

Flood of Fire (2015)

Story *Flood of Fire* is the last instalment in Amitav Ghosh's critically acclaimed trilogy covering the opium trade in the first half of the nineteenth century. The narrative picks up the story in 1840, a year after the previous book ended, when the Chinese government has finally enforced a long-standing ban on the import of opium. This final volume concentrates on six characters, four of whom have already played prominent roles in the series. Mr Burnham, Deeti, Neel Rattan Halder and Zachary Reid are the hold-overs, while we also meet Shireen, widow of opium merchant Bahram Modi, and Kesri Singh, brother of Deeti.

The story opens in Bombay, with Shireen bemoaning her fate. 'Is there really nothing left? Nothing?'; she asks and the answer is yes. Her husband had sold all his stock and his ship to Burnham, a British businessman at below market value. Her brothers find a way of recouping some losses, but her greater tragedy is that she discovers her deceased husband had a wife in Canton (now also dead). Shireen now undertakes the long voyage to Canton to visit her husband's grave and to look for his illegitimate son, Ah Fatt. In Canton, the narrative focus shifts to Mr Burnham and a man he has recently employed, the ambitious and mixed-race Zachary Reid. Reid is put on trial in Calcutta for helping others escape (in the first book) from a boat carrying them as indentured labourers to Mauritius. Reid is acquitted and then carries on an affair with the wife of his employer, Mr Burnham, and rises in the social and economic hierarchy, ready to become an opium merchant on his own.

These personal dramas are then eclipsed by the build up to the British invasion of Canton in order to open it up again to 'free trade' (i.e., the profitable opium trade). We watch the British Army advance through the eyes of Kesri Singh, while political negotiations take place. Britain demands that China pay six million Spanish dollars for the opium that they destroyed a year before and, in addition, that they give them an island for a permanent military base. When these demands are refused, the terrible war begins. The descriptions of the terrible vengeance exacted on Canton and its people are detailed and unsparing. The trilogy ends in a roaring blaze, the flood of fire promised in the title. The date is June 1841, with 15 months of the Opium War still to go, leaving the possibility that a fourth book might appear.

Characters

Shireen Modi Shireen Modi is the widow of Bahram Modi, who committed suicide (in the previous book) when his opium stock was destroyed. She journeys to Canton to look for his grave and for his illegitimate child by a Chinese woman.

Kesri Singh Kesri Singh is the brother of Deeti (central character in the first book), who brought their family into disrepute by escaping from her husband's funeral pyre. Kesri also escapes from their native village by joining the British Indian army at the lowest rank and participates in the assault on Canton.

Zachary Reid Zachary Reid (who played key roles in the previous two books) is a mixed-race American who helped others escape from a ship carrying indentured labourers. After being tried and acquitted for mutiny, he is hired by Mr Burnham, has an affair with his wife and becomes an opium merchant in his own right.

Mr Burnham Another character from the earlier books, Mr Burnham is an unprincipled British shipping merchant, who is responsible for the ruin of more than one person. He is nevertheless something of a mentor to Reid, whom he hires.

Neel Rattan Halder Neel Rattan Halder is a once-wealthy landowner and upper-caste gentleman reduced to penury by Burnham. Now he is working for the Chinese government, documenting the encroachments by the British East India Company on Chinese territory. It is revenge, of a sort.

Themes

Conflicted loyalties One theme that emerges beneath the blazing fireworks of war is that of conflicted loyalties. The most dramatic of these dilemmas is that faced by Kesri Singh, the poor farmer's son who enlists in the British Indian army and is sent to Canton to punish the local population. This decision is taken despite his father's advice to join the Mughal Emperor's army, then defending India against the British. Instead he becomes part of his colonial master's forces attacking

people who are defending their territory. Shireen Modi also must decide whether or not to continue to honour her dead husband's name after she discovers that he was disloyal to her in marrying a Chinese woman and fathering a son by her.

Hypocrisy Some divided allegiances can lead to hypocrisy, and Amitav Ghosh provides an acid satire of the British self-serving philosophy of 'free-trade.' Here the mouthpiece of the author is the thoroughly evil character of Benjamin Burnham, the ship owner. In talking with Zachary Reid, he explains that fighting a war to support selling opium is 'bestowing on the people of China the gift of liberty that the British Empire has already bestowed on all those parts of the globe it has conquered and subjugated.' This convenient explanation convinces Reid to become an opium trader himself, which represents another kind of irony: Born of a slave mother, Reid decides to shackle Chinese to addiction by selling them opium.

Language One of the delights of this novel (and all Ghosh's fiction) is his focus on language as a symbol of the variegated nature of history and culture. In this the trilogy, it is said that the characters speak 23 different languages. But Ghosh gives special voice to the pidgins, or trading languages, that result from the mixing of languages and peoples. A simple example would be the Anglo-Indian speech, created by the comingling of English and Hindusthani, but there are many words and phrases that come from contact with Malay, Tamil, Thai, Swahili, Berber, Cantonese, Burmese, Arabic and Indonesian, to name only a few. Sometimes, Ghosh uses these unusual words to comic effect, as when Mrs Burnham gives this advice to Zachary Reid after a tumble in the bed: 'I do not doubt that it is a joy to be a launder of your age, with a lathee always ready to be lagowed — and a dumbpoke is certainly a fine thing, not to be scorned. But you know, my dear mystery, a plain old-fashioned stew can always be improved by an occasional chutney.' Rather than translate, it's best to leave the meaning of her words to your imagination.

History At the end of this trilogy, Mr Burnham speaks to Zachary Reid, explaining their place in history. The Englishman says, 'It is the destiny of the English to bring about the world's end; they are but instruments of the will of the gods. [...] That is why the English have come to China and to Hindustan: these two lands are so populous that if their greed is aroused they can consume the whole world. Today that great devouring has begun. It will end only when all of humanity, joined together in a great frenzy of greed, has eaten up the earth, the air, the sky.' This could have been spoken by a journalist or a campaigner today; that is the value of historical fiction.