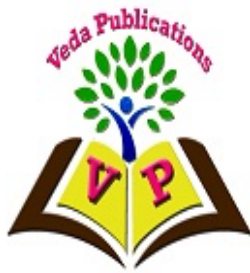




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**PANORAMIC HISTORY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE RIVER OF SMOKE***Dr. A. Kiranmayee^{1*}, Dr. G. Kiran Kumar Reddy²^{1*}Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College, Puttur, AP, India.²Assistant Professor of English, Rajeev Gandhi Memorial College of Engineering and Technology, Nandyal, AP, India.Email : kiranmayee.a19@gmail.com, kiran.mokshita@gmail.com

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Historical writing usually involves a record of historical events and in the case of literature, especially in Indian English Literature, documenting historical happenings has been a remarkable theme to the writers to carve their fiction. Like wise, one among the writers of Indian origin , often referred as a diasporic writer , Amitav Ghosh makes his creative fiction to mark all the historical events into his fiction. This paper is a critical analysis of Ghosh's fiction, his intertwining of history into his fiction and more importantly the seas, oceans occupying a keen role in the novel. Ghosh deals with the major issue of opium war that took place in 1849 as the one that has to be reflected in his fiction and made it a part of his biology where in he discusses the war between Britain and China, the export of opium and his unintentionally intentional representation of waters.

Keywords: *History, Opium, Wars , Oceans.*



INTRODUCTION

Historical novel emerged in the second part of eighteenth century in Europe. Sir Walter Scott was the father of historical novel, explored nationalistic themes in his novels. Historical novels reflect historical memory, historical events portrayed in novel form, Scott derived characters from middle class historical frame, explored societal conflict. 18th century nationalism and early 19th century caused the development of the historical novel.

Amitav Ghosh's prominence lies in the recent contemporary society and culture. His novels portray the post colonial elements, focused on culture and history. He shows keen interest in social anthropology. Most of his novels deal with history, culture, and people. *River of Smoke* explores historicity and the opium trade. It is filled with colorful characters drawn from diverse geographical, cultural, and historical backgrounds, united by a common interest in making money through trade with China. This paper attempts to examine Amitav Ghosh's exploration of historical consciousness as reflected in his works, *River of Smoke* and *Sea of Poppies*.

METHODOLOGY

This article focuses on the historicity in the works of Amitav Ghosh. A qualitative and interpretative approach has been adopted to examine his representation of history in the novels. This approach facilitates an imaginative and critical analysis of characters, narrative structures, and historical contexts. The study draws upon textual evidence to explore how and why historical elements are constructed and represented, thereby addressing the

central aim of the research. Accordingly, a systematic theoretical analysis method has been employed to investigate the concept of historicity in this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali writer, received the Jnanpith Award for his portrayal of Indian and South Asian cultures and peoples. He has written extensively on themes such as historical fiction, colonialism, and climate change. His education in Dehradun and at Oxford University greatly influenced his intellectual development, particularly his engagement with social anthropology. This academic background enabled him to understand complex human concerns, such as the Opium War, which he explores in his novels.

His first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, centers on themes of fable and picaresque fiction. *The Shadow Lines* deals with the histories of two families. He blends history, anthropology and philosophy. It delves into the history and speaks about human memories and nostalgia. His books were translated into thirty languages. His enduring penmanship showed the evidence of history, universal human conditions to the common readers.

The sea of poppies covers the story of 19th century opium wars and the former slave ship, the Ibis. He projects many characters from many parts of society, a twist of nemesis. *The Glass Palace* is an exploration of identity, exile and memory. His works depict the past as a radiant one that moulds the contemporary situations and intimates the prospective future.

His works are *The Circle of Reason*, *The Hungry Tide*, *The Ibis Trilogy*, *Sea of Poppies*, *River of smoke*



and *Flood of Fire*. *The shadow lines* attained two coveted prizes 'Sahitya Academy Award' and the 'Ananda Puraskar' in 1990. In 2018, the 'Jananpith Award' was bestowed on him. In 2024, he received 'Erasmus prize'.

DISCUSSION

History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquity. (PLATO, Ion)

History is not merely a record of victors or a collection of imagined events. Rather, it is a repository of facts that, though they occurred centuries ago, offer us a vivid and realistic understanding of the past—wars and invasions, the rise and fall of empires, rulers ascending glittering thrones, their systems of administration, and their strengths and failures. Indeed, to truly understand the present, one must first learn from the past.

