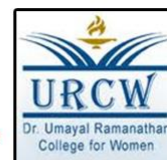




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Tony Thomas
PhD Research Scholar in English
St. Josephs College (Autonomous)
Trichy
tonyadu@gmail.com

Patterns of Globalization in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

Abstract

Globalization is one of the leading characteristics of the contemporary world. It leads to the interpenetration of countries, regions, markets, communication and ideas across various countries. The second novel in Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy *River of Smoke* draws its characters from different parts of the world. Different facets of globalization are well described in this novel. Here the after effect of this phenomenon can be perceived in certain specific events, in the life style of people, in patterns of trade and the mode of communication. Further it provides wide possibilities to explore the maximum potential of an individual.

Keywords: Colonialism, human migration, economic globalization, free trade, opium war,

Introduction

Globalization results in the circulation of ideas, languages and culture. In a globalized country there is an integration of economy of that nation with the remaining world economy. Naik in his book *Globalization and Human Rights* states globalization as "a package of transnational flows of people, production, investment, information, ideas, and authority" (2). This novel is set around the background of the Chinese opium war. People from various countries and regions were instrumental and were badly affected by the course of events that led to this. This article attempts to underscore certain patterns of globalization that are found in *River of Smoke*.

River of Smoke, the second instalment in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy is set in the period immediately before the first opium war of 1839–1842. The opium war is not Ghosh's major concern in this novel. Here his attention is focused upon the events that led up to it, and upon the complicated web of human interactions that the global trade produces. So in a sense this novel is about the first major period of economic globalisation, about the patterns of human migration and movement initiated by colonialism and the expansion of capital. The descriptions in this novel go beyond political and geographical borders and examine social, political, culinary, artistic and personal adventures.

Here Ghosh constructs different types of characters and they are from various regions and belong to diverse categories such as Bahram Modi and 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 finally Commissioner Lin, a representative of Chinese Emperor.

Ghosh employs a larger canvas in *River of Smoke* that is to say early 19th century Canton attracted various foreigners, mostly traders and sometimes painters and even botanists all of whom were carried by large vessels which had to be anchored either in old Malacca "where Malays, Chinese, Gujaratis and Arabs had lived elbow to elbow with the descendants of the old Portuguese and Dutch families" (63) or in new British built Singapore. Halder in his book *Weaving Imagination into the Cross-currents of History: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's River of Smoke* remarks "He is comfortable in drawing a variety of characters belonging originally to different corners of the world, giving the impression that immigration and displacement were not exclusively 20th century issues" (131). In a way this is a novel about the first great period of economic globalization, about the patterns of human migration and movement initiated by colonialism and the expansion of capital. Ghosh's *Trilogy* is a fictional description on the beginning of globalisation, in which the tracing of new routes of barter, buying, selling and exchange between India and the Far East in the 19th century is seen and is a forerunner to the opening up of areas and markets in the late twenties.

Globalisation in a fundamental sense is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as history, starting with the large migration of people across the great landmasses. After the miraculous escape from the Ibis Neel, Kaula, Serang Ali, Jodu, Ah Fatt and Deeti end up in an island. The main source of wealth of the people living there are certain birds called *hinlene*. People

pay a lot of money for their nests. It's the most expensive food of all. Ah Fatt says "if these were the nests that were called 'yanwo' in Canton, then they were indeed of great value, as good a currency as any that existed in eastern water—depending on their quality they were worth their weight in either silver or gold. A single chest of nests could fetch the equivalent of eight troy pounds of gold in Canton" (23). Later while the merchant Punhyqua host a banquet along with various expensive dishes; candied birds' nests too is included. While they depart from the island, since travelling together is likely to invite danger, they split up into two groups. Serang Ali, Kaula and Jodu move to Mergui. Along with Ah Fatt, Deeti moves to Singapore and then to Malacca.

Botanically China is a resourceful country. The country is rich in various flora and fauna. Chaudhuri in his Rev. of *River of Smoke* by Amitav Ghosh mentions "Plants and flowers, like tea and porcelain, silk and spices, sugar and coolies, are all commodities for the European market; knowledge itself, and botanical, mineral and agricultural knowledge in particular, growing exponentially in the 19th century, is a commodity"(4). Frederick Fitcher Penrose travel on his ship along with the orphaned Paulette Lambert hunting for botanical specimens to feed both the curiosity and the greed of the west is an incarnation of an international businessman. Most of the plants in Redruth had been from "America and had only recently been introduced to Europe and were thus unlikely yet to have reached China" (77). Fitcher's own company named Penrose & Sons is famous for its Chinese importations; some of which had gained enormous popularity in the British Isles.

