

# RIVER OF SMOKE

Amitav Ghosh

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.

## 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

## 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 Al 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.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

### **BAHRAM MODI** (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.

## FITCHER PENROSE (Predatory)

**Character** Frederick Fitcher Penrose is as eccentric as his name. He is an intriguing mirror-image of Bahram Modi, the opium trader who is the novel's main character. Like Modi, Penrose is a Victorian adventurer whose ambition is to plunder the riches of Asia for his own gain. The only difference is that Penrose is a botanist. He is attracted, in particular, by the legend of a certain golden camellia, which he pursues on land with the determination of a mercantile entrepreneur on the seas. While Penrose appears to be harmless and eccentric, he harbours a deep-seated desire to acquire. Indeed, he looks upon the natural world as 'an assortment of puzzles' which when a proper solution is found 'could provide rich sources of profit.' He alienates his sons who regard plants as 'no different from doorknobs, or sausages, or any other object that could be sold for a price on the market.' As a botanist, he is observant, though not always of people. He has a high opinion of himself and takes pleasure in correcting others, especially in botanical matters.

**Activities** Penrose spends most of his time rambling about the countryside in Cornwall and China, hunting for plants. We also find him, in Cornwall, on the *Redruth*, a boat that he has bought and refitted for his long sea voyages. In addition, he likes to browse in libraries, searching for old botanical books, and especially those with illustrations.

## Illustrative moments

Predatory A good example of Penrose's predatory nature occurs while he is sailing on the Cornish coast with Paulette. As usual, they have set out several nets to catch fish, but when Penrose hauls his in, he finds only a sea-porpoise. Paulette would like to set it free, but Penrose won't hear of it. 'He was delighted to see the plump creature floundering around on the deck', and then he 'swiftly slaughtered it and stripped it of its fat.' The only part of the porpoise that he did not utilise was its 'excrements,' paralleling the rapacious exploitation in the opium trade and colonial trade more generally. Like Bahram Modi, Penrose's quest remains inconclusive. 'Not for nothing was it said in Cornwall that he was so near with his pennies that he would skin a turd for its tallow.'

Puritan Another unsympathetic element in Penrose's character, one in contrast to Modi, is his puritanism. As the author puts it, 'he had no use for luxuries, and his wealth was a source not of comfort, but of anxiety—it was a burden, like a sack of cabbages that had to be hoarded in the cellar for seasons of scarcity.' This spartan approach to life is displayed while he is a gardener in his native

Cornwall and his employed, a wealthy landowner asks him how much water his roses require. 'As much as the Lord gives, sir.' And how much is that, his boss persists. 'A cup a day, sir, and not one drop more,' Penrose replies. 'Not one single drop more, for that would be a sinful waste.'

**Ambitious** Perhaps the least undesirable of his qualities is ambition. We get a good example of this midway through the novel, when he is offered a chance to return to China, in order to hunt for the elusive camellia. This time, he would go not as the representative of Kew Gardens (in public hands) but employed by a private group of investors (led by Sir Joseph Banks, the real-life head of Kew Gardens), who are keen to find the magical plant. The voyage would disrupt his life—his young wife was pregnant, and he would lose his permanent job at Kew Gardens—but he knew that he would seize this opportunity with both hands. When Sir Joseph handed him a picture of the camellia, Penrose says, 'Yes, sir. Yes, I will go. I will start tomorrow.'

**Neel Rattan Halder**      Adaptable

**Character** Neel Rattan Halder is the only character to appear in all three books of Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy (of which *The River of Smoke* is the second book). Halder is the rich Calcutta merchant and landowner who has been convicted of (trumped up) forgery charges in Calcutta and sent on the *Ibis* to the island of Mauritius as indentured labour. Once a collaborator in the colonial economic system, and a proud Anglophile, Halder is now disgraced and, when he escapes from the *Ibis* during a fierce storm at sea, becomes a fugitive of the law. Halder has already shown himself to be a competent entrepreneur, but now he displays his adaptability. He lands up in Canton, where he knows no one and does not speak the local language (at the beginning, at least). But he has the imagination and flexibility that enable him to create a new life for himself. He first takes on a new identity as Anil Kumar Munshi, the clerk or munshi to the Canton-based merchant Bahram Modi, and later, having learned the polyglot tongue used in this busy trading port, he becomes a translator to a Chinese merchant. Halder is a curious character, a somewhat introverted and reflective pleasure-seeker, a chronicler of words, a defender of the old order and yet an opportunist, too.

**Activities** Halder spends time in the office of Bahram Modi, his employer and owner of a shipping company in Canton. We also see him on his journeys around this vibrant trading post, interacting with merchants, ship captains, sailors and passengers. In his free time, he spends hours compiling his dictionary of a business language used in Canton, writing words and definitions on filing cards that will (one day) form the basis of his manuscript.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Reflective** Although Halder has been disgraced and reduced to an employee, he still retains a capacity of imagination, the power to reflect on himself and the world around him. This quality is illustrated in an early scene of this novel, when Halder sees a storm brewing on the open sea. In Ghosh's description: 'Neel was fascinated by the image the typhoon conjures up: of a gigantic oculus, at the far end of a great, spinning telescope, examining everything it passed over, upending some things, and leaving others unscathed; looking for new possibilities, creating fresh beginnings, rewriting destinies and throwing people together who would never have met.' This is a significant image for the whole of the *Ibis* trilogy in that it highlights the movement of people (Deeti, Paulette, and others, including Halder himself) across vast territories of the earth, looking for new identities and brighter futures. In this image of the swirling sea, Halder has perceived a dynamic of transformation that, in Ghosh's fiction, propels world history.

**Adaptable** Himself dislocated by a typhoon of misfortune, Halder finds his feet in Canton by reinventing himself as a secretary (munshi), taking the name Anil Kumar Munshi, and then as translator for a Chinese merchant. His adaptability is demonstrated when, in a moment of inspiration, he decides to become a scholar and compile a dictionary of the words used in the south China trade. He gives his proposed book the fabulous title of 'The Celestial Chrestomathy, Comprising A Complete Guide To And Glossary Of The Language of Commerce In Southern China.' The pompous title carries a whiff of satire of the leather-bound volumes produced by nineteenth-century British colonial administrators. In truth, fact and fiction are blurred in Ghosh's own Afterword, in which he mentions the imminent publication of Halder's dictionary. But Halder's interest is genuine, spurred by a conversation he has with his boss, Bahram Modi. When Modi speaks a kind of pidgin, mixing

Cantonese, Hindustani, Portuguese and Malay, Halder is first puzzled and then impressed. The initial confusion gives way to the realisation that using a language of such diverse origins is a shrewd way to communicate with trading partners. Not everyone will understand everything, but each person will understand something. Here, too, as with Halder's image of the storm (described above), Ghosh uses Halder to convey his own fascination with the rich history of languages. As Halder explains, 'Words, like people, are endowed with a history and a destiny of their own.'