

Critical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's "Flood of Fire"

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Abstract— The culminating volume of Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy, Flood of Fire, is a remarkable literary work, as are all of Ghosh's published works. Ghosh's literary prowess is evident in his masterful storytelling, as exemplified by Flood of Fire. This work offers a thought-provoking perspective on the complex themes of Globalisation, nationalism, ambition, greed, and the ever-present force of love. Moreover, Ghosh deftly interweaves a diverse cast of characters, seamlessly connecting the narratives of Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke. The literary work entitled "Flood of Fire" is predicated upon the inaugural Opium War, which transpired in Canton during the year 1840. During this time, the British military forcefully entered the region in order to dismantle China's opium trade embargo. Furthermore, the British demanded remuneration for their damages after Chinese commissioner Lin decimated their merchandise.

Index Terms— Flood of Fire, Nationalism, Globalization, Drug Trade

I. INTRODUCTION

In the year of our Lord 1839, the nation of China has implemented a prohibition on the importation and consumption of opium. Notwithstanding the considerable financial interests involved, it is noteworthy that the British Foreign Secretary had issued directives to the colonial administration in India to assemble a military expedition with the aim of restoring the aforementioned trade. Kesri Singh, a soldier in the esteemed army of the East India Company, is among the cohort of individuals who have been deemed culpable. He is currently traversing towards the east on the Hind, a conveyance vessel that shall facilitate his passage across Bengal en route to Hong Kong. Several personages hailing from the Ibis Trilogy make an appearance, most notably Zachary Reid, a juvenile American purveyor of opium futures, and Shireen, a widow of an opium merchant whose demise in China remains shrouded in mystery, impelling her to embark on a quest to locate her estranged offspring. Amidst the onset of conflict, the Hind alights upon Hong Kong's shores, coinciding with a deluge of opium inundating the market. Traversing from Bombay to Calcutta, amidst naval conflicts and aboard hospital vessels, Amitav Ghosh takes the reader on a tumultuous journey through the zenith of British opium commerce and a turbulent epoch in colonial chronicles, replete with corruption, extortion, and sabotage. Similar to its antecedent volumes, Flood of Fire culminates Ghosh's inventive narration of the 19th century opium conflict in a gratifying manner. Ghosh's literary work, "Opium Wars," has captivated a global audience with its compelling narrative, historical acuity, and dynamic character ensemble, all of which are relevant to the contemporary moment.

The literary works of Ghosh have consistently featured highly suggestive and vivid locales. Following his vivid

depictions of the poppy fields of Bihar and Deeti's cave in Mauritius in his initial two novels, the author proceeds to captivate his readers with a stirring portrayal of the grandeur of the Bengal Native Infantry.

The Assamese perspective on the theatrical performance known as "tamasha" centers around the character of Havildar Kesri Singh, who happens to be the brother of Deeti. The individual who has hitherto been addressed in a perfunctory manner is accompanied by a non-commissioned officer of the British armed forces. As the narrative unfolds, the reader experiences a profound sense of solace upon encountering familiar characters from preceding literary works. One may observe the gradual depigmentation of Zachary Reid's integumentary system as he progresses through the journey of life. This is in conjunction with our primary traits.

Neel Rattan Haldar, who is presently stationed in China and serves as our primary liaison for all developments in the region, is joined by Jodu and Ah Fatt, who have acclimatized themselves adeptly to the situation. Additionally, there are some enigmatic spouses who operate in a more clandestine capacity. The antecedent installments feature distinct personages, who manifest their individuality and wield significant influence in the plot.

The crux of Flood of Fire pertains to the intricacies of warfare. The author's comprehensive exposition on the First Opium War (1840-1842) is accompanied by an astute observation on the interdependence of India and China, whose destinies were inextricably linked by the capitalist forces of Free Trade, as Mr. Burnham contends, that sought to engulf them. This resulted in the decimation and exploitation of their indigenous systems, as elucidated by Ghosh in his introduction to a literary work of his own. The multitude of casualties and devastation inflicted upon individuals who had not provoked nor aggressed against their

assailants, as depicted in Ghosh's historical narrative, prompts readers, Kesri Singh included, to ponder deeply. Could you kindly explicate the precise connotation of the aforementioned statement? Pray tell, what was the underlying intention behind such an occurrence? Our esteemed acquaintance, Baboo Nob Kissin, persists in drawing a parallel between the rapacious tendencies of capitalism and the concept of pralaya, the ultimate annihilation of a world, in a manner that borders on the philosophical. As we behold the spectacle of a bygone society's downfall, we are filled with a sense of wonder and reverence.

