



Neo-Colonialism: in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*.

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Abstract

This paper discusses neo-colonialism in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*.

Ghosh attempts to write a postmodernist view of historical metafiction against the conventional way of writing history and correlates the art of fiction with reality. Exploring the imperial historical past, Ghosh's *River of Smoke* illumines the contemporary realities by implication. *River of Smoke* is a vibrant multiplot novel, highlighting neo-colonial aspects of this post millennium era examining issues such as globalization, free-trade, liberalization, transnational market, multinational commerce, multidimensional world economy which engenders a new way of colonialism, human devastation and ecological deterioration. Ghosh talks about the free trade doctrine in the international market and its negative results by exposing the British East India Opium trade. Bahram Modi, a parcy opium trader in Bombay, is the progonist of the novel. Anahita, a ship owned by Bahram, carried a large consignment of opium to China to get considerable wealth. This paper discusses the impact of trade imperialism in the contemporary world.

Keywords: neo-colonialism, globalization, liberalization, transnational, multidimensional, multinational.

Introduction

After World War II, as the result of the process of decolonialization led by colonized nations, the term 'neo-colonialism' became dominant. Even though the European powers granted political independence to the colonies, they continued to control the economy of the colonized countries. The idea of neo-colonialism is widespread in the late twentieth century. Frantz Fanon had already used the concept of neo-colonialism in his book *Wretched of the Earth*. Its coinage can be traced to the late 1950s. Brutents in *A Historical View of Neo-Colonialism* says, " an international conference on the role of the developing countries in the modern world held several years ago, by Rubert Emerson, Walter Laquer and other Western colonial experts and anti-communists, who asserted that the question of neo-colonialism is an invention of Moscow. The title of Laquer's contribution, for instance, was 'Neo-colonialism- the Soviet Concept'" (17). Neil Lazarus has used this term in his work *Resistance in Postcolonial American Fiction* for expounding the involvement of developed countries over the developing countries.

Analysing the discourses of colonialism and neocolonialism In *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* Jean-Paul Sartre, the French Philosopher, delineates number of situations that creates neocolonialism and its devastative nature. Sartre in his speech on "Colonialism is a System" at Wagram on 27 January 1956, warned against the mystification of neo-colonialism, a system put in nineteenth century, supported and maintained by liberal ideology. "In this form the colonial enterprise remained hesitant. It took more definite shape during the Second Empire, as a result of industrial and commercial expansion. One after the other, the great colonial companies were created: This time it was capitalism itself that became colonialist. Jules Ferry would become the theoretician of this new colonialism" (10)

The term neocolonialism was widely used particularly in the situation of Africa to indicate the continued political, economic and cultural relationship of the colonial countries with their former colonies eventhough the received the formal decolonization. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of newly independent Ghana, coined the term that was expounded in the Organization of African Unity Charter. In 1965 in his book *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah wrote, "In place of colonialism, as the main instrument of imperialism, we have today neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is also the worst form of imperialism . . . Neo-colonialism like colonialism is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries" (xii). It is a policy or system of capitalist countries, overlapping political, cultural and economic hegemony over the independent nation indirectly.

'Neo' colonialism implies a form of contemporary economic imperialism as well as a new way of colonialism in the post-colonial world. The term 'Neocolonialism' refers to as 'Neo-imperialism', 'Global Capitalism' and postmodern 'Late Capitalism.' It is an attempt by the former colonial regimes to exploit the resources of the post-colonial nations in the post-millennium era. So neo-colonialism is a continuation of the economic imperialism of colonialism.

Neo-colonialism examines the notion of central and periphery dichotomy. Existing international economic arrangements designed by the former colonies connect the developed countries with underdeveloped countries and maintain their control of the former colonies. Based on this economic policy, the centre of the wealthy nations or developed countries shares with the poor nations or developing countries. Spivak explaining the economic concept of 'neocolonialism' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, writes, "Today the old ways, of imperial adjudication and open systemic intervention, cannot sustain unquestioned legitimacy. Neocolonialism is fabricating its allies by proposing a share of the center in a seemingly new way (not a rupture but a displacement) . . ." (57).

Nexus between Neo-colonialism and Postcolonialism

The relationship between Neo-colonialism and postcolonialism lay in its thematic similarities. Both deal with the economic, political, and cultural deformities traces of colonialism and colonial hegemonies in different means. Neo-colonialism is an extension and changing mode of postcolonialism in the late twentieth century. Post-colonialism is associated with the particular period of history of colonialism and its implications. Postcolonial discourse offers different perspectives of colonialism. There are mainly two aspects of postcolonialism which are the cultural aspect and the economic aspect. Postcolonialism in cultural discourse focuses on the western cultural dominance in the colonized nation during the colonial period and the impact of the colonial experience in the present. The economic dimension of postcolonialism emphasises modern economic arrangements in the globe, created by the formal colonial powers to maintain control on the former colonies and make them dependent after the colonial independence. Economic imperialism implies a form of neo-colonialism in the contemporary post-colonial world.

