

Colonial Commerce and Cultural Exchange: Multicultural Dynamics in the Opium Trade Era of River of Smoke

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Abstract

In the years preceding the First Opium War, Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*, the second book in the *Ibis Trilogy*, deftly examines the multicultural dynamics of the early 19th-century opium traffic, mainly in Canton (present-day Guangzhou). This historical fiction explores the relationships between migration, trade, and cultural exchange, presenting a dynamic and varied civilization influenced by international trade networks. The novel centers on Fanqui Town, a commercial community where Chinese and international traders coexist and foster a linguistic, cultural, and ideological melting pot.

Characters from a variety of geographic and cultural origins are included in the story, including Ah Fatt, Bahram's mixed-heritage son; Neel Rattan Halder, a Bengali zamindar who became a Munshi; and Bahram Modi, a Parsi opium seller. Ghosh explores issues of cultural hybridity, economic exploitation, and imperialism through these characters. Both a unifying and a divisive force, the opium trade exposed the terrible human and societal costs of this trade while uniting China and India behind British colonial objectives.

To recreate the intricacies of the time period, Ghosh uses a variety of storytelling approaches, including letters, journals, and dialogues, along with extensive historical background. The book emphasizes the opium trade's significant cultural ramifications in addition to its economic drivers. *River of Smoke* provides a realistic depiction of the early phases of globalization and its effects on heterogeneous cultures by fusing human narratives with more general historical events. This piece emphasizes how migration and trade both strengthen colonial hierarchies and promote cross-cultural exchange.

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River of Smoke, the second book in the *Ibis* trilogy, was written by Amitav Ghosh. Within the historical framework of the early 19th-century opium trade, this book offers a thorough examination of multiculturalism. The novel, which is mostly set in Canton (present-day Guangzhou) in the years preceding the First Opium War, depicts a thriving multicultural society that was influenced by migration, trade, and cross-cultural interactions.

The Cosmopolitan Canton sometimes act as a Cultural Melting Pot in the novel. With traders coming to Fanqui Town from China, India, Britain, and other places to do business, Canton is a microcosm of

multiculturalism. As varied personalities adjust to new cultural norms and languages, this little enclave becomes a symbol of global connection. Although this cosmopolitanism promotes cross-cultural interaction, it also dilutes native customs. This conflict is embodied by characters like Bahram Modi, who must strike a balance between their local Parsi identity and the pressures of colonial trade.

This research paper also highlights on the hybridity and Identity formation which can be seen throughout the novel. Throughout colonial and postwar contexts, the story emphasizes how identities can change. A good example of cultural hybridity is Ah Fatt, who is the son of a Chinese boatwoman and a Parsi opium seller. Ah Fatt's troubles highlight the intricacies of identification in a multicultural environment and represent the difficulties of being torn between two different cultural worlds—China and India. Another example of successfully navigating cultures through linguistic adaptation and respect for local traditions is Zadig Karabedian, a watchmaker who is half Armenian and half Egyptian.

Despite these barriers, the passengers were not acquainted with each other for the main deck was the crossroads of the ship and it sometimes happened that they would find themselves face-to-face there. Then they would exchange bows and curtsies, salaams and greetings—although perfectly cordial, these ceremonies were a little stiff, the awkwardness of the respective parties being emphasized by the contrast in their costumes, the one being dressed in trousers, pelisses and surtouts, and the other in robes and ample headgear (Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 153).

Ghosh uses language to both portray the merging of civilizations and to recognize multiculturalism. To converse across cultural divides, the characters speak a variety of languages and dialects, such as Bhojपुरi and Creol. The rise of new identities influenced by globalization and cross-cultural interaction is symbolized by this linguistic hybridity.

Ghosh utilizes Trade as a Spark for Cross-Cultural Communication in the novel. Opium commerce serves as a platform for cross-cultural exchange as well as an economic endeavour. People from different backgrounds come together, but it also highlights the unethical behaviour and unethical business tactics that were a part of colonial trade. Unlike other dealers who use the pretext of free trade to defend their activities, Zadig Karabedian rejects the opium trade in favour of moral business conduct. Readers can also see the Intercultural Romantic Relationships. The covert relationship between Bahram Modi and his Chinese partner Chi-mei highlights interpersonal ties that go beyond social conventions and breaks beyond barriers of race and culture. This connection highlights the story's cultural melting even further.

By portraying Canton as a thriving centre where cultural boundaries are blurred rather than just a location of imperial exploitation, Ghosh challenges prevailing colonial narratives. By demonstrating how international trade both changed societies and exacerbated inequality, the book challenges colonial modernity. Ghosh examines how migration, mobility, and trade affected the development of identity during colonial times through individuals like Neel Rattan and Ah Fatt.

Amitav Ghosh skillfully captures multiculturalism in Canton during the opium trade era in *River of Smoke* through language, migration, trade, and interpersonal interactions. The book highlights the positive effects of globalization on cross-cultural interactions while also highlighting its negative effects, such as identity conflicts and economic exploitation. Ghosh offers a complex depiction of cosmopolitanism that speaks to current discussions on globalization and identity formation by fusing historical events with fascinating character storylines.

