghosh highlights three modes of cross-cultural existence that display a degree of critical self-reflexivity and distance from exploitative trade networks; but these represent a miniscule section within the wide maritime world. These are: nature, specifically plants of medicinal and aesthetic value, art and creativity, and to an extent, the hybridity of lineages and lives. However, it must be clarified that this is a possibility actualised within the fictional world of the *Ibis* trilogy impelled by the author's optimism and imaginative skills that draws energy from the author's own belief in the possibilities of a 'cosmopolitan' life for his characters. Here, we notice an important distinction between history writing and historical fiction wherein the former opens up imaginative realms and lives and allows subalterns a degree of agency and succour that history cannot.

The key role in the mobility and exchange of plants is played by Paulette Lambert, the daughter of a French botanist, or a white 'memsahib' who has chosen to 'go native'. The love for native flora and nature inculcated in her by her father during the time they spent living in the environs of the Botanical Garden of Calcutta leads to her complete 'naturalisation'. When she is orphaned and left penniless, she decides to travel on the *Ibis* in order to continue her botanical explorations in Mauritius. A fortuitous meeting with Frederick Penrose, "a noted nurseryman and plant-hunter" (19), results in her employment as gardener and botanist on his sailboat *Redruth* which plies the waters between England and China with the express purpose of transporting plants. Through this sub-plot, Ghosh brings within the ambit of discussion the prevalent English obsession with exotic plants and landscape gardening. It must be kept in mind that the instinct underlying the European interest in extending the knowledge about flora and fauna was also part of the Enlightenment epistemological project.<sup>17</sup> The commercial aspect of this project also indicates the exploitation, in several instances, of acquired territory through the plunder of its natural resources.

As Ghosh narrates, the Chinese had resisted this European exploratory endeavour too, as they were well aware of its exploitative potential. In the novel, Joseph Banks, the Curator of King's Garden in Kew, comments to Penrose: "Unlike the inhabitants of other botanically blessed countries, the Celestials seemed to have a keen appreciation of the value of their natural endowments" (40), so that acquisition of plants from China was limited to nurseries in Canton and Macau. Having said that, what distinguishes the *Redruth*'s journey to Macau (of which Paulette is a part) is the introduction of the idea of exchange of plants of Latin America and Europe with those of China. The mutuality of the encounter conducted as a consensual barter in the

flora of the three continents alters its dynamics from that of a solely material and epistemological plunder or appropriation.

Similarly, another avenue of a creative cross-cultural contact which carries the potential for mutual enrichment is the exchange of artistic styles and practices. The Cantonese school of art was looked down upon by both European artists such as George Chinnery as well as the practitioners of Chinese High Art. When Robin visits a prominent Canton studio, he is surprised to learn that the Cantonese artists, practitioners of a hybrid form, are less condescending than the purists, freely assimilating western techniques as well as indigenous ones. The author indicates that the practices of copying and ‘faking’ can also be understood as modes of learning. As Robin (himself an illegitimate child of mixed parentage) reflects sadly in one of his many letters to Paulette, “Canton’s studios produce a *bastard* art—a thing no more likely to be loved by its sire than is its human avatar” (89). These letters are an enlightening discourse on prevalent artistic styles and how each is unique and creative in its own way. Robin reflects that while European art deems itself superior in its confidence of more realistic depictions through the deployment of perspective, European artists ignore the potential of miniature painting with its ability to simultaneously depict multi-layered complexity in great detail. Similarly, the Chinese style of scroll painting has a dynamic narrative potential lacked by the other two. Thus, the “bastard” Robin is the one who sees through arbitrary hierarchy and promotes a more open assimilation of various cultures, which, I argue, is the visionary stance of the novel as well.<sup>18</sup> It is he who is trusted by the author with the responsibility of an artistic pictorial depiction of Canton as it was before the Opium Wars, clearly reflecting authorial sympathy as in the case of Neel’s *Chrestomathy*. Robin Chinnery decides to execute this subject on a scroll, merging his own training in Western art with Chinese traditional practices in the cosmopolitan space of alternative and mutually fruitful interaction between cultures.

