

# FLOOD OF FIRE

## Amitav Ghosh

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.

### 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.

## 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.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### **SHIREEN MODI** (Resilient)

**Character** Shireen Modi enters the story as a conventional, even conservative, Indian woman, meek person, dutiful wife and pious Parsi living in Bombay. She lives in her in-laws' house, with her husband always away, and is almost invisible. She is not consulted about anything important, although she runs the kitchen. Then she is brought the news of her husband's financial ruin and suicide in Canton, and she embarks on a transformation of character. Her emotional loss is one thing (we don't really know if she loved her husband because he spent so much of his time in Canton), but her financial loss is even worse. She has been left nothing of the fabulous wealth he had (apparently) amassed through his opium trade, not even a single ship. When she also finds out that her deceased husband had a Chinese wife and has a son by her, she appears more concerned with a loss of face than with the loss of her husband. As she says, 'money is only one small part of the problem. I have to consider my family's reputation.' Despite these concerns, she agrees to undertake a long journey to Canton, against the wishes of her relatives, and in the company of the mysterious half-Armenian, half-Egyptian Zadig, who has brought her this news, which also scandalises her in their eyes. She is

determined to complete the story of her life, to locate the place where it has been cut short, and the voyage to Canton proves liberating. As a sign of her transformation, she abandons traditional Parsi mourning dress and adopts European-style clothing. Once in Canton, she shows another side of her character, empathy, in her new friendship with Mrs Burnham. And she begins what promises to be a different kind of friendship with Zadig. Having come through a storm of misfortune, Shireen is a resilient person.

**Activities** In the life prior to her husband's death, Shireen was a typical Parsi wife. Although she had little authority over most domestic affairs, she spent days fussing over food and recipes, and she often went to visit her daughters and granddaughters. Once in Canton, she makes friends with Mrs Burnham and spends days in her company, two women with failed marriages and common problems.

### **Illustrative moments**

Traditional Shireen Modi lived as a traditional member of an extended Parsi family in Bombay, until news of her husband's death is brought to her from Canton. At first, she cannot believe it, but when it sinks in, her reaction is instinctual. 'Remembering what widows do, she struck her wrists together, almost mechanically, breaking her glass bangles. They fell away, leaving tiny pinpricks of blood on her skin.' She immediately takes to wearing the clothes prescribed for a Parsi widow.

Decisive Although the grieving widow first appears to be meek and passive, she soon reveals a resolute quality lying beneath the culturally shaped exterior. That decisiveness is clearly demonstrated a few weeks after she learned of her husband's death. Then, in the face of stern disapproval from her relatives and wider Parsi community in Bombay, she decides to go to Canton and give up 'the peculiar kind of loneliness that comes of living in a house where the servants far outnumber their employers.' Now, nothing will deter her from her decision, not even the rumours that begin to circulate when she announces that she will go to Canton with the mixed-race Zadig.

Transformed The transformation of her character from passive wife with an absentee husband to an independent-minded woman is dramatised, as so often in Ghosh's fiction, with clothing. In preparation for her voyage to Canton, Shireen goes to a tailor. She plans to take some new shawls and saris. While she is there, however, her maid suggests she also buy some dresses. 'Dresses! Shireen clamped a hand over her mouth. After hearing of Bahram's [her husband's] death, she had adhered strictly to the rules of widowhood, which prescribed...only white saris.' Later, at home, she proudly paraded herself around in the new clothes, showing off her new image to her daughters.

**KESRI SINGH** (Disillusioned)

**Character** Kesri Singh is a young man, the son of a poor farmer in north India and the brother of Deeti (the woman who brought disgrace to the family when she escape from her husband's funeral pyre and ran off with an Untouchable man, whom she later married). While unaware of his sister's whereabouts, Kesri also leaves the family home and joins the British Indian army. He takes this decision, despite his father's advice to fight for the Mughal Emperor, to defend his homeland against the British. But Kesri is not interested in politics or empire; he is interested in finding a route out of rural poverty (as did millions of Indians who served the British until 1947). He is restless but naïve, a rustic who does not understand the wider world, until he joins the army and is sent to Canton to punish the Chinese for the audacity in outlawing the opium trade. He is also proud, of his good-looks and his 'charming' personality. Gradually, though, Kesri acquires a new perspective. First, he is told that his sister married an Untouchable man, and he is declared an 'outcaste' himself by a council of fellow Indian soldiers. This revelation is made by his superior, who (somewhat unbelievably) turns out to be Deeti's dead husband's brother. Then, his experiences in Canton teach him that he is a mercenary. Kesri thus realises that, despite his desire to leave his rural village, he is controlled by the caste system and his sister's transgression. And despite his journey from isolated north India to China, he did not find freedom. He ends in disillusionment.