The literary work entitled "Flood of Fire" is set in the year 1840, a period antecedent to the inaugural war of autonomy in 1857, during which the Indian populace remained under the governance of the East India Company. The Indian sepoys who participated in the Opium War in the 1840s harbored grievances that had the potential to incite mutiny. These included inadequate compensation in comparison to their white counterparts, subpar weaponry, unsatisfactory transportation vessels, and insufficient rations. Ghosh has aptly identified Mr. Burnham, a resident of Calcutta, as the suitable individual to explicate the mechanics of a bygone epoch of globalization. According to Mr. Burnham, the expedition would necessitate an unparalleled reliance on private enterprise for sustenance, thereby presenting a plethora of profitable opportunities, spanning from the leasing of vessels to the acquisition of provisions for the troops. Commissioner Lin, however, expressed skepticism towards the notion of deploying an army overseas to compel another nation into purchasing opium. However, such was the ultimate outcome. The Ibis trilogy chronicles the lives of a diverse cast of characters, including Kesri Singh, a valiant soldier hailing from Ghazipur, and Neel Rattan, a former Raja of great distinction. Are individuals hailing from diverse backgrounds and regions, namely Calcutta, Baltimore, and Bombay, respectively? Among them are Neville Mee, a gentleman of British descent and son of a shopkeeper, Zachary Reid, a sailor from Baltimore, and Mrs. Burnham, the daughter of a general who has yet to achieve victory in her personal endeavors. Additionally, there is Shireen Mody, a woman from Bombay who lacks a male heir to her estate.

Perusing Amitav Ghosh's "Flood of Fire" is akin to embarking on a journey alongside sepoys, sahibs, and rajahs, traversing from Assam to Calcutta to Canton, delving into their histories while anticipating or yearning for their respective destinies. The aforementioned is a fictitious expedition through space and time that, akin to authentic voyages, is most pleasurable when embracing unforeseen paths and escapades.

The literary work of Ghosh delves into the ramifications of the incipient free trade in the area, which has given rise to a significant altercation that is ultimately resolved through the deployment of military might. Neel is struck with a profound sense of wonder and inquisitiveness as he contemplates the ability of a mere handful of men, within the span of a few

fleeting moments or hours, to irrevocably shape the fates of countless multitudes yet to come. This contemplation arises as he observes a conflict during the Opium War. In what manner might the outcome of those fleeting moments determine the hierarchy of power and wealth for generations to come, as well as the dichotomy between servitude and mastery?"

The phenomenon of climate change is significantly propelled by the economic system of capitalism. However, Ghosh posits that a more profound analysis of imperialism and empire is imperative. In this particular segment, he expounds extensively on the pivotal role played by Asia in the current climate crisis. The preponderance of Asia in the discourse on climate change is partly attributable to demographics, as the majority of those at risk are situated in this region. Bangladesh and Vietnam, in particular, are acutely vulnerable to the effects of rising sea levels, while the continent's interior is poised to experience increasingly severe weather phenomena. The Himalayan glaciers' melting has already precipitated a water crisis in Asia, with the most disadvantaged members of society, particularly women and children, bearing the brunt of the consequences. Given these circumstances, Asia assumes a pivotal role in the overarching considerations of "mitigation, preparation, and resilience" (90). Any global strategy aimed at addressing climate change must necessarily secure the buy-in of Asian stakeholders.

According to Ghosh, the culmination of the crisis can be attributed to the proliferation of industrialization in Asia during the 1980s. Although indications of a shifting climate were already apparent in the 1930s and particularly the 1950s, their magnitude would have been significantly greater had Asia already commenced its era of uninterrupted economic growth. The Asian encounter serves as a testament to the fact that the Earth is incapable of accommodating these "modes of existence to be embraced by all of humanity" (92).

Ghosh poses a query as to why the heavily populated nations of Asia refrained from industrializing until the latter half of the 20th century. He initiates his discourse by alluding to the proliferation of modernity during the 16th-19th centuries and how its progression was analogous across the globe. The dissemination of concepts, technology, and erudition was extensive and all-encompassing. Therefore, modernity was not a contagion that disseminated from the Occident to the Orient.

Approximately a millennium ago, China underwent a transformative economic revolution during the medieval period, marked by the adoption of coal as a primary energy source and consequential alterations to their physical environment. However, the nation did not fully transition to a widespread coal-based economy, as the majority of these reserves were situated in remote regions and alternative fossil fuels were utilized.