To reiterate, while Ghosh is critical of the dynamics of opium trade which led to the two Opium Wars, he is simultaneously projecting the possibility of new modes of transnational interaction which operate on different paradigms. Again, like in the case of globalisation, such opportunities might have been available to a select few and might also be product of Ghosh’s own optimistic assessment rather than historical possibility. In fact, Ghosh is more ambiguous about a similar scope in the interpersonal relationships forged by individuals of disparate national or cultural groups in the novel. For example, through the mention of romantic and sexual encounters such as those between Chi-mei and Bahram Mody; Zadig Bey and his Ceylonese wife, and George Chinnery and his Indian mistress, Ghosh indicates an era of pre-Victorian flexible attitudes in Britain and its colonies. However, the dynamics of such relationships were often informed by a clear hierarchy—the mobile, upper-class men of powerful communities and the lower-class subjugated women of colonised nations. It is only Zadig Bey who openly acknowledges the seriousness of his relationship and, ultimately, decides to live with his



Ceylonese family at the cost of societal censure and even exclusion, especially from profitable familial networks. Moreover, the offspring of such “illicit” unions remained marginalised figures in both societies: passed off as a nephew in the case of Robin Chinnery, or deprived of the paternal name and recognition, like Ah Fatt. Thus, this “hybridity” cannot be celebrated as an absolute triumph over entrenched social prejudices or national-cultural stipulations and it would be several years before this could be actualised. Robin and Ah Fatt’s condemnation of their fathers and their own unease regarding their ontological status reflects their liminal status.

Within the novel, it is only through those characters who have been sensitised to various cultures and accepted the intricacies of both, that there are hints towards the possibility of an alternative cross-cultural practice. Figures such as Zadig Bey, Paulette and Neel, and Baburao and Asha, who have endeavoured towards a plural mode of being beyond ascribed cultural codes or regional affiliations, indicate a redemptive possibility. Paulette’s French father is presented as an ardent botanist beyond any mercenary motive who allows his daughter to be reared unhindered by racial prejudice. In fact, Paulette develops a close relationship with her *ayah*’s son, Jodu, and both grow up as close as siblings. Thus, she is able to move beyond the image of the colonial “memsahib” to a woman who is comfortable in both a sari and a gown, and in French as well as Bengali. Similarly, Baburao and Asha represent an interesting paradigm of heterogeneity as ethnic Chinese who are also comfortable with their Bengali affiliations. Finally, the several shifts in Neel’s character also delineate his gradual cultural and ontological evolution, even while it runs parallel to his economic and social decline. As a humble munshi of the rich seth Bahram, he reflects upon his past life and realises his earlier naiveté, arrogance and disengagement with reality. Neel’s key role in saving Bahram from imprisonment and his astute understanding of the role of colonialism in the destruction of not just nations and their economies, but in the corruption of the spirit of these nations and their people too, reflects this change. Towards the end of the novel, his attempt to compile a *Chrestomathy* of pidgin takes him deeper into an understanding of the Chinese worldview and indicates an optimistic trend for the future.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* is a significant text in the study of globalisation and cosmopolitanism. It cautions us against the patterns of history as well as indicates the avenues for multicultural contact which can bypass the exploitative transnational financial networks.

Gupta correctly highlights the fact that there are limits to the concept and practice of ‘cosmopolitanism’. He writes,

If by cosmopolitanism one means the *seamless* negotiation of difference, and the ability to operate in different cultural and social contexts *without any difficulty whatsoever*, then it could be argued that this is an *utopian ideal* which even the high modernist versions of that term could only gesture toward, but not ever possibly fulfill. Cosmopolitanism always has a shape, a character, an ethos and an ethics (13, my emphasis).

Certainly, *River of Smoke* reflects the awareness of the impossibility of such “utopian ideal(s),” particularly in the case of macro-formations such as nations, trade lobbies or large business enterprises. However, fiction, like history, is an interpretative tool, limited as well as enabled by the author’s subject-position. Within the enabling space of fiction, fleeting utopian moments of connection at the level of individuals are actualised. The book opens with the description of one such moment—Deeti’s vision atop the *Ibis* when the convicts attempt their daring escape. At the heart of the chaos that is the storm rests the calm “eye” through which Deeti has a glimpse of the future (7). Arguably, Amitav Ghosh, the author, like his female protagonist, perched on a vantage point as a creative visionary, is making a similarly daring prediction about future possibilities, expressing hope for mutuality and equality within the chaos of globalisation and mirages of cosmopolitanism.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. Subalternity is understood here as a general condition of those disenfranchised from networks of power on the Indian Ocean route. However, this does not preclude particular instances of agency, especially within the fictional framework where such agency propels the narrative and suggests alternative ontologies and possible realities.

