
Aesthetics in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

Dr. Anil F. Kshirsagar,

Dept. of English, M. J. College, Jalgaon, Maharashtra,
India, Mail- afk.mjc@kces.in

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's fiction possesses a rich aesthetic orientation with the blend of language, structure, interdisciplinary nature, humanism, a multitude of stories, their poeticity, and the overall delineation. Ghosh's storytelling rolled up in the said aesthetic fabric doesn't just entertain but serves as a gateway, inviting readers to immerse themselves in diverse human experiences, gaining deeper insights into the complexities of life and enhancing their literary experience. Through the novel *River of Smoke* from the Ibis trilogy, he paints a vibrant fictional portrait of an era marked by the Chinese government's ban on the opium trade from India and beyond around 1839. The novel subtly navigates through the themes of migration, cultural encounters, the Interdisciplinary nature of things, and the socio-political dynamics of the period. This paper examines the aesthetic values of *River of Smoke*, focusing on its linguistic artistry, thematic depth, and interwoven narratives that transcend temporal, cultural, and geographical boundaries. The paper is an attempt to locate the above-mentioned aesthetic contours in Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke*.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, aesthetic value, postmodernism, opium trade, narrative structure, interdisciplinary, migration, and humanism.

Introduction:

Ghosh's fiction seriously means to communicate something worthwhile to be poetically experienced and thus to be imprinted on the human mind so that humanity learns something important to forward the human story ahead. With varied aesthetic aspects, such as language, geography, arts, interdisciplinary inquiry, generic experimentation, compassionate humanism, man-woman relation, plural social existence, and migration experience, narrating a compassionate story is a unique feature of his novels. This quality of his fiction makes it stand out as a manifestation of postmodern aesthetics.

River of Smoke (2011) is a sequel to the first book of Ibis Trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*. The epic storm that hit the ship 'Ibis' towards the end of the *Sea of Poppies* also dragged in the prospectus of two other ships: 'Anahita,' and 'Redruth.' The prior was on its way to Canton, carrying a heavy consignment of opium belonging to a merchant, namely Bahramji Naurozji Modi, whereas the other ship, namely 'Redruth', was owned by a Cornish botanist,

Mr. Fitcher. He usually undertook exploratory missions to find the rarest varieties of plants as part of his trade. This time, he was on a mission to trace a variety called 'Golden camellia' in China. Bahram had been in the opium trade for twenty or more years. In this particular expedition, he invested his entire fortune. The Chinese government had banned the opium trade on its soil. Bahram was convinced that under such conditions, the drug would be sold like a hot cake. He considered it to be a lifetime opportunity to make money. While dealing with Bahram's story, Amitav Ghosh offers a detailed account of the 19th-century opium trade in China.

Language Aesthetics:

In the present novel, Ghosh offers the readers the bygone Chinese Pidgin English, which facilitated communication between foreigners and Chinese traders for different purposes. In *River of Smoke*, Ghosh does not limit this Chinese Pidgin English within the mechanical world of trade and commerce, governed only by the concerns of profit and loss, "for him, this hybrid language forges the bond of love, sex, bonhomie and camaraderie, between people belonging to different racial, cultural and national affiliations" (Laskar 190). Canton, due to its opium trade, pulled up people from different nations. The foreign merchants stayed outside the town. The area was called Fanqui Town. It was a multicultural landscape; people from England, America, France, India, and other parts of the world stayed quite amicably. They mixed up with Chinese merchants and the people there. These people did not necessarily use English as a language of communication. Along with English, they used Laskari and pidgin. Even though many Chinese spoke English with considerable ease, they would not negotiate with it, believing that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin, they reposed far greater trust...while the words were mainly English, Portuguese, and Hindustani- and such being the case, everyone who spoke the jargon was at an equal disadvantage, which was considered a great benefit to all. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 171)

The pidgin, in which Bahram and his Cantonese beloved, Chi-mei, conversed, consisted of a simple mixture of English, Portuguese, and Hindustani. It was a lot of ungrammatical and full of repetitive words. During their journey to England, Bahram's friend, Zadig, asked him whether they had a love relationship. Upon this, Bahram said it was a 'lob-pidgin' (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 74), love pidgin between them, because neither of them would ever term it as a love relation. Terming it as a love language was far acceptable to both of them.

Thematic Concerns and the Aesthetics of Migration:

One of the central themes in *River of Smoke* is migration, both voluntary and forced. The novel is populated with a diverse set of characters that have crossed vast geographical and cultural distances, driven by a range of motives, from trade to survival. The aesthetic value of this theme lies in its ability to convey the multiplicity of human experience, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of migration, as well as the opportunities and challenges it brings.

