

Bahram Modi (in Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke*) Trapped

Character At the narrative centre of this complex novel, Bahram Modi is a multi-faceted and fascinating person. He is a Parsi businessman from Bombay, who takes advantage of his father-in-law's death to make a 'killing' in the opium trade based in Canton. On the outside, he is a genial if shrewd and successful businessman, but as the story progresses, he becomes trapped by the psychological conflicts within him, which are the result of his position in the opium trade. The obvious trap is the very opium from which he profits but which later claims him as another victim. More than this, he is the classic case of the insider-outsider, an advantageous position in trading terms, but one that ends up tormenting him. He also is an Indian who wants to be accepted by the British, and he is a Parsi who wants respect from his extended family home. He is a man who staked his fortune on the free-trade advocated by his British peers but who is now prevented from trading by his Chinese hosts. He is a mixed-up man with mixed influences and origins. As the author explains, his speech is 'silted with the sediment of many tongues—Gujarati, Hindustani, English, pidgin, Cantonese.' Tormented by the stalemate in the opium trade, he reflects on his life and the circumstances that produced it, usually resorting to vague homilies from his poor understanding of Zoroastrian theology. His reflections provide the author with a vehicle for expressing his own ideas about the world and its cultures. In the end, when his opium stocks are destroyed, he commits suicide in the river. Modi is a likable person whose desires and interests are ultimately defeated by far-reaching historical, economic, and political events.

Activities Bahram Modi is often engaged in negotiating business deals, talking with suppliers, other merchants and the stubborn Chinese authorities in Canton. He spends hours of leisure with his Chinese lover and less time with their son. He sometimes takes walks and relaxes with friends.

Illustrative moments

Self-aware At one point, when the Chinese government has halted the opium trade in Canton, Modi takes a walk and begins to think about his life. He stops when he sees a group of young Indians (some of them probably his own employees) playing a game of cricket on a patch of scrubland. Then he muses, 'Will they remember what we went through? Will they remember that it was the money we made here, the lessons we learned and the things we saw that made it all possible? Will they remember that their future was bought at the price of millions of Chinese lives?' Modi is not unaware of the misery his profit-making business has created but he cannot free himself from it.

Philosophical One of the most extraordinary scenes in this extraordinary novel occurs when Modi and Zadig Karabedian (the clock-maker of Canton) meet Napoleon, who has been exiled on the island of St Helena. Napoleon asks them if the opium trade is evil, and when Zadig says he only makes clocks, Modi answers, 'Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him—his friends, his family, his servants—by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by.'

Trapped Modi is caught between two worlds, two identities, two nations and two philosophies (commercial and personal). This is his tragedy—to be brought down by the loyalties he has shown to others. The most devastating blow comes toward the end of the novel when his British friends betray him. The Chinese have halted the trade and the British take a strategic decision to surrender their entire stock (including Modi's) to the government, who then destroy it. Modi, 'who was the most loyal of the Queen's subjects,' is shattered with a 'sense of betrayal.' Now his understanding of the world, the reciprocity and loyalties that maintained it, has proved to be an illusion.