Among the many significant events in history, wars stand out as particularly remarkable, often fought in the pursuit of power, territorial expansion, or political dominance. Whether it is the Battle of Panipat, the First World War, or the Second World War, such conflicts have profoundly shaped the course of human history. In the context of the present study, however, the focus is on the Opium War—specifically the First Opium War (1839–1842), also known as the Anglo-Chinese War, fought between Britain and China over diplomatic, economic, and trade-related disputes.

For centuries, China remained a largely self-sufficient nation, restricting foreign influence and limiting European trade within its borders. During the

17th and 18th centuries, however, there was a growing demand in Europe for Chinese goods, particularly silk and tea. Since China imposed strict controls on foreign trade, this led to a significant imbalance, with European nations exporting large quantities of silver to China in exchange for these commodities.

The introduction of the Canton System further regulated trade by confining foreign merchants to specific ports, yet the imbalance persisted. Recognizing an opportunity, the British East India Company sought to reverse this trade deficit by exporting opium cultivated in India to China. The drug was exchanged for silver, gradually infiltrating Chinese society through local intermediaries and traders.

As opium addiction spread rapidly, it began to have devastating social and economic consequences, even affecting government officials. Alarmed by this crisis, the Chinese authorities moved to ban the opium trade. This led to resistance and conflict, culminating in the confiscation and destruction of large quantities of opium by the Chinese government—an action that ultimately triggered military confrontation.

This historical episode has also captured the imagination of a prominent contemporary writer in Indian literature who belongs to the Indian diaspora—Amitav Ghosh. Born in 1956 in West Bengal, he currently resides in the United States. Ghosh began his literary career with his debut novel *The Circle of Reason*, followed by the critically acclaimed *The Shadow Lines*. His later works reveal a deep engagement with history, particularly in



relation to colonial encounters and transnational movements.

Ghosh's more recent fiction includes the *Ibis Trilogy*, a landmark contribution to historical fiction. The first volume, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), set against the backdrop of the Opium Trade, was followed by *River of Smoke* (2011), which forms the primary focus of the present study. A notable feature of Ghosh's fiction is his sustained engagement with maritime spaces—the Indian Ocean and other interconnected seas—which function not merely as settings but as dynamic sites of cultural exchange, migration, and conflict.

Reflecting on this aspect in an interview with Mahmood Kooria, Ghosh observes:

"It was not intentional, but sometimes things are intentional without being intentional. Though it was never part of a planned venture and did not begin as a conscious project, I realise in hindsight that this is really what always interested me most: the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the connections and the cross-connections between these regions." [5]

These historical events are vividly represented in one of the novels from Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*. The second volume, *River of Smoke* (2011), which is the focus of the present study, is preceded by *Sea of Poppies*. Serving as a sequel, the novel continues the narrative from where the earlier text concludes. The storyline picks up after the *Ibis* is caught in a storm, leaving several passengers stranded in Mauritius, and unfolds by tracing the subsequent journeys and experiences of these displaced individuals.

Set against the historical backdrop of the First Opium War and the opium trade with China, the novel skillfully intertwines personal narratives with larger socio-political developments. In addition to its historical dimension, the text explores the lives of the passengers associated with the *Ibis*, with particular emphasis on the cultural transformations and evolving identities of Indian immigrants in Mauritius.

The narrative is enriched by a diverse cast of characters who, despite their varied personal histories, share a common geographical origin and a mutual interest in trade with China. Much of the action is situated in Fanqui Town—a coastal enclave designated for foreign traders—serving as a crucial site of interaction between Chinese authorities and international merchants. Significantly, the events of the novel unfold in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the First Opium War, thereby capturing the tensions and complexities that led to the conflict.

In the year 1838, three ships—the *Anahita*, owned by a Parsi merchant from Bombay, Bahram Modi; the *Redruth*, under the command of the botanist Fitcher Penrose, who travels to China in search of rare plants; and the *Ibis*, previously introduced in *Sea of Poppies*, carrying convicts and indentured laborers—are caught in a violent storm. This event serves as a narrative bridge linking multiple storylines within the novel.

The central plot of *River of Smoke* follows the lives of key characters such as Neel Rattan Halder, a former zamindar turned convict, and Ah Fatt, a fugitive of mixed heritage. After escaping confinement, they attempt to rebuild their lives in



Canton, navigating a world shaped by trade, exile, and cultural intersections.

