

# A Study of Amitav Ghosh's novel, *FLOOD OF FIRE*

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## Abstract:

Three novels comprise Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy: *River of Smoke* (2015), *Sea of Poppies* (2014), & *Flood of Fire* (2015). This historical book chronicles the years 1839–1841, when the British took control of Hong Kong & Chinese endured what is known as the "hundred years of humiliation" due to the opium wars that ensued. A few months before to the First Opium War's starting in 1839 is when the tale begins. The narrative of Amitav Ghosh shifts from India to China, painting a vivid picture of how men & women coped with the influence of European empires in the nineteenth century. As Amitav Ghosh explains, Europe imposed stringent trade regulations on China and India. All three of his books in the trilogy center on the zenith of European civilization As the old ways of life, culture, & traditions of ancient civilizations are threatened, this book shows how individuals might become wealthy. Finally, in an effort to revive the dwindling opium trade, Britain declares war on China.

**Key Words:** humiliation, civilization, community.

## INTRODUCTION

There are primary and secondary storylines in this book. Regarding the main characters and minor ones. The village of Fanqui serves as the setting for the story. It was a hub for the opium trade between China & Europe. *Flood of Fire* mostly takes place in Bombay & Calcutta in its first half. At the start of the First Opium War (1840–1842), the novel's protagonists and antagonists are on display. The events of *Sea of Poppies* bring Kesri Singh, the brother of Deeti a main character and Kalua, a lower-caste labourer to light. Kesri had no idea that Deeti had been forcibly removed from her home in Bihar and had become a member of the Ibis family, who travelled to Mauritius with Deeti. Today, the whole Singh family feels shame over what happened. The son of a farmer named Ram Singh, Kesri defied his father's wishes and enlisted in the dying Mughal army, instead joining the ranks of the British, who were then the dominant force in India. Kesri, an Indian soldier, becomes a close friend of his British officer Captain Neville Mee after enlisting in the Bengal Army as a sepoy. The East India Company's army had a complex inner workings, as described by Amitav Ghosh: the sepoy battalions, which were composed entirely of upper-caste Bengalis, could act as khap panchayats, with the informal power to dismiss troops whose families had disobeyed marriage orders. Disturbingly, Kesri is pronounced as being kicked out of society and punished for his sister Deeti's "sins" is something Captain Neville Mee cannot change. The business purposefully stoked upper-caste stereotypes and was hesitant to become involved in such issues. The brother of Deeti's late husband is his boss at the East India Company, where he works.

After her husband Bahram passed away, Shireen Modi found herself in Bombay, a widow burdened with innumerable troubles. After Bahram's spouse dies, Shireen finds herself trapped by her brothers, who are taking advantage of the situation by taking care of Bahram's unsuccessful opium trade & Bahram's financial responsibilities. When Shireen learns the secret that her husband had a kid named Ah Fatt from a lover named Chi-Mei, who is now deceased, her life takes a tragic turn. Zadig Bey, a close friend of Bahram's, tells Shireen about Ah-Fatt and Chi-Mei and persuades her to pay her husband a visit at his tomb in Hong Kong. An Indian Parsi woman named Shireen Modi has departed for China to find Ah-Fatt, the half-Chinese kid of her late husband. She becomes romantically involved with the American friend of her husband, who is now assisting her in her hunt. Additionally, she is cognizant of the fact that her traditional Parsi

community will condemn her for her intimate relationship with this Armenian Zadig Bey. American soldier Zachary Reid, whose parents were white & slave, goes into commerce under the guise of being white. Zachary Reid, an American sailor & shipwright, helped Kalua, Deeti's second husband, and a few of the other oppressed Ibis members escape the ship before it reached Mauritius. Born to a slave and her white master who pretends to be white, Zachary quickly discovers that he can make more money than a penniless American could ever dream of by selling opium to the Chinese, just like his boss Benjamin Burnham has argued. This would bring the Chinese the invaluable benefits of free trade & free them from their tyrannical rulers. His liaison with Benjamin Burnham's wife, a powerful British opium dealer, & Zachary's trial in Calcutta followed his release. Even though Zachary achieved great success in life, he was an abomination. Canton, Macau, & Hong Kong also have other significant and lesser figures. The Ibis, Anahita, & Hind are the three ships where much of the action unfolds. The Hind is a new addition, although the first two ships are familiar from the preceding chapters. The Brits gathered a massive army and unleashed the armament of their sophisticated vessels, the most formidable of which was the iron-clad steam-propelled frigate, Nemesis a name that was deemed unsuitable by the Chinese because of her destructive capabilities.

