



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Narratology in River of Smoke: A Study

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* belongs to the genre of the historical fiction. With the help of different narrative strategies, Amitav Ghosh in this novel has written history that covers the period of opium trade in Canton in 1838. The story is about the struggle of Manchu Empire against the British Empire who made war on China in the name of free trade. Ghosh has re-investing past through using different narratology devices while presenting nation's history. He shows that memory, interior monologue, 'Stream of Consciousness', authentic and official voice of historical personal, original documentation edicts Canton Journals, Hukam namas, proclamation, translators, letters, painting and drawing etc. to present Opium war period in Canton. The novel moves in flash back in non-chronological order. There are analeptic movements, embedded stories, characterized by fragmented sequences, ellipsis, digression and jumbled chronology. The narrative is presented through third person omnipresent narrator along with person character narrator. The point of views from which the story is told keeps on changing. Different perspectives of the colonized, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the sufferers, the marginals, of the colonizers. This shifting focalization also helps to present vividly the history of opium war period in Canton.

Key Words:- Narratology, Canton, opium trade, war, Genre, Narrators, Focalization.

### Introduction

In his novel Amitav Ghosh wants to mirror different people through the eyes of oppressed rather than the dominating and oppressing forces in society. He thinks that narratives have basically the same function. One has to go through narrative to encounter the surface of the story just as one has to travel through history to encounter.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke* belongs to the genre of the historical. With the help of different narrative strategies, Amitav Ghosh in this novel has written that covers the period of opium trade in Canton, in 1838. The story is about the struggle of Manchu Empire against the British Empire who made war on China in the name of free trade. The British government was backed by merchants and traders. They made war on China in the name of free trade. They were trading in opium which was produced as monopoly of the East India Company. They talked about free markets and trade but in fact the markets were not free at all as the Asian merchants couldn't compete with British merchant on equal terms. The merchants

in Asia had a very long tradition. Even in the past they were often able to outdo the British traders and merchants. But the British maintained their control on business and trade by using their political and military power. It is through the omnipresent narrator or the character focalizers. These characters and their memories about the world they lived in the foreign merchant's quarter of Canton, the cliffs of Mauritius, the inner sanctum of walled Chinese garden or the life on a vessel, from all perspectives.

The main story of *River of Smoke* is about the struggle of Manchu empire against the British Empire. On one hand the Chinese Emperor is trying to ban the import of drug while the western power who profits from this trade resist this movement in the name of free-trade. This scenario has also its relevance in present. A century and a half later material profit still provokes to attack the other.

### Discussion

The book is divided into three sections 'Island', 'Canton' and 'Commissioner Lin'. Each section comprises six unnamed chapters. Ghosh has tried to project and reproduce the Canton different voices of traders, migrants, lascars, government officials, British officers, business men, botanists, horticulturists, and even painters, opium trade and pre-war conditions in Canton, Amitav Ghosh has relied to great extent on original records to create an emotional and fictional response to the condition of sufferers. The novel's interest lies in horror and beauty with which Bahram Modi the Parsi opium trader comes to terms with his memories allowing the readers to share the pain and suffering of his life.

Amitav Ghosh wishes to present a subtext from a new critical direction. In this sub text he presents the history of the transportation of rare plants from Canton to other countries through the vessel Redruth. Ghosh fictionalizes and presents different activities during the period of opium trade in China. It is a history conceived by Ghosh through intense reading of Chinese Repository and Canton Register- the journals of that period and other related material available as mentioned by Ghosh in his acknowledgement.

*River of Smoke* is a not a univocal narrative. It frames a series of inter-related stories from history presented by multiple narrators. The psychological effect of the opium war upon the psyche of the people sometimes outweigh the historical facts, which is presented mainly through main character focalizers Bahram Modi, Neel, Zadig Bay, Robert Chinnery etc. Thus, Amitav Ghosh's novel reveals the psychic sub-text that lie within and beneath the historical facts. This psychological presentation doesn't come within the compass of history which is related only with fact and figures. He present the disturbed life that the people like Bahram, Ah Fatt, Deeti, Neel, Chinnery has to go through during the opium trade and war period in china. Through different narrative techniques the authors offers an opportunity to readers to deep into psyche of the inhabitants, traders, officials and others in Canton and to know their past by reconstruction history.