In his literary work, *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh cites a passage that illuminates the significance of Yenangaung, Burma, where oil seeps to the surface and the lives of its

inhabitants revolve around this precious resource. As early as the mid-19th century, British travelers were cognizant of these oil wells, recognizing their potential as a major source of revenue for the Burmese. Following the second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852-53, the importance of oil was further underscored, as the British claimed a significant portion of the country that contained many of these wells. The king, perturbed by this development, sought to exert direct control over Yenangaung and establish links with the global market, consolidating his authority as best he could. However, the British ultimately seized the remaining territory in 1885, effectively monopolizing all the oil reserves and forming a colossal corporation known as Burma-Shell. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that Burma had harnessed this technology and possessed the capability to match strides with the petroleum-based economy, but was impeded from doing so by the forces of imperialism.

During the early 19th century, steam-powered vessels made their way to India, and the country's labor force was primarily responsible for the operation of the boiler rooms of the global merchant fleets. In pursuit of a regular steamship service between India and England, Indian entrepreneurs sought the support of a consortium of British investors, who rose to the occasion. The inaugural journey of the *Enterprise*, which ensued, was met with great fanfare and was even chronicled by Ghosh in his literary work, *Flood of Fire*, wherein the notable figure of Dwarkanath Tagore was mentioned.

Tagore played a pivotal role in India's carbon economy, having been a prominent entrepreneur who contributed to the development of commercial infrastructure. He was also a vocal advocate for the advancement of railroads, a sentiment that was shared by indigenous merchants in Bombay who were equally enthusiastic about the potential of this new technology. In fact, Indian entrepreneurs demonstrated a remarkable acuity in recognizing and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by British and American steam technology, as noted on page 107.

The reason why certain regions, such as India, were unable to participate in the carbon economy can be attributed to the British economy's reliance on a substantial supply of raw materials. As elucidated in the text, the burgeoning fossil-fuel economies of the Western world necessitated the prevention of the development of coal-based energy systems in other areas, even if it required the use of force. (107).

During the emergence of steam technology, the prominent European powers established a significant military and political foothold across vast regions of Asia and Africa. Concurrently, alternative technological advancements were either repressed or assimilated into the prevailing paradigm. The utilization of fossil fuels played a pivotal role in the sustenance of Western powers' hegemony in their respective territories. Ghosh ponders over the hypothetical scenario of decolonization and empire dissolution occurring earlier, possibly post the First World War. This query is intriguing as

it raises the possibility that imperialism may have postponed the climate predicament by hindering Asia and Africa's ability to expand their economies proportionately.

The notion that the advancement of pivotal technologies in the carbon economy impeded the progression of the climate crisis ought not to alter our perspective on the issue of worldwide equity and the crisis at hand. However, it is crucial to recognize that "our existence and our decisions are constrained by a historical framework that appears to offer no alternative but to pursue our own demise."

Asia's journey towards industrialization was impeded by various forms of indigenous resistance. One notable example is Gandhi's assertion that the universalist premise of industrial civilization was a fallacy, as a consumerist model would ultimately prove to be unsustainable. In China, the Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian communities united their voices to oppose consumerism and industrialization. Despite the resistance, Japan and Korea demonstrated that it was possible to overcome these challenges by utilizing resources more efficiently.

Prior to the mainstream adoption of environmentalism in the Western world, numerous prominent Asian figures had already expressed apprehension regarding the detrimental effects of environmental degradation. Despite being frequently accused of contributing to the climate crisis, individuals in both China and India had been drawing attention to the actions and potential of the carbon economy. While they did not entirely halt the widespread acceptance of carbon, they did manage to impede the complete adoption of a consumerist and industrialized economic model in their respective nations. Hence, it is untenable to posit that the climate crisis is a predicament engendered by an external entity, and the phenomenon of planetary warming ought to be comprehended as the culmination of the collective human conduct throughout history.

Amitav Ghosh has recently concluded his *Ibis* trilogy, a fictional account of the events leading up to the first opium war of 1839-42, after more than a decade of writing. The trilogy comprises 1,600 pages and nearly a million words. The first volume, *Sea of Poppies*, was shortlisted for the 2008 Man Booker prize and brought to light the harsh realities of opium production and its impact on the people of Bihar and the Bay of Bengal. The character of Deeti, who was widowed by her husband's opium addiction and was expected to die on his funeral pyre until she escaped on board the *Ibis*, a former slaving schooner repurposed as an opium transporter, was particularly noteworthy. The second book in the series, *River of Smoke*, takes us to Canton, the destination of the opium, and the escalating tension between the Chinese authorities and the traders.