In the cultural field, Postcolonialism explores the country's culture affected by the colonial power, and the hidden agenda of western imperialism. Bill Ashcraft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* use the term "postcolonialism" "to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). Postcolonialism deals with issues of cultural identity of the colonized society, their exploitation, race and ethnic differences, subjugation, displacement, cultural hybridity, and the Other. Even after the process of decolonialization, the struggle and impact of the colonialism was continued. In *Beginning Postcolonialism* McLeod says, "'Postcololialism' recognises both historical *continuity* and *change*. On the other hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonialisation" (33). Stressing the constant colonial threat, recurring in the decolonized society, Fanon states in his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, "We should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western powers wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police forces from our territories" (101).

From the economic perspective, Postcolonial addresses the new direction of the neo-colonial imperialism where industrial and economic powers interfere politically and economically in the affairs of the post- independent nation. Enabling the transformative nature of postcolonialism, it takes the terminological shift from the traditional investigation of colonial imperialism in the history into geo economic hegemony which is the contemporary colonial structure of domination. Neo- colonialism implies a global economic system as a form of international capitalism in the contemporary world. It is a new expression of the modern epoch conditioned by the powerful project of globalisation propelled by the irresistible forces of international capitalism. In this context, the term postcolonialism designates financial power as an economic hegemony in neo-colonialism. Shohat in “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’” illustrates:

the term ‘post-colonial,’ when compared with neo-colonialism, comes equipped with little evocation of contemporary power relations; it lacks a political content which can account for the eighties and nineties-style U.S. militaristic involvement in Granada, Panama and Kuwait-Iraq, and the symbolic links between U.S. political and economic interests and those of local elites. (326)

postcolonialism claims in the name of Third World or commonwealth countries as its provenance’s regime for its concern and orientation whereas neo-colonialism gains nation- state concept as the space of organisation for its critical discourse. Explaining the contemporary transformations in global culture and examining global conditions and the origins of the new world situation caused by global capitalism, Arif Dirlik in “ The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism” points out that “the term postcolonial has acquired the status of new orthodoxy both in cultural criticism and academic programs”. He asserts:

The new world situation created by transformations within the capitalist world economy , by the emergence of what has been described variously as global capitalism, flexible production, late capitalism, and so on, terms that have disorganised earlier conceptualisations of global relations, especially relations comprehended earlier conceptualizations of global relations, especially relations comprehended earlier by such binaries as colonizer/colonized, First World / Third World, and the ‘ West and the Rest,’ in all of which the nation-state was taken for granted as the global unit of political organization (295).

Thus, the postcolonial has generated with the new vistas as ‘neo-colonialism’. It is an international capitalism to counterpart to the old fashioned colonialism and to the new balance of forces in the international arena.

Neo-colonialism: Global Capitalism

Neo-colonialism is modern way of colonialism created by global capitalism, processed by globalisation, neo-liberalization, free- trade and transnational market which are the dominant power of global economic system in the contemporary world. When examined the existing new world order, it is formed by the over whelming inflexible structure of capitalism which is based on the private ownership of the production and monopoly over product. This global capitalism controls the world. This is known as neo-colonialism. Global capitalism is a new implementation for the elevation of the level of production to the standardized and successful functioning in economic development. Defining the basic philosophy of freedom and right, and ownership and private property in production, George Riesman in his book *Capitalism*, explains, “Capitalism is the economic system that develops in so far as people are free to exercise their rights to life and choose to exercise it” (19).

Pointing out the significant features he notes, “ It is spontaneously to set about establishing, extending and reinforcing all the other institutes, in addition to freedom and limited government that constitute a capitalistic economic system such as the private ownership of the means of production, saving and capital accumulation, exchange and money, division of labour and price system” (27). This new economic capitalism becomes a dominant global power because it acquires its power and wealth by increasing new technology in product, transnationalization of market and flourishing consumer culture. It is a new empire, expressing immense scope of power and controls to the present world. The imperialist venture which prevails in the new global capitalistic empire exerts power over other countries. Thus, global capitalism, an instrument of colonial structure of domination, has established its reign over the world.