**Activities** Through flashbacks, we see Kesri as a child with his sister in their village, helping his father with ploughing and harvesting. However, most of the description of Kesri focuses on his life in the army, which is a rich documentation of an ordinary soldier's experience. He undergoes demanding physical training, instruction in bayonet and firearms use and in following the army code of absolute loyalty to one's unit and obeying one's superior. We watch him marching on army expeditions in India (before he is sent to Canton) and interacting with local villagers when they camp.

He then spends time at Fort William in Calcutta, from where he sails with his platoon to Canton. There, he takes part in the assault, leading his men, killing with his sword and taking no prisoners.

Kesri, the farmer's son, who defied his father's wish that he should join the decaying Mughal army to enlist with the army of the new power in India, the British, helps his British masters defeat the Chinese, then realises that he is really a mercenary who can never experience the passion the Chinese feel as they defend their lands.

### **Illustrative moments**

Proud Kesri Singh is proud of his background (he is from a relatively high caste), of his appearance and of his physical strength. This is displayed in the opening scene of the novel, when he is leading his platoon through the rice fields of Assam. As an upper-caste recruit, he is an officer (Havildar) riding on horseback and leading others. 'Havildar Kesri Singh was the kind of soldier who liked to take the lead...when marching through territory already conquered and his only job was to fly the colours and put on their best parade-ground faces for the benefit of the crowds.'

Disgraced The proud man falls when it is discovered that his sister broke caste rules by marrying an Untouchable (who had rescued her from her husband's funeral pyre). A superior officer informs him and spits at him, saying, 'I never want to see you again.' Incredulous, Kesri nevertheless knows that he will be stripped of his status and sent to another regiment as a common soldier. Following this revelation, 'the walk from the officer's tent to his own was the longest of his life,' Ghosh tells us. 'None of the men looked at him...they knew he had been declared an outcaste...Everyone drew back, creating a space around him, as if he had become a moving source of defilement.'

Disillusioned Kesri's eyes are later fully opened in combat with Chinese troops, who are overwhelmed by superior British firepower. In one scene of hand-to-hand fighting, Kesri drives his sword into a Chinese soldier who refused to surrender. 'When he had pulled out his dripping sword, Kesri saw that the man's eyes were still open. For a few seconds of life that remained to him, the man fixed his gaze on Kesri. His expression was one that Kesri had seen before, on campaigns in the Arakan and the hills of eastern India – he knew it to be the look that appears on men's faces when they fight for their land, their homes, their families, their customs, everything they hold dear.' that moment, he reflects that 'in a lifetime of soldiering he had never known what it was to fight . . . for something that tied you to your fathers and mothers.' He also realizes that 'doing his job' in the service of the East India Company makes him little different from 'hired murderers.'

### **MR. REID** (Ambitious)

**Character** Mr Reid is the Zachary Reid of the two previous books, but he deserves another sketch here because, as the central character in the series of three books, he undergoes a transformation in this last book. Whereas earlier, he was adventurous, even reckless, in *Flood of Fire* he becomes an engine of unlimited ambition. As Zachary himself explains, 'I am sick of sailing, risking your life every day, never having any money in your pocket...I don't want to be one of the deserving poor anymore.' Previously, he was charged with helping others escape a boat of indentured labourers and was acquitted, but is left with considerable legal fees. Mr Burnham hires him to refit a boat, and that is the beginning of Reid's rehabilitation. Now in close proximity to wealth and power (of Burnham), his own desires grow and grow. He also comes under the watchful eye of Mrs Burnham, who takes it upon herself to educate him in the Christianity morality. They end up having a torrid (and comical) sexual life together. Then in one of the most vivid scenes in the book, Reid takes his first step in imitating Mr Burnham when he buys a stick of opium in a dark alley in Calcutta. Now the gloves are off and Reid bursts into full life, using his 'can-do' spirit to become a corrupt and deceitful capitalist.