The ultimate chapter of this literary work portrays a fundamental conflict between a government that opposes unrestricted commerce, which has resulted in rampant

addiction among its citizens, and a coalition of individual and corporate interests fervently dedicated to the principles of unrestricted trade. Ghosh's objective is to demonstrate how this conflict fundamentally altered the regional landscape, catalyzing the metamorphosis of the previously insignificant Hong Kong port into a preeminent hub of global enterprise, among other significant developments.

The antecedent two literary works, as well as the current one, do not present themselves as mundane historical accounts. Ghosh's narrative technique, which involves a collective portrayal of characters - in *Flood of Fire*, four individuals' tales interweave and gradually merge - and a lively and inventive amalgamation of various languages and styles, propels the story forward with great momentum, oscillating between profound gravity and light-hearted amusement. The work is both disorienting and pleasurable, captivating and entertaining.

Its linguistic playfulness is most evident in the story that concerns Zachary Reid, a Baltimore seaman and the son of a slave and her white master, who is himself taken by all who meet him as a white man. At the beginning of *Flood of Fire*, Zachary finds himself paying off some debts by working as a "mystery" (craftsman) on a "budgerow" (a type of Indian river-boat) belonging to the wealthy Burnhams. In a scene somewhere between a pastiche of the 19th-century novel and a Carry On film, Mrs Burnham witnesses from a distance him vigorously polishing a belying pin, draws an unfortunate conclusion and furnishes him with a series of terrifying pamphlets outlining the dangers of onanism; before too long, and with the help of a revealing toga party, the pair begin a highly secret and enthusiastic sexual liaison that proceeds almost entirely by euphemism. "It's my turn now," Mrs Burnham proclaims, "to bajow your ganta"; when she teaches Zachary the art of "chartering" (oral sex), she at first admonishes him ("Oh no, my dear, no! You are not chewing on a chichky, and nor are you angling for a cockup! Making a chutney, dear, is not a blood-sport") and then congratulates him ("It is a wonder to me, my dear mystery, how quickly you have mastered the gamahuche!").

The narrative is indeed entertaining, yet it is important to acknowledge that sexual relations are inherently intertwined with political dynamics. Mrs. Burnham's lexicon, influenced by her upbringing in a colonial environment, is indicative of her desire to maintain established hierarchies. Even in the privacy of the bedroom, she insists that her and her lover address each other formally as Mr. Reid and Mrs. Burnham, revealing her fear of being exposed for their adulterous affair and disrupting the status quo. Meanwhile, Zachary's proximity to the Burnhams' wealth and influence fuels his own aspirations to follow in Mr. Burnham's footsteps as an opium trader. The novel presents a vivid depiction of Zachary's initial purchase of this commodity, which marks the beginning of a gradual process of moral decay that serves as a counterpoint to the overall comedic tone. The scene takes place in a squalid bazaar in the backstreets of Calcutta, where

the stench of dust and dung is juxtaposed with the memory of Mrs. Burnham's fragrant boudoir, evoking a strange sense of arousal.

The novel in question is characterized by a rapid succession of perspectives, with Zachary's viewpoint being just one among many. Among the other characters we encounter are Shireen Modi, a widow who embarks on a journey from Bombay to Canton to collect her late husband's debts, despite the social impropriety of such an undertaking. We also meet Neel Rattan Halder, a former raja who has fallen on hard times and now works for the Chinese, meticulously documenting the East India Company's activities on Chinese soil and the failures of diplomacy that have led to war. Finally, there is Havildar Kesri Singh, Deeti's brother and a sepoy in the East India Company, who reluctantly agrees to join the overseas campaign despite his reservations.

In the midst of personal tribulations, Ghosh deftly portrays the grandeur of history. Through meticulous attention to detail, encompassing naval and military jargon, culinary and sartorial nuances, and the gamut of interior spaces from boudoirs to battlefields, Ghosh illuminates the far-reaching impact of the opium trade on international relations, communities, and migration patterns. Despite the trilogy's narrow temporal scope, Ghosh's narrative traverses an immense expanse of ground.

The literary voyage through Amitav Ghosh's "Flood of Fire" transports one to a realm of sepoys, sahibs, and rajahs, traversing from Assam to Calcutta to Canton, while simultaneously delving into their histories and anticipating their fates. This fictitious odyssey is both corporeal and chronological, and akin to authentic expeditions, it is most gratifying when one is open to unforeseen paths and escapades. The third volume of Ghosh's Ibis trilogy features several familiar characters from its predecessors. In "Sea of Poppies," the author introduced Deeti, a widow who evades her husband's funeral pyre and boards the Ibis, a former slave ship transporting indentured servants from India to Mauritius. Deeti and a select few manage to escape the harsh reality that awaits them on the sugar estates by assuming new identities. In "River of Smoke," the second installment, Ghosh shifts the narrative to Canton, specifically to Fanqui-town, the enclave where foreigners reside and engage in trade with the locals. During a time when the Chinese authorities are striving to eradicate the opium trade, a Parsee merchant from Bombay endeavors to amass wealth from a single, colossal shipment.