Bahram Modi, a central figure in the novel, is the son-in-law of the wealthy merchant Rustamjee Mistry. Compelled by familial expectations, Modi invests heavily in the opium trade with China and initially achieves considerable success. However, his growing prosperity arouses jealousy among his brothers-in-law, who seek to undermine his position, especially after the absence and eventual death of Rustamjee.

Determined to secure his fortune, Modi plans to transport a large consignment of opium to Canton, despite the increasing restrictions and eventual ban imposed by Chinese authorities. His personal life is equally complex; he fathers a son, Ah Fatt, with a boat woman named Chi-mei—a relationship he keeps hidden from his family in Bombay. This concealed lineage becomes a significant thread in the unfolding narrative, linking personal secrets with the broader themes of trade, identity, and displacement.

Fitcher Penrose, the owner of the *Redruth*, embarks on his voyage to China in search of rare botanical specimens. He is accompanied by Paulette Lambert, the daughter of a French botanist, who is driven by her quest to discover the elusive golden camellia. Their journey is further enriched by the presence of the artist George Chinnery, whose observations add a visual and cultural dimension to the narrative.

Meanwhile, Neel Rattan Halder and Ah Fatt, having escaped from the *Ibis*, eventually join Bahram Modi in Canton. Neel assumes the role of a *munshi* (clerk) in Modi's trading enterprise, while

Ah Fatt unknowingly reunites with his father. The intertwined lives of these principal characters in Canton form the core of the novel's narrative, bringing together diverse experiences shaped by trade, exile, and cultural interaction.

In *River of Smoke*, Amitav Ghosh intricately weaves historical realities with fictional storytelling. The novel explores the economic structures of trade, the botanical pursuits tied to imperial expansion, and the growing centrality of China in the global opium network. At the same time, it functions as a work of postmodern historiography, reinterpreting the past through the lens of present-day concerns.

In an interview with Tom Ashbrook, Ghosh highlights the parallels between the historical context of the novel and contemporary global dynamics. The advocacy of "free trade" by nineteenth-century Euro-American powers finds resonance in modern neoliberal policies. Just as the opium trade led to a severe drain on the Chinese economy, similar imbalances can be observed in present-day global financial systems, particularly in the context of trade deficits.

The novel also foregrounds the tensions between free trade and state regulation. When Commissioner Lin (Lin Zexu) confiscates opium cargo from British, American, and Indian traders, he acts in accordance with both the letter and spirit of Chinese law, which permitted legitimate commerce but strictly prohibited opium imports. This act becomes a pivotal moment, reflecting China's attempt to curb economic and social damage caused by the illicit trade.

Ghosh's narrative further offers a layered, almost palimpsestic view of Canton (Guangzhou), presenting



it as a vibrant urban and ecological space shaped by global interactions. The city emerges as a hub of cultural diversity, where traders from across Europe and Asia—including the British, Americans, Portuguese, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, and Parsees—engage in commerce within designated “factory” zones along the Pearl River. These enclaves, situated outside the main city, became spaces of negotiation, exchange, and cultural encounter.

The descriptions of Canton often invite comparison with contemporary Indian cities such as Calcutta. Through the letters of Robin to Paulette, Ghosh vividly portrays the contrast between the densely populated northern banks and the lush, serene landscapes of Honam, dotted with monasteries, orchards, and villages. Such descriptions not only enrich the narrative but also highlight the ecological and cultural complexity of the region.

Overall, *River of Smoke* stands as a comprehensive exploration of Ghosh’s historical imagination. By blending past and present, fact and fiction, the novel illuminates the causes and consequences of the Opium War while engaging readers through compelling storytelling. It may well be described as a form of “edutainment,” where historical awareness and literary pleasure coexist, making the narrative both intellectually enriching and aesthetically engaging.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh’s novels profoundly engage with themes of historicity, memory, and nostalgia, blending them seamlessly with richly imagined fictional narratives. His characters, drawn from

diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds, reflect the interconnectedness of the global world he portrays. Ghosh’s works stand as compelling examples of “truthful fiction,” where historical realities are reimagined through creative insight and intellectual depth. Through this fusion of fact and imagination, he not only reconstructs the past but also offers meaningful reflections on the present, making his fiction both enlightening and enduring.

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