Members of the cast, such as Shireen Modi, Kesri Singh, & Neel Rattan Halder, all suffer from different types of hidden shame. Rumor has it that Deeti, Kesri Singh's sister, brought shame upon the Singh family. If the Parsee community found out that Shireen Modi was seeing her husband's close friend Zadig Bey, an Armenian, they would undoubtedly look down on her. The erstwhile Rajah of Raskhali, Neel Rattan Halder, is currently hiding out from the law since he faces forgery allegations & would be immediately arrested and sent to prison if caught.

Seth Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, a Parsi Indian merchant who has strong connections with the British parliament and British merchants was a business partner of William Jardine. He played an important role to start the Opium War. He also earned a lot through opium trade. These two traders wanted to get the support of Bombay merchants for a Chinese expedition. made it clear that one of the expedition's principal goals is to extract compensation for the opium that was confiscated by Commissioner Lin.

Chinese were simple, generous and practical people but all these qualities were misused by the Europeans for their opium trade and started to colonize them. Later China with their bitter experiences in the past with the Europeans they built a special town for the Europeans in Canton called Fanqui town. Chinese built this town for the Europeans to save themselves from the Europeans. In Canton, traders were more in number and the ordinary people were in a pathetic state no proper education they were treated as outcasts. In Canton, even ordinary boat-people are treated like outcasts. These ordinary people were working-class people.

In order for readers to fully appreciate the story, Amitav Ghosh has provided sufficient historical context. The language, the events, & personalities are all given similar weight by him. A big conflict sparked by the region's free commerce is settled by the use of military force in the novel. When Neel witnessed one of the Opium War fights, he was astounded:

How could a handful of men, in the space of a few minutes or hours, determine the destiny of millions of individuals who had not yet been born? Who would dominate whom, who would be wealthy or impoverished, master or servant for decades to come how could the result of those few minutes be so consequential.

As eyewitnesses to history, the sepoys, small-time businessmen, & opium addicts are immersed in a world of vengeance, carnage, violence, conflict, and devastation. The Bengal Infantry sent over 400 men across the ocean to battle in China. In a letter sent by a sepoy, the Indian soldiers detail the precarious situation in which they are fighting.

We are going to a place that is very far. We know nothing about it. If I do not return I want to make sure that my field with the mango tree goes to my brother Fateh Singh. It saddens me that I have not fulfilled all my obligations to my family. For that reason alone will I regret my death.

According to Neel Rattan Halder, who summarizes the shift in oppressive institutions, the English were the ones who were immune from the law when it came to other people; they had become the new Brahmins of the world.

A youthful Indian sepoy named Kesri Singh serves as the company's commander for the East India Company. "So much death; so much destruction and that too visited upon a people who had neither assaulted nor harmed the men who were so intent on enveloping them in this flood of fire" is what Kesri Singh says when he looks at the carnage.

A few of the supporting characters in Flood of Fire have interesting stories to tell. Examples are Raju & Dicky. They are both members of the "banjee-boys" team, which consists primarily of young people from the "Eurasian" ethnic group. Scholarly work on the Company's army has mostly ignored the banjee-boys' experiences. The artist George Chinnery was born in Britain but lived for the most part in India and China. The novel's characters eloquently represent societal expectations regarding race, religion, and culture.

On board the Ibis, a converted slave ship that sailed from India to Mauritius, are the protagonists & antagonists from the Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke trilogy. That only a select few of people, like Deeti, are able to evade the inevitable fate that befalls them on the sugar plantations, taking on new personas. While the Chinese government is trying to outlaw the opium trade in Fanqui-town, where Europeans reside and trade, new merchants from all over the world are flooding in to keep it going, backed by the East India Company.

The British took Neel Rattan Halder, who had been a Rajah before, and separated him from his son. Now that Neel has fled, he is on the run from justice for the phony forgery accusations that Mr. Burnham helped him be convicted of.

Captain Neville Mee, a British soldier dispatched to China with an expeditionary force of sepoys; Kesri Singh, a loyal aide of the sepoys under Captain Mee's command, & man who permits the Indian soldier bearing the banner of the empire that has oppressed his people to fight for Britain.

The son of a slave in the United States, Zachary Reid now pretends to be white in order to break into a trade that is mostly white-dominated. Due to his dishonest actions, he fails to elicit pity from the reader. The disagreement arises because, according to the source, "honest opium traders would no longer be able to be branded as smugglers."

Amitav Ghosh paints a vivid picture of how Hong Kong went from a sleepy port to a major economic hub on a worldwide scale. In an effort to control economic imbalances with China, Amitav Ghosh argues, the East India Company sought to control the opium traffic as a means to wean itself off of silver as payment for Chinese products.

Now the factory's appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts.