**Activities** Reid spends days in court, giving testimony, in his trial for mutiny in Calcutta. Later, when he's acquitted, he devotes his day time hours to working on refurbishing a boat owned by Mr Burnham. This leads to his sexual relationship with Mrs Burnham, which is described in great and humorous detail. Toward the end of the novel, he watch him on the streets of Calcutta, initiating himself into the opium trade. Under Mr Burnham's tutelage, he learns the tricks of the trade, buys himself a ship and soon becomes as rapacious as his mentor.

### **Illustrative moments**

Ambitious In a telling scene, Reid reveals his shift of character in a conversation with a friend, who has brought him news of his old flame, Paulette. The friend says that she has asked about him (Reid)

and she expects him to seek her out. Reflecting back on his earlier life (in the previous books), Reid says he will not go to her, that he has a sexual partner (Mrs. Burnham) and that he is 'sick of sailing.' 'Now,' he says, 'I want to be rich...I want to have silk sheets and soft pillows and fine food... I want to own ships and not work on them... I want to live in Mr. Burnham's world.'

**Rapacious** After one of their sex-fuelled afternoons, Zachary says, 'I have become what you wanted, Mrs Burnham,' he said. 'You wanted me to be a man of the times, did you not? And that is what I am now; I am a man who wants more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of "enough". Anyone who tries to thwart my desires is the enemy of my liberty and must expect to be treated as such.'

**Comic** Despite his success in business, Reid cuts a somewhat comic figure. Not because he is nouveau riche, but because his aping of Mr Burnham's world has taken him into Mrs Burnham's bed. During their energetic acrobatics, she demands that they address each other by their formal names (Mr Reid and Mrs Burnham) as a means of maintaining the pretence that the established order has not been overthrown. During their initial encounter, things proceed almost entirely by euphemism. 'It's my turn now,' Mrs Burnham proclaims, 'to bajow your ganta.' Later, 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.'

**TARA** (Realistic)

**Character** Tara is the opposite of her older, domineering sister, Bimla. Tara lacks confidence, does not want to go to school, avoids confrontation and seeks attention from others to compensate for her absentee parents. Teased and timed, she escapes by marrying at a young age and living in the US, with a husband, who is scarcely less controlling than her sister. Still, her experience of living abroad and being the mother of two daughters adds depth of her understanding of her family, her past and of India as a culture. When she returns to Delhi, to attend her niece's wedding, she is more assertive and insightful. Back in the old, decaying house, she is struck by the lethargy, the lack of initiative, the absence of ambition. She wants to question Bimla about this perceived inertia, but realises that she will not be understood, that she is out of place in this old world. When she does express others ideas to Bimla, they seem to be largely shaped by her husband. Tara is glad that she is free from the age-old conflicts of India, both within the family and the country, but at the same time she is nostalgic about being with her sister and brothers in the old family home in Delhi. She wants to reconnect with both her sister and her heritage.

**Activities** As a child, Tara plays in the garden and house with her siblings. She is teased a lot and runs to her aunt for comfort. She also frequently visits the neighbours' house and becomes friends with two sisters in that family. Later, when she visits Bimla in the old house, she spends time talking with her sister and wandering about the garden, stirring up memories.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Realistic** Tara, although attractive and sympathetic, has none of her brother Raja's imagination or her sister's determination. She is an ordinary person. When the three siblings play a game of 'who is your hero? Who do you want to grow up to be?', Raja and Bimla express grandiose ideas, while Tara simply says, 'I want to be a mother.' And of the three, she alone achieves her very realistic ideal.

**Westernised** When Tara revisits her old family home, she (and we) come to realise the extent to which she has grown apart from her family, from India and its traditions. She speaks American English, dresses as befits the wife of the Indian Ambassador to the US and finds the atmosphere of the old house dreary and inert. She sees the paint peeling, the curtains heavy with dust and the garden scorched by the summer heat. Even the garden gate sags on its rusted hinges. 'Nothing here ever changes,' she says to herself with a heavy sigh.

**Nostalgic** Tara's reaction to the old house is complicated by feelings of nostalgia. She finds it hard to comprehend the decaying and undisciplined state of affairs, in the structure of the house and the lives of her siblings, and yet she gains pleasure from remembering her childhood in the house. A day after her arrival from America, she is alone in the front room and sees a guava tree in the garden. Her taste buds tingle with the memory of the sharp guava fruit. Desai describes her feelings this way: 'If she had been sure Bakul [her husband] would not look out and see, she would have run down the veranda steps and searched for a guava fruit.'