The movement of people between India, China, and the British Empire during the 19th century creates a fertile ground for exploring issues of identity, belonging, and

alienation. Ghosh's characters, such as the protagonist, Bahram, a Parsi merchant, and the Cantonese trader, Zheng are caught in the forces of history and global trade, embodying the tensions that arise when cultures collide. The aesthetic appeal of Ghosh's treatment of migration lies in his ability to portray the nuances of these experiences with empathy and complexity.

The man-woman relationship in his novels, as one of the important aspects of his novels, enhances the beauty of his works. In this novel, Baharam stays out for longer patches of time. During his visits to China, he came across Chei-mei, and a love relationship developed between them. Even though they were not married, they treated each other as husband and wife. Sajalkumar Bhattacharya rightly comments that;in the fictional world of Ghosh, it is this nature of the family that enables it to be relocated transnationally, beyond the "shadow lines" of the borders of the home country, in various foreign physical spaces. It is thus no longer a simple journey away from home/family but from one home/family to another. Ghosh's basic point of contention seems to be that home is everywhere; it only needs to be reinvented. (145)In Baharam's absence, his friend, Zadig Karabedian, an Armenian citizen, made it a point that Baharam's family in Canton was rightly looked after.

Interdisciplinary Nature of Ghosh's Aesthetics:

Ghosh's fiction frequently incorporates elements from various disciplines, such as history, economics, geography, and anthropology, to deepen the reader's engagement with the story. In *River of Smoke*, the narrative is interwoven with historical events and economic theories, particularly regarding the opium trade and its effects on China and India. The novel explores the geopolitical consequences of the opium trade, incorporating perspectives from both the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty, thereby presenting a balanced view of the tensions and motivations at play.

The novel also addresses the artistic and intellectual endeavors of the time, such as the role of opium in the production of art, literature, and culture in both India and China. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the aesthetic appeal of the novel, allowing Ghosh to explore the connections between the economic, cultural, and historical forces shaping the world of his characters. The use of such diverse fields of inquiry highlights the interconnectedness of human life across time and space, underscoring the postmodern sensibilities of the novel.

The Postmodern Aesthetics:

Ghosh's narrative style in *River of Smoke* can be situated within a postmodern aesthetic characterized by a fragmented narrative, the questioning of historical grand narratives, the celebration of pluralism, and even hybridity. In keeping with postmodern tendencies, Ghosh's novel resists a single, unified narrative; instead, it offers multiple perspectives, each contributing to a larger, more complex understanding of the events unfolding in 1839.

The fragmented narrative in *River of Smoke* is also mirrored in the novel's non-linear approach to time. The story oscillates between the immediate events of the opium war and flashbacks that provide crucial historical context, creating a tapestry of moments that invite

the reader to piece together a more holistic view of the past. This approach challenges the traditional notion of historical narrative and invites readers to engage actively with the text.

Moreover, Ghosh's novel challenges the Eurocentric view of history by providing a multi-dimensional portrayal of the opium trade, highlighting the agency of both the British and the Chinese, and the marginalized voices of those involved in the trade, such as the Indian merchants and the laborers. By emphasizing these diverse voices, Ghosh's work aligns with postmodern ideals of deconstructing dominant historical narratives and promoting a more inclusive, pluralistic view of the past.

As for hybridity, it is one of the characteristics of Ghosh's novels. Ah Fatt and Robin Chinnery both are born out of the union of undignified mothers and dignified fathers: "The cultures represented in *River of Smoke* are hybridized... Intermingling of cultures and races in the narrative of this novel is quite apparent in characters like Ah Fatt and Robin Chinnery" (Ginni 300). Ghosh, in one of his works, has rightly commented, "India exported with her population, not a language, as other civilizations have done, but a linguistic process—the process of adaptation to heteroglossia" (*The Imam and the Indian* 246). Liu Binyan also argues on the same line in his essay *Civilization Grafting: No Culture is an Island* (19).

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* demonstrates the power of aesthetic storytelling in conveying complex historical and human truths. Through his rich, multi-layered prose, the novel offers an immersive experience that transcends traditional boundaries of genre, culture, and history. The book's aesthetic qualities, its language, its themes of migration and humanism, its interdisciplinary approach, and its postmodern sensibility invite readers to engage deeply with the world of 1839 and the people caught in the flow of history. Ghosh's narrative is not merely a historical recounting but a living, breathing work of art that underscores the complexities of human existence and the interconnectedness of our global past. In doing so, *River of Smoke* affirms the power of literature to both entertain and enlighten, offering a rich aesthetic experience that resonates with the reader long after the final page.

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