2. These are terms used by Ghosh in the novel.

3. In itself a problematic formulation evincing the Eurocentric bias of history as a discipline.

4. The numbers are available on the National Archives of UK website.

5. This implies a shortage of work and livelihood opportunities in one place and an excess in other, leading to migration. However, the link of colonialism between the two zones is ignored in using such an explanation for Indian Ocean migration.

6. Discussed and critiqued in Dinabandhu Mitra’s *Neeldarpan*.

7. For details, please refer to “Real and Fictional Characters: The Strange Case of Neel Rattan Halder.” 9 May 2013. Web. 14 Apr. 2015. <<http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=5970>>.

8. The main focus of this work is a discussion of the practices of inscription of “permanent criminality” and colonial power on the body of convicts through tattooing or *godna*.

9. *Fanqui* is “foreigner” in Chinese, *Ahcha* is the local Chinese term for Indians and *I-Say* for the British, all of which carry derogatory connotations, as explained in the novel.

10. See also Niall Ferguson's *Empire* in this regard.

11. A fictional character portrayed as the illegitimate son of George Chinnery who is a historical character and a well-known painter based in India and later, China.

12. *Co-hong* is the pidgin word for the Chinese merchants who traded with foreigners.

13. *The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language Of Commerce In Southern China*—a compendium of pidgin put together by the character, Neel Halder.

14. The actual text of the letter is widely available (accessed through the *World History Sourcebook*).

15. Indeed, the Indian trading contingent in Canton at the time was led by a Parsi from Bombay (Brook and Wakabayashi 2002).

16. In her article on cosmopolitanism or the lack thereof in the Andamans, Aparna Vaidik writes: "Cosmopolitanism is fundamentally a European epistemic frame moored in writings of Enlightenment thinkers but one with its own chequered genealogy... Maritime histories tend to emphasize processes of exchange that undoubtedly represent and/or presume the metanarrative of globalization (either from Europe; from below; old or new). However, the question one could ask is – Does the mere existence of continuous exchange in ideas, material and humans and the co-existence of diverse groups of population in coastal areas or port towns or shared climatic and cultural mores constitute cosmopolitanism?<sup>1</sup> Was the Andamans' society cosmopolitan?" (22) While I agree with her fundamental premise wherein she questions the very concept of cosmopolitanism and how spaces like Andamans problematise it by exposing its hollowness, I would argue that Ghosh is able to manage to bypass the thorny issue through a deft maneuver discussed on page 13 of this essay and indicate possibilities of cross-cultural contact.

17. For an elaboration of this, see Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*.

18. Another transnational mobile group present in China were the missionaries who forwarded the colonial "civilizing project" using the ruse of religion to undermine the local cultural practices. They followed in the wake of traders or even led them in territorial conquest and also constituted a significant lobby in pressurizing the British government to open up more areas of China for propagating their faith. As Zadig Bey says, they "hold the Bible in one hand and trade in opium with the other" (89).

19. Some other locales of plurality are also mentioned in the novel which is beyond hierarchies or racial and colonial control. One is the floating clothes market of Singapore, which is geographically located between Mauritius and Canton. Another instance is old Malacca which is so unlike the new “white town” of Singapore with its segregated racial spaces. In contrast, British clubs in Bengal and Bombay are restricted to Europeans whereas the club in Canton cannot afford such rigidity due to exigencies of trade which involved Hindustanis like Bahram.

20. This paper owes much to the insights provided at various stages by friends, particularly Niyati Sharma, Ashish Mitter, and Aparna Vaidik; the latter’s comments were crucial in thinking through several historical questions and avoiding many pitfalls! In addition, I am indebted to the anonymous peer reviewer for her/his astute comments. The shortcomings that remain are all mine.

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