

River of Smoke (2011)

Story This second instalment in Amitav Ghosh's celebrated trilogy tells the story of three main characters involved in the opium war in the 1830s. It begins with a brief scene in Mauritius, where the ship in the first book of the series has landed. But the story soon shifts to Canton and particularly to the Foreign Quarter, which is the hub of the opium trade, and to the central character Bahram Modi. Modi is a modest Parsi merchant from Bombay, who worked in his father-in-law's shipping business until the old man's death, after which he became involved in the opium trade in Canton. Modi made many trips to China and now, in autumn 1838, he has decided to risk everything on a very large shipment. The problem is that the Chinese Emperor has finally decided to enforce the long-standing ban on opium, which means potential financial ruin for Modi. Meanwhile, as Modi and other foreign merchants struggle to outmanoeuvre the Chinese government, a second strand of the novel appears, in which Paulette Lambert and Robin Chinnery search for rare flowers in the countryside outside Canton. While they wander (without conclusion, it seems), Modi, who has lost his Chinese lover through an early death, and the merchants battle away in meetings with the government, until the Emperor takes decisive action. He seizes the entire stock of opium in the foreigners' warehouses—all 20,381 crates—and has the balls of opium broken up, mixed with salt and lime and thrown into the Pearl River. (That's the river of the title; the smoke is from the continuously lit opium pipes.) With his stock destroyed, Modi commits suicide. Commissioner Lin has written 'a prayer addressed to the God of the Sea asking that all the animals of the water be protected from the poison that will soon be pouring in.' With this serene scene, the novel ends in a standoff between the foreign (mainly British) merchants and the Chinese authorities, leaving the last instalment of the trilogy to cover the actual Opium War of 1839-1842.

Characters

Bahram Modi Bahram Modi is a Parsi merchant from Bombay who builds his fortune on the opium trade and lives in the Foreign Quarter in Canton. He is also the father of Ah Fatt (Freddie), through a liaison with a Chinese woman. Bahram is a man 'caught in the middle,' an Indian who is accepted by British society in Canton. He also struggles to hide his Chinese lover from his extended family in Bombay and ends up killing himself when he loses his opium stock.

Neel Rattan Halder Neel Rattan Halder is a once-wealthy Raja from Calcutta who was convicted of forgery and sent in exile to Mauritius (in the first book). He escaped and makes his way to Canton where he is hired by Modi as a secretary.

Paulette Lambert Paulette Lambert, who also appears in the first book, is a French woman gone 'native' in India. She and Robin Chinnery are engaged in a botanical search for mythic golden camellias in the countryside outside Canton.

Robin Chinnery Robin Chinnery is an eccentric friend of Paulette's from her childhood in Calcutta and accompanies her on her pursuit of flowers for the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, England.

Fitcher Penrose Fitcher Penrose is an English botanist, who should be hunting the camellias but cannot leave Canton due to restrictions placed on Europeans. We learn about him mainly through the humorous letters he writes to Paulette.

Ah Fatt Ah Fatt (Freddie), whom we met in the first book, is the son of Modi and a Chinese woman.

Zadig Karabedian Zadig Karabedian is another one of Ghosh's mixed-race characters, in this case half-Armenian and half-Egyptian. He is a successful clock-maker in Canton, a clever man who takes time to learn the local language and obey the norms of the local culture.

Themes

Imperialism The underlying theme of this novel is the imperialism of the opium trade in China, which is the classic example of an economic system in which the colonial powers exploits the

colonies. The author describes this complex relationship in vivid and haunting detail, not flinching from the physical and mental pain of the opium addicts, but also including wonderful descriptions of the Canton and the trading communities. The hypocrisy of the British 'free-trade' principle is revealed, as well, for nothing is 'free' when there is such asymmetry between the players. At the same time, there is no simple contrast between 'good' and 'bad,' between European and Asians, for the 'hero' of the novel, a merchant who profits from the system, is an Indian (Modi), who is supported by another Indian (the ex-*raja* Halder).

Botany In a clever (if somewhat clumsy) technique of plotting, the author introduces a second main theme of botany. If half the European world in the 19th century was immersed in global trade, the other half (it seems) was made about collecting exotic plants from all over the world. The botanical explorations of Paulette and Robin also provides a perfect symmetry to the novel about opium. Opium trade is about importing a flower, while botany was about exporting flowers. In one case, a flower causes untold misery, in the other it brings unlimited joy.

Cosmopolitanism Throughout the trilogy, but especially in this second book, the author celebrates cosmopolitanism, which was the direct result of the imperialist trade and the diaspora of people. In this book, we meet multi-ethnic characters who speak three, four or five languages, especially the pidgin speech of international trade, which is itself a motley mixture of languages. Highlighting and delighting in this messy melange of jargon, slang, miscegenation and bastard children, Ghosh reminds us that the comforting categories of 'east' and 'west', 'us' and 'them' are simply fictions.