Economic globalization is the logic of the modern era through which capitalistic imperialism is being exercised through vehicles of free trade and extending of the market to other countries. The nature of global capitalism is accumulation of revenue and multiplication of commodity production by introducing worldwide economic plan called ‘globalization.’ The new economic arrangement shaped by the globalisation has endowed maximum capital by exercising freedom from the social, political interference and opening free trade market worldwide. It is noticeable that how new-colonialism is created out of this situation and pervaded over the country, by erection of institutions means for production. Critising the current state of organising production and the ideology of new hegemony, Arjun Appadurai the contemporary postcolonial writer, has argued that “ we are of moving to a global order in which the nation-state has become other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place” (421). Globalization acts as a contemporary imperialism and the capitalistic mode of product claims and establishes a new history of colonialism. Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin conceptualize globalization as a new form of colonialism. They write:

The key to the link between classical imperialism and contemporary globalization in the twentieth century has been the role of United States. Despite its resolute refusal to perceive itself as ‘imperial’ . . . the United States had, in its international policies, eagerly espoused the political domination and

economic and cultural control associated with imperialism . . . the operation of globalization cannot be separated from the structures of power perpetuated by European imperialism (92)

Neo-liberalisation and free trade are the major elements of neo-colonialism which is encouraged and practised by the capitalist system. Harvey, understanding the freedom in trade and the policy of neoliberalism, states that neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Neo liberalisation demands the non interference of other nation in the matter of trading as well as inviting association and support of the nations in the trade market.

Transnational Corporation and international market is the effective and innovative means by which trade is accomplished with the support of every country. The fundamental system of flexible manufacturing and marketing is transnationalization of trade which promotes enrichment of capital in the globalised world. In “ The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism” Dirlik who observes the new strategy of global capitalism, He commands, “The medium of linking the contemporary global capitalist network together is the transnational corporation, which has taken over from national markets as the locus of economic activity not as a passive medium for the transmission of capital, commodities and production but as a determinant of that transmission and its direction” (309).

Amitav-Trade Imperialism

In historical novels, incidents are re-lived and meanings are generated and constructed by the novelist who links them to the present situation. Their voice has a great impact and powerful feeling in the minds of the reader. In that way Amitav Ghosh who presents a postmodernist view of historical metafiction against the conventional approach to write history, claims to give a new interpretation to historical truth. Ghosh is one of the distinguished and influential writers and is recognised as an important writer by contemporary critics. His narratives do not take an ordinary stance; instead, they present a multifaceted view of contemporary issues. Depicting imperialism and colonialism, and subjugation and marginalisation of an earlier era, Ghosh exposes the historical consequences and effects of such a legacy in the post-colonial world and expounds the extension of economic hegemony and cultural changes over the former colonies in the contemporary world as a form of neo-colonialism.

Ghosh’s latest series, the *Ibis* Trilogy, presenting the British Imperial history in his novels illumines the scenario of neo-colonialism and points out the devastating nature of modern colonialism through historical expressions. The speciality of the fictional narratives of Ghosh is in his outstanding qualities of dealing with political issues and presenting philosophical ideas, which are intertwined in the historical predicaments with contemporary realities in the form of metafiction. Recognizing the new pattern of narration, Linda Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism* states that the postmodern historical novels are a ‘historiographic metafiction’ because the postmodern writers have formed a theory of contemporary historiography and have made the complicated identification of history and fiction. Thus, it has been restructured in the hand of postmodern historians.

River of Smoke, the second volume of Ibis trilogy, is set in the backdrop of opium trade and commerce. Ghosh traces the illegal opium trade of the British East Indian Company at Canton in China vividly and dramatically and portrays the opium war of 1839 which was an important historical incident in nineteenth century. There are three stories intertwined with each other Ghosh's brilliance of narrative technique and the anthropological impulse in the novel stand out. The novel begins with the dangerous exile of Deeti who lost her husband in a dangerous sailing as an indentured labourer in a distant land in Mauritius. This is the end of the first book namely *Sea of Poppies*. This background scene gives way to *River of Smoke*. The first story is about Neel Rattan who was once a Zamindar. His wealth was swindled and he was imprisoned by the British. Second, Paulette Lambert is a French girl who has been left as an orphan and she inherited from her knowledge of flora and fauna of that region and spends in expedition on collection of flora. Third, Bahram a parsi business man involved in profitable trade operations in Bombay and engaged in selling opium in overseas. Even though it is interesting to record all the incidents that involve with Neel Rattan, Paulette Lambert and Deeti their expeditions, it occupies the peripheral concerns in the novel.

Bahram is a parsi merchant who has an exceptional ability and vision in trading. The trade companions he deals with are foreign traders and Chinese traders. He had undertaken his journey for fifteen times in the course of his career, establishing the export division of Mistrie Brothers which was one of the largest and the most profitable trading operations in Bombay. Being an excellent dealer in opium and having a wide experience of merchandize in Canton, he had planned to load a large consignment of opium with great expectations of earning huge profit in trade. The foreign merchant are not interested in the legal trade but in the trafficking of opium. As soon as Bahram explained about his opium trade, Rustamji, his father-in-law and owner of the Mistries firm, disapproved his decision and told him that selling opium in overseas is smuggling, the Mistries firm cannot get involved in unwanted trade or in social evil. Bahram reiterated, "Look at the world how it is changing. Today the biggest profits don't come from selling useful things: quite the opposite. The profits come from selling things that are not of any real use . . . Look at all the money that people are making from selling rum and gin. Opium is like that" (51). East India Company was trying to take monopoly over the opium trade.