Amitav Ghosh describes the awaiting opium war, But the matter is not in our hands, Charles. Surely you do not think the traffic in opium would stop if we signed a pledge? Others will step in because it is not we but the Chinese are responsible for the trade. It is they who love opium after all. Deeti's shrine proves Amitav Ghosh's interest for characters. Serang Ali, recognizable by his blood-red mouth; Jodu with his three eyebrows; Neel, with his journals; Raju, in his fifer's hat; Kesri, who, by convention, was always drawn with a bundook.

Two people go on a journey to China: Zachary Reid, a youthful sailor on a quest to find his lost love, and Shireen Modi, a resolute widow seeking to recapture the fame & fortune her late husband amassed as an opium seller. A diverse cast of people from India and China make their way through the First Opium War, China's crushing loss, & Britain's conquest of Hong Kong.

Each of the three books in the Ibis Trilogy features a key character who also makes an appearance in the first two: The story follows a diverse cast of characters, including Kesri Singh, a sepoy in the British East India Company's military service, Zachary Reid, a young mulatto from Baltimore who starts his career as a ship's carpenter, Benjamin Burnham, the wealthy opium trader who owns the Ibis, and Burnham's wife Catherine, who carries a dark secret in her life. Shireen Modi, a Parsi mother of two daughters in Bombay & widow of Bahram Modi, Neel Rattan Halder, a former Raja of Raskhali who served as an adviser to the Chinese in their conflict with the British, Zadig Bey, an Armenian trader close to Bahram, and other soldiers, sailors, traders, & officials are also introduced.

Amitav Ghosh has vividly portrayed the pressure between China and British India, the impact of colonization is seen. There are various Opium war events related to China, India and Britain. Beijing was into opium smuggling. China has encouraged and exploited the trade of opium and forced the British Foreign Secretary to bring pressure on the colonial government including Indian agencies to initiate the trade of opium in an illegal approach. For example, Kesri Singh, the soldier in the Army of East India Company forced to involve in these matters and faced troubles from China. Similarly, several characters like Zachary, Reid and Shireen, are the victims and sufferers of the opium traders. The readers can identify

the problems faced by the marginalized through opium war and colonial government. Opium and colonization are merged in these trilogies. The opium war becomes the novel's central theme in *Flood of Fire*. We go deep into the past as it pertains to the eras of British, Chinese, & Indian colonization. The opium trade is connected to land and water i.e., ship is used to transport opium and reach the shore.

## LANGUAGE

Amitav Ghosh use of language gives more life to his characters and they appear real. He uses everyday local vernacular language English mixed with Hindi and Bengali, this is also to show that English is merged in their routine usage. Amitav Ghosh translates very rarely and makes his characters speak with mixed language. The book's protagonists speak a variety of languages, including English, Bengali, Cantonese, or Gujarati, as well as their dialects and the slang used by sailors.

No one gets a satisfying resolution to the conflicts that develop between the characters' loyalty and treachery. In his journal, Neel reveals to Amitav Ghosh how language is a tool for expressing devotion, It is madness to think that knowing a language and reading a few books can create allegiances between people. Thoughts, books, ideas, words if anything they make you more alone, because they destroy whatever instinctive loyalties you may once have possessed.

Amitav Ghosh has a great passion for language. He is delightful in using true and original words when the characters converse. He uses prose style characters speaking in a half-Indian, half-Chinese and Parsi mixed with English, even as they speak the reader could feel the difference between local and the upper-class language

Amitav Ghosh incorporates the Girmityis' native Bhojpuri into the story, as well as the lascars' multilingualism, Zachary Reid's ability to pick up new words quickly, Paulette's French and English, and Deeti's pidgin from Mauritius. Postcolonial writers have the unique ability to use dialect and linguistic registers as potent instruments of self-expression and identity-creation. Ghosh makes excellent use of words. When the girmitya sing their tender bidai melodies, he lets us lose ourselves in the Bhojpuri. He writes in the manner of the Sahibs & Memsahibs in Hindi.

## Time

The characters in *Flood of Fire* sepoy, sahibs, and rajahs—take us on a journey from Assam to Calcutta & Canton as we learn about their histories and share in their hopes & fears for the future. This voyage, like all travels, is best experienced when one is open to new experiences and eager to face obstacles. It is both a physical & temporal illusion. The person responsible for documenting the clan's history through cave carvings is Deeti. Here again, time moves to and fro through the characters in terms of memories, letters and diaries. The bare condition under which the Indian soldiers are fighting is expressed through a sepoy's letter.

We are going to a place that is very far. We know nothing about it. If I do not return I want to make sure that my field with the mango tree goes to my brother Fateh Singh. It saddens me that I have not fulfilled all my obligations to my family. For that reason alone will I regret my death.

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