Taneja in his book *Globalization and Economic Growth* states "Globalization (or globalisation) refers to the increasing global relationships of culture, people, and economic activity" (1). Bahram is a self-made business man. In those days not many have travelled to Canton more than three or four times but Bahram had travelled to China fifteen times in the course of his career. "He had built, almost single-handedly, one of the largest and most consistently profitable trading operations in Bombay: the export division of Mistrie Brothers"(45). The export division of this company was Bahram's personal creation and he built this small unit into a worthy rival of the famous shipyard.

Srivastava in his book *Globalization Privatization and WTO with Reference to India* remarks International monetary fund defines "globalisation as the growing economic interdependence of countries worldwide through increasing volume and variety of cross

border transactions in goods and services and of international capital flows and also through the more rapid and widespread diffusion of technology” (1). It brings out competition in market. In that period ships were being built by several foreign companies, it is clear from the reference to Anahita, “one of the few Bombay-built vessels that regularly outrun the swiftest British-and American-made opium-carriers, even such legendary ship as *Red Rover* and *Seawitch*” (27).

Bahram’s father in law Seth Rustamjee contributed several important innovations in shipbuilding techniques; always he stayed advanced in this field. Often certain most sophisticated foreign-made vessels visited Bombay, and then Bahram befriended the artisans and repairman serving in these ships. Thus Mistries kept informed regarding the latest technological advancements and nautical gadgetry that they quickly adapted and modified for their own use. Later many European fleets and ship owners had send commission to Mistrie & Sons in preference to the shipyards in their country.

Globalized open world provides a platform to prove one’s own potential. Entering into his father - in - laws business due to his lack of interest, Bahram’s tenure as an apprentice shipwright was short lived. Therefore he was transferred to account session and this too disappointed Bahram for neither numbers nor the man who worked with was of the least interest to him. He found his own gifts “ were of completely different kind; he was good at dealing with people, staying abreast of the news, and was blessed moreover with a sharp eye for sizing up risks and opportunities...even while serving time in the daftar, he was careful to keep himself informed of other openings” (50). And later Bahram with the financial support from his father - in - law enters into export trade and astonishes everyone. Free trade is the sole reason for his financial success.

In a globalized world Naik once again observes “the natural barriers of time and space have been vastly reduced. The cost of moving information, people, goods and capital across the globe has fallen dramatically” (16). On the way to Canton, Anahita is being anchored at the Tivendale boatyard in Singapore, while “Bahram is staying inside the ship he could hear the voices of the chulia boatman talking, shouting and singing in Tamil, Telegu and Oriya” (63). Further this place is convenient for buying and selling, here Vico’s favourite is a weekly open-air mela where people come from near and far to sell and exchange old clothes. In the wordy-market for it is known so amongst sailors and lascars “every kind of garment could be

bought and sold-from Papuan penis sheaths to Sulu skirts, from Bengal saris to Bagobo trousers” (115).

Globalized world witnesses a cross - country flow of information, ideas, technologies, goods, services, capital, finance and people. One of Bahrma’s true intimates ZadigKarabedian is an Armenian by origin, for centuries his family had been settled in Egypt, there they lived in the old Christian and Jewish quarters of Cairo

Legend had it that one of Zadig’s ancestors had been sold to the Sultan of Egypt as a boy: after rising in the Mamelouk ranks he had arranged to bring some of his relatives to Cairo where they had prospered as craftsmen, tax collectors and businessmen. Since then they had developed close business connections with Aden, Basra, Colombo, Bombay and several ports in the Far East, including Canton (64).

Further he was a deep-seated traveller, and was fluent in many languages. AshaDidi who runs a kitchen boat along the entire length of the Pearl River was born in Calcutta. Her “father had moved to Bengal soon after she was born: he was one of the Chinese immigrants to settle in Calcutta” (325). Later she was married off to Ah Bao, the man is known among boatmen as Baburao. After the birth of five children of their nine children AshaDidi and her husband moved to Canton.