In the final volume of the trilogy, "Flood of Fire," Ghosh resumes the narrative in 1839, a mere few months prior to the commencement of the First Opium War. The reader is introduced to Kesri Singh, a sepoy, or Indian soldier in the British military, who has voluntarily enlisted in an expeditionary force for the East India Company. Additionally, we encounter Zachary Reid, an American sailor who fortuitously finds himself in a position to engage in opium trade. Shireen Modi, a widow who embarks on a journey to

China to locate her late husband's illegitimate child, and Neel Rattan Halder, a rajah who was separated from his son following his detainment by the British, are also among the cast of characters.

The four protagonists of this narrative are subject to the capricious whims of the opium trade, a force beyond their control, which alternately assists or thwarts their ambitions. Each of these characters harbors a clandestine shame. Kesri Singh has been informed that his sister Deeti has abandoned her spouse, who happens to be the brother of his own superior, and has taken up with a low-caste laborer, thereby bringing dishonor upon their family. Zachary Reid, the offspring of an American slave, presently presents himself as white and aspires to enter a profession that is predominantly dominated by white men. Shireen Modi has begun to experience romantic sentiments for an Armenian gentleman who was her husband's close confidant, a relationship that would undoubtedly be frowned upon if the Parsee community were to discover it. Lastly, Neel Rattan Halder, the former Rajah of Raskhali, is in hiding due to his conviction on fabricated charges of forgery, and if apprehended, will be incarcerated.

The social novel comprises of characters who are bound or separated by a potent combination of cultural, racial, and religious conventions. The issues of loyalty and betrayal are bound to surface, and their resolution is far from simple. As Neel pens down in his journal, "It is a fallacy to assume that language proficiency and a few literary works can foster connections between individuals. In fact, thoughts, books, ideas, and words tend to isolate one further by eroding any innate loyalties that may have existed."

Ghosh, a distinguished author of seven preceding novels and five books of nonfiction, is a writer who ardently cherishes language. He does not merely construct a world, but revels in endowing it with the most authentic words. His prose is such that a half-Indian, half-Chinese opium addict is distinctly different from an upper-class Parsee widow, who in turn is distinct from a British woman raised in India. (In one comical episode, the British woman devises an impressive array of terms for sexual organs or acts. She refers to a flaccid penis as "a sleeping bawhawder," masturbation as "soaping the sepo," and cunnilingus as "making a chutney.")

The literary work of Ghosh delves into the implications of the emerging free trade in the area, which has resulted in a significant clash that was ultimately resolved through military intervention. While observing a particular battle of the Opium War, Neel contemplates the perplexing notion of how a limited group of individuals could wield such immense power to determine the destiny of countless future generations. The outcome of these brief moments of conflict could dictate the hierarchy of power, wealth, and servitude for an extended period.

The literary work "Flood of Fire" can be likened to a voluminous and amorphous creature, as Henry James might have described it. The author, Ghosh, has meticulously researched and included a plethora of historical details that

are truly remarkable. However, there are instances where Ghosh's inclusion of background information, although helpful for readers who are not familiar with the previous books in the trilogy, can be burdensome to the narrative. Additionally, the diary format used to tell Neel's part of the story lacks the same level of intensity and immediacy as the other sections. Nevertheless, Ghosh's ardor for his subject matter, his deep empathy for his characters, and his masterful command of language make it effortless for readers to become fully immersed in the tale.

II. CONCLUSION

Within the corpus of Ibis literary works, Flood of Fire stands out as the most riveting and thrilling in terms of its action sequences and suspenseful plot. Mortal demises, amorous entanglements, paranormal phenomena, elopements, antiquated ribaldry, reconciliations, combative sequences, retaliatory measures, moral degeneracy, salvational trajectories, metamorphoses, and a plethora of other elements are all encompassed within. For those who have previously savored the literary work of Sea of Poppies, yet found themselves somewhat underwhelmed by the River of Smoke, Ghosh's latest offering will undoubtedly rekindle their interest in the saga. This captivating narrative, much like the Ibis vessel itself, navigates through a series of twists and turns, braving tumultuous waters, and ultimately leaving the reader with a sense that the journey has only just begun.

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