Accumulating wealth and multiplying money are recognised as basic human needs. There is a certain restriction on the production of wealth and its gratification. Giving more important in earning money, new world order promotes any illegal practises to acquire the wealth. Ghosh pictures that the philosophy of life in the present day is rooted in freedom and wealth which is reflected in this novel. Bahram realised his motivation of earning money by purchasing ship and thought of loading a large shipment for production of wealth. So he pooled all his resources, withdrew cash from bank, mortgaged his properties, sold Shireenbai's jewellery and borrowed money from his friends. The *Anahita*, a sophisticated ship contained three thousand chests. The value of the shipment would be over a million Chinese taels of silver and about forty English tons of the precious metal. When *Anahita* was sailing on its way to Canton, a fierce storm battered the ship. Hundreds of chests had broken loose and splintered, spilling the contents. When Bahram left at Canton he was warned and informed that the protocols to stop opium trade was formulated and propagated by the Chinese Government.

Ghosh traces out the transnationalization of trade in the present day context which leads to global unity as well as fragmentation. In fact, global capitalism promotes the private corporations with modernization of products which create the mode of fragmentation in trade. The transnational corporations gain power by installing its own institutions in their country. The trade corporations and organisations in the country appear as fragmentation in the world level and bloom everywhere competing with one another. Transnational economic organisations, functioning as great power, control the world economy and get involved in the social, political and cultural affairs of the globe.

In this novel, Ghosh exposes the system of economic globalisation in the Chamber of Commerce in Canton which consists of British East Indian Company in British, Jardine, Matheson & Company in Scotland, Dent & Company, Olyphant & Company in America and Slade & Company, Indian Private Merchants known as 'Accha Hong' and Chinese merchants known as 'Co Hong'. These private companies and enterprises manifested fragmentation in the economic world and highlight power structures.' Ghosh exhibits 'Chamber of Commerce' and its functions as the Transnational Trade Corporation in present world and the development of global capitalism. Highlighting the new civilised world conditioned by the overwhelming dynamics of globalisation which is propelled by the irresistible forces of trade and commerce, this novel projects economic capitalism. In an enclave meeting, Slade climbs that "This is a new age, and it will be forged and shaped by trade and commerce" (237) and reveals the detailed war plan of Jardine, and repudiate the ban on opium trade. Even if the British protest against the banning of opium and fight a war against China, they have a safe position because they are the privileged citizen of the British empire, "You must consider yourself lucky, John, you were born in England" (238). It is foretold that like Bahram many merchants, from the non western world would be the victims of this globalised trade. The British take the dominant role among the tame of merchants.

While discussing 'Free Trade' doctrine, Slade thunderously argues about the freedom of free trade. Charles is convinced the ethical law of productive role of various economic functions, and he insists on legalistic economic activities and well being of others and the circumstance, He replies "if freedom is merely a stick for one to beat others with, then surely the word has lost all meaning?" (238). While Slade demands "the Law of Free Trade" (238), Charles King insisted "the Law of Conscience" (238). Ghosh as an anthropologist underlines not only the trade imperialism but also the freedom, morality and ethics in society and in the personal philosophy of life. Lin Zexu, the Governor of China, promulgated laws to eradicate opium smuggling and consumers and signed on some agreement with foreigners. But China could not stop the inflow of opium. Chamber of Commerce protested against the propaganda and shouted in the meeting, "Free Trade, Universal Free Trade, the extinction of all monopoly and especially the most odious one, the Hong monopoly" (406). British and the entire foreign merchant were very adamant against the law of opium. Finally, all the shipment of opium were confiscated, and surrounded to the Chinese government. The British along with the other merchants declared a war.

Conclusion

Ghosh's main emphasis in this novel is 'Trade Capitalism' and gives detailed descriptions on chamber scene with enormous discussions and dialogues. On interview Ghosh was asked by Venkadesh, "While writing Trilogy, are you concentrating on 1893 of Opium War between British India and China? Were you conscious of political parallels in contemporary world that the Trilogy might address? Ghosh replied, "Certainly, at the end of it, it is perfectly clear to me, The Opium War inaugurated faith in world history which you might call 'Free Trade Imperialism.' There is such distinct parallel between Opium war and Iraq war". Thus, Ghosh in this novel presents past colonial historical events to illuminate contemporary realities marked by economic Imperialism bound by revenues and he invites countries to analyse critically and build a new world where there is no colonial dominance and war instead, peace and harmony.

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