Through a number of significant mechanisms that represent linguistic imperialism, cultural hybridization, and the erasure of indigenous identities, Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* novel illustrates the effects of colonialism on language and culture. On the account of Linguistic Imperialism, characters in the novel

were forced to adopt the colonizers language in order to engage in trade and diplomacy, and pidgin English emerged as a functional lingua franca, symbolizing the colonial reshaping of communication. The novel demonstrates how colonizers imposed their language as a tool of control, marginalizing native languages. The novel also contains traces of linguistic hybridization. The heterogeneous atmosphere produced by colonial trade networks is reflected in the blending of languages like Bhojpuri, Cantonese, and Creole. But this hybridity also highlights the emergence of new dialects influenced by colonialism and the loss of linguistic purity. The alienation brought about by colonial linguistic supremacy is demonstrated by the fact that such hybrid languages frequently fall short in their ability to fully convey indigenous cultural meanings.

So you have seen the world a little, eh munshiji? said Bahram. Done a chukker or two? Tasted something other than daal-bhat and curry-rice? Munshis who can manage chair-sitting are not easy to find. Can you handle a knife-fork also? Little-little at least? Ji Sethji, said Neel. Bahram nodded, So you met Freddy, my godson, here in Singapore, is it? Ji, Sethji. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 129).

The impact of colonialism on language also includes its role in erasing native cultural identities; colonizers devalued native cultures and traditions by suppressing indigenous tongues and prioritizing European languages, which is reflected in the characters attempts to preserve their cultural heritage while navigating a world dominated by colonial discourse.

The commodification of opium is a metaphor for how colonialism reduced cultural practices and artifacts to economic transactions, turning cultural values into instruments for imperial profit in addition to exploiting indigenous resources. The dominance of colonial ideologies suppressed native histories and stories in favour of Eurocentric narratives, which is reflected in the characters struggles to express who they are within a framework shaped by colonial power structures.

Fanqui-town's most commonly used coin was the one that had the widest currency in the world: it was the Spanish Silver dollar, also called the 'piece of eight' because it was valued at eight reals. The dollar contained a little less than an ounce of fine silver and was embossed with the heads and arms of recent Spanish sovereigns. But among the pieces of eight that circulated in Canton, very few retained the designs that had been stamped on them at the time of their minting. In China, while passing from hand to hand, every coin was marked with the seals of its successive owners (Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 316).

Through linguistic imperialism, hybridization, and cultural erasure, colonialism changed language and culture. Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* critiques these effects by presenting characters who must choose between preserving their heritage and adjusting to the demands of a colonial world, highlighting the long-lasting effects of imperial dominance on identity and communication.

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* examines how colonial structures and ideologies impact the mental and emotional health of characters navigating a world shaped by imperial dominance, employing themes of identity fragmentation, cultural displacement, and internalized colonial ideologies to illustrate the psychological effects of colonialism on individuals.

Through the imposition of foreign cultural norms and values, colonialism disturbs people's sense of self. Characters such as Bahram Modi encounter a tension between the requirements of colonial trade and their indigenous customs. They struggle to balance their cultural heritage with their duties in a colonial economy controlled by Western powers, which causes them to feel alienated. This dual existence's psychological toll shows up as internal conflict and self-doubt.

Bahram's breakfast always ended with a beverage that Mesto claimed to have invented himself: the drink was made with tea leaves but it bore no resemblance to the *chah* that was commonly served in Canton-

indeed it was considered so revolting by the Achha Hong's Chinese visitors that the very smell of it had made a couple of them vomit. Just look, said Vico, disparagingly, these fellows are happy to eat snake and scorpions but milk they cannot take! (Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 190).

Characters in the novel are displaced from their homelands and compelled to adjust to new surroundings as a result of colonial trade networks. For instance, the loss of autonomy and dignity under colonial control is shown in Neel Rattan Halder's incarceration and eventual exile. A profound sensation of dislocation is cultivated by this cultural and physical displacement, which exacerbates psychological misery. Ghosh provides examples of how colonialism makes colonized people feel inadequate. Characters develop self-loathing or embarrassment about their native culture as a result of internalizing the idea that Western ideals are superior. Ah Fatt, whose mixed ancestry traps him between opposing cultural identities, is a prime example of this. Such internalized beliefs worsen anxiety and sadness and undermine society's sense of self.

The impact of colonialism on generations is discussed in the novel, with the trauma endured by one generation influencing subsequent ones. A cycle of psychological suffering is sustained throughout time by the legacy of exploitation and cultural erasure, which causes characters to battle with inherited feelings of loss and wrath. Through its intricate portrayal of identity issues, displacement, and internalized ideology, *River of Smoke* highlights the long-lasting psychological repercussions of colonialism on people. Ghosh sheds light on how historical trauma impacts societal and individual identities in multicultural contexts by analyzing the long-lasting psychological harm brought forth by imperial domination.

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