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HOW IS OPIUM TRADE PRESENTED IN AMITAVA GHOSH'S IBIS TRILOGY'S RIVER OF SMOKE?

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ABSTRACT

Morality and globalization blends in River of Smoke. This is because of deducing the commercial profits gained through opium trade in Canton. Engine of the channels on which opium was transported, becomes a symbol of this globalization. Bahram Moddie is presented as Amitava Ghosh's mouthpiece for heavy reliance of the Parsi merchants on increasing investments on opium. Though China profited from this trade, but life of poor peasants and farmers in India was put into stake by forcing them into opium and poppy cultivation. This contradicts morality, as the relationships between social constructs were destabilized. Evidence is the resistance and oppositions from Chinese traders.

Key words: Opium, trade, Amitava Ghosh, Ibis, Trilogy, River of Smoke

1. INTRODUCTION

Opium, was not a drug, as it is, in the present modern context. In colonial times, opium was cultivated, processed, and exported for gaining economic profit. Poor farmers and peasants were forced into cultivation. They were treated as slaves by the British colonizers. These references ignite sympathy among the readers when they read short stories, novels, documentaries. Evidences can be cited of Amitava Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy, which consists of a novel, *River of Smoke* (Choudhury, 2019). Here, smoke is something which does not go with the river. This is because there are waters, which make up a river. For understanding how opium trade is represented in the novel, this paper is prepared.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In *River of Smoke*, the second novel of the Ibis Trilogy by Amitav Ghosh, opium trade is presented vast, morally fraught, and globally interconnected enterprise. This enterprise drives personal fortunes and imperial politics. The first volume focuses more on the production of opium in India. By the time the novel transgresses into *River of Smoke* attention of the readers is shifted into trade's commercial interests, which comes from Canton (Guangzhou). This is the scenario just before the time, when readers witness the outbreak of the First Opium War. Presentation of opium trade in the novel initiates with engine, which symbolizes global capitalism. Opium becomes the economic backbone of British to conduct imperial trade in Asia. Through Bahram Moddie, Narayan, (2021) stated that Amitava Ghosh shows deep reliance of Parsi merchants on investments in opium shipments, which were made to China. Ghosh shows the dependence of fortunes, credit systems, insurance, and shipping networks on the drug trade.

Opium increases financial stability of China through Britain's tea imports. Major drivers of this are the shipping industries and private merchant houses. Through this, Indian poppy farmers, British firms are tied with Chinese buyers. Together they form one globalized economy, possessing mutual sharing and understanding towards gaining profit through transparent and ethical manner. Renu, (2017) argued that the trade does not marginalize criminality, but institutionalized commercialization of the interests, behind which there is support of power and authority of the colonizers.

Moral ambiguity and rationalization are other themes, which readers find while reading the novel. Ghosh presents opium trade through morally complex characters, as they have the capability to represent legitimate business participation. Mention can be made of Bahram

whose characterization is justified for his participation in legitimate business. Here, simple villains are a mismatch as British traders frame opium as a significant commodity over any other. Despite of recognizing the severe impact, some characters are compelled to feel economically trapped. Here, Bawa and Arora, (2022) stated that normalization of capitalism is ambiguous, as high profit gaining mentality is exploited.

Another significant issue is Chinese resistance and moral oppositions. Both this resistance and opposition was towards the opium imports (Dasgupta, 2022). Chinese officials are portrayed as protective agents, attempting to prevent people from becoming addicted to opium, and colonizers gaining profit by draining bulk profit. Strict restrictions imposed on opium trade in Canton aggravated complexities. Crackdown and decline in the trade foreshadowed historical actions committed by Lin Zexu. His anti-opium campaign had high chances of triggering First Opium War. In this context, Datta and Datta, (2025) stated that trade appears as imperial aggression as compared to free trade enhancing commercial interests.

Cultural and civilizational clash also became important as a theme for discussion. Through opium trade, colonizers, that is, Britishers considered free trade like universal and acting according to the principle (Bhatt & Raisi, 2025). On the contrary, Chinese authorities perceived the trade as immoral, destabilizing relationships between the social constructs. Destabilization ignited from misunderstandings which ignited between legal systems and worldviews intensifying conflicts on economic issues. Joseph, (2022) was of the view that Ghosh contributed by showing rhetorical liberal economics which conceals coercion and violence.

Human consequences are also shown in the novel, *River of Smoke*. Focus lies on merchants involved in carrying and processing opium as compared to the ones who are addicted from consuming. Impact is destructive on the social constructs, which is visible from weakened power of Chinese communities, silver drained from China's economy, and Indian farmers locked into poppy cultivation systems. The trade reshaped living standards and lifestyles across continents India, China, and Britain. Bajaj, (2024) argued this reshaping uncovers hidden human cost, laying behind imperial wealth.

Historical inevitability can also be connected with the possibilities of impending war. The novel built inevitability around First Opium War. Insistence of traders' insistence on profit and Britain's back up of commercial interests exempts military conflict from being accidental.

However, Beretta, (2022) stated that it is presented as structurally embedded within the system of imperial capitalism.

3. METHODOLOGY

Thematic analysis is apt here for understanding representation of opium trade in Amitava Ghosh's novel, *River of Smoke* in Ibis Trilogy. For preparing the themes, sources like books, journals, articles, government websites, reports are considered. From these themes, essential aspects are deduced, which makes deductive approach justified in this context.

4. CONCLUSION

Review of the literature concludes that in *River of Smoke*, opium trade is portrayed as an agent for globalizing imperial commerce. Opium, for the people, is morally compromised but normalized in the form of consumption, production, processing. Opium also becomes a catalyst for cultural conflicts among the social constructs with different opinions and perspectives. Systems connecting channels, routes and roads, also exploits multiple societies, based on the processing of opium for trade. All of these ignite a geopolitical upheaval, reshaping the nations. Ghosh refrains from romanticizing or simplifying the trade. Instead, he presents opium as an ombre shade reflecting modern globalization.

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