Imperial invasions and war often results in the mixing of cultures and civilizations. At the time of Bonapart’s invasion of Egypt, Zadig was a boy of fifteen, living in his family-house which was in Old Cairo “Bonaparte’s victory had affected Zadig in many ways, large and small: he had started taking French lessons...he and his cousins had begun to ride horses, which was something that they, as Christians, could not have done before...It was then also that he acquired the skills that would launch him in his trade, being taken on as an apprentice by a French watchmaker” (152).

Globalization results inTaneja once again states “the transnational circulation of ideas, languages, and popular culture” (1).Wide exposure to cultures even brings out certain changes in the pattern of language. From childhood, after a long gap, Paulette happens to meet Robin Chinnery on Redruth.He had certain changes upon him. “Robin’s voice it seemed to Paulette that his accent had changed just as much, if not more than his appearance: he had lost all trace of a Bengali intonation” (164).

Canton is a cosmopolitan city, many nationalities stay there with the purpose of making money. The greatest of Canton's suburbs is the river itself "There are more people living in the city's floating bustees than in *all* of Calcutta: fully *one million* some say" (180-181). The merchants living there are not sticking to any particular language in their daily affairs. In a conversation with Napoleon Bahram says "the common language of trade in southern China was a kind of patois—or, as some called it, 'pidgin' which meant merely 'business' and was thus well suited to describe a tongue which was used mainly to address matters of trade" (171). Even if many native merchants speak English fluently, they would not use it, thinking that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. Merchants put their trust in pidgin, its grammar was the same as that of the Cantonese, while the words used in it were mainly, English, Portuguese and Hindusthani.

The Fanqui town, where the thirteen factories are situated in small yet densely populated, here the town is compared to a shop at sea, with thousands men living crammed together in a little space. For a great number of denizens living there are from India. "They come from Sindh and Goa, Bombay and Malabar, Madras and Coringa hills, Calcutta and Sylhet" (185).

One of the key characteristics of globalization is international trade between countries. Such trade relations are underscored in *River of Smoke*. In his early days in Canton, Bahram had resided in the Dutch factory, for in the distant past in Gujarat, the Parsis had been of immense assistance to traders from Netherlands—later in turn these people offered the Parsis shelter when they started to trade with China. "Back in Surat, Bahram's grandfather too had once had a trading partner from Amsterdam, and it was this connection that had first brought Bahram to the Dutch Factory" (186). While Robin is staying at Mr. Markwick's hotel in the imperial factory in thirteen hogs, he had an unusual neighbour, an Armenian, who had been everywhere and speaks more languages than the best of dubashes: "he grew up in Cairo and learnt watchmaking from a Frenchman who went to Egypt with Napoleon" (212).

The streets of Canton is filled with foreign people, even the city's guardian deity is a foreigner. In Canton "down by the river stands a temple that was founded by the most famous Buddhist missionarie—the Bodhidharma, who had come to Canton from Southern India and was perhaps a native of Madras" (377). One of the mosques in Canton is the oldest in the entire world, it is believed to have been built in the lifetime of the prophet Mohammad

himself. In appearance it looks like a Chinese temple. Thus it is clear that years back people from Hindusthan, Arabia and Persia were able to build monasteries and mosques in Canton city. In China at the time of Tang dynasty hundreds of thousands of Achhas, Arabs, Persians and Africans lived in Canton. At the time of their regime they invited foreigners to settle in Canton, along with their wives, children and servants. They were permitted to build up their own courts and places of worship and were allowed to come and go as they pleased.

One morning Bahram happens to notice most of the locals had exchanged their summer dress for heavier winter clothing. This is because the people happened to see the governor of the province in his winter cloths day before, for always this was the sign for everyone else to follow same. The governor happens to be in his winter dress for he got information regarding the climatic change from Peking which is far away from Canton. “It was just like British in India—except that here the Governor had to await a signal from faraway Peking. The strange thing was that considering how far the capital was and how different the climate, the change of wardrobe in Canton was never out of kilter with the north by more than a few days” (256). Here without understanding and analysing the situation people are blindly following the foreigners.

Conclusion

Thus in *River of Smoke* all the major characters are from different countries, regions and social strata. Initial part of the novel presents the picture of main characters slitting into various groups and embarking in different regions for their survival. Consumer goods found and produced in one specific part of a region is transported to another country or region to serve the need of the people residing in that area. Globalized world enables one to prove one's talents anywhere and opens up a wide possibility of travel and exploration. Thus through depicting the progress of various interconnected movements in this novel Ghosh beautifully unveils the pattern of globalization in *River of Smoke*.

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