*River of Smoke* is set during an appalling period of opium trade between India and China and later on Opium war between China and England. The plot the novel is manipulated not in a simple manner. Ghosh's technique is to thread various narratives together and sometimes he has presented the memories of characters in present tense just to achieve vividness and accuracy of the events. All the meetings, conversation and discussion among traders and British officials are presented in present tense in the form of mimeses as if the whole drama is enacted before the audiences eyes

"But Mr. Sladel....., if freedom is merely a stick for you to beat others with then surely the world has lost all meaning? ....you have not once taken the name of commodity that has brought us to present impasse opium" (*River of Smoke* page-238)

The way the events in the novel are presented in non-chronological order present the distinction between the plot and story of the narrative. The story moves in flash back. There are analeptic movements in the novel so many embedded stories crop up throughout the narrative. It was a period when life of opium merchant, the officials, the artists, the painters and common men of Canton were adversely affected due to upheavals in political and historical scenario. The disturbed psyche of the people could only be depicted through the zig-zag pattern of the narrative. The memories of the past and worries of the future haunted the character like Bahram Modi and that's why Amitav Ghosh shows how the past may unconsciously impose on or interspersed with the present.

There are only two modes of narration in narratology irrespective of any language and these modes are *diegesis* i.e. 'telling' and *mimesis* i.e 'showing' 'telling' a story the writer often interferes, comments and gives information about the fictional material in the course of narrative. While in 'showing' the writer minimizes his / her present in the narrative and it is upon the reader to experience and understand the narrative own his own. Both the modes of narration 'telling' and 'showing' are used though much preference is given to 'telling'. he constructs all types of character- Bahram Modi, Zadig the traders, Paulette a botanist, Neel an exiled Raja and later a Munshi, Ah Fatt an opium addict and Bahram's estranged son Robert Chinnery a painter, Charles King, Mr Jardin, Mr Dent, Mr. Innings (the British and American traders and officials) and Commissioner Lin-a representative of Chinese Emperor. These are the people who are either affected by or may be affected directly or indirectly the history itself. Some of them are those whose destinies are written by other and some are those who write the destinies for other as Mr. king appeals to Bahram:

"I refer of course to you, Mr Moddie, amongst all of us it is you who bears the greatest responsibility, for you must answer not only to your own homeland but also to its neighbours.... Our successors will not have to live with the outcome of today's decision in the same way that yours will. it is yours children and grandchildren who will be called into account for what transpire here today (River of Smoke page-470).

Commissioner Lin in his letter commands captain Elliot and asks him:

".....that he should give clear commands to the foreigners to obey the order, requiring them to speedily deliver up all the opium that is on board their store-ship thence forward all the foreigners will conduct a legitimate trade....(River of Smoke p-513)

Another important aspect of narratology is focalization. Time and again Bahram Modi recalls his past and remote past-his life with his mother before his marriage, his marriage with Shreebani, his business in past, his relation with Ah Fatt, his mistress Chemei and his life in Canton. He shares an incident with his friend Zadig Bay about His first meeting with Che-mei: "Her name was che-mei, he told Zadig....She was scrubbing cloth in the flat stem of her boat. Her face was pert and lively, with glinting black eye" (River of Smoke P-6).

Here the narrative which is presented mainly through the omnipresent narrator, shows Bahram Modi both as the character narrator, a middle aged and Bahram Modi as well the character focalizer- Modi as young man.

The Maidaan' in *River of Smoke* has been used as metaphor which has its own role in the narrative. It is a place that becomes a mirror in the hands of all kinds of narrators- Omnipresent narrator, first person character narrator Robert Chinnery and different character focalizer. Reflection of the whole Canton life is mirrored through the Maidaan which becomes a dynamic narrative instrument in the hands of the writer. It becomes the running motif throughout the text it has its own characteristics as any of the character in the novel and becomes the evidence or the the-testimony to all the happening in Canton. Chinnery calls it to be the "heart and hearth" (ROS P-104) of Fangui-town.

The "window" is again another metaphor used as cam-cord or a binoculars by different narrators and character focalizers through which they could see the activities in 'Maidaan' it has

been considered as one of luxuries in accommodations of the Canton. Robert Chinnery writes to paulette :

“.....I have been installed in the American Hong in a room twice as large and far more luxurious. And nor I am deprived of the view that I had at Markurick’s for here too I have a window that looks out on the Maiden’ I have indeed been singularly fortunate....(ROS-p-529)”

## Conclusion

For Amitav Ghosh, literature has a function similar to that of history. The story, the theme, the title, the location, the language, the background, the selection of the narrator, characters, the modes of narration, the plot the dialogues and the movement of the narrative all work together to depict the period of opium trade and opium wars. The other narrative strategies like real characters from history, their prolonged and sometimes heated discussions present the live scenario of the period. Such discussion and conversation invite the reader into the hidden folds of the history as well as to understand the psyche or consciousness of the people living in this period that the narrator has created in *River of Smoke*

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