Opium and the Empire: Imperial Rhetoric and Practice in River of Smoke

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Abstract:
Opium trade acted as the backbone of the East India Company’s financial gains in South-East Asia accounting for a major portion of its total revenue around 1839, the time of the First Opium War between British and Chinese. History seldom speaks of the practice of this inhuman trade that was fraught with exploitation and abuse. Amitav Ghosh’s novel *River of Smoke* goes back into the past and with minute details tries to document how this trade was organized and managed by the colonizer to keep its trade balance with China at an equilibrium as China was self sufficient and needed nothing from outside against its exports like tea, cotton and other agricultural products. Opium was invented for a market which could only be ‘tamed’ only this way. In the overall flourishing of the colonial project there was always a need for local allies: controlling them helped in ‘controlling multitudes’. This paper will look into the trade tactics employed by the Britishers for a long time to secure “the most precious jewel in Queen Victoria’s crown”

**Key words:** Opium, trade, drug, war, ally, history, human abuse
Opium in China was used for medicinal purposes for a long time before 17th century “to treat masculinity, strengthen sperm, and regain vigour... to cure the chronic diarrhoea that causes the loss of energy ...” (Yangwen 11) With time it began to be mixed with tobacco thereby increasing its demand tremendously among the common populace. History suggests that the first opium traders in China were the Arabs during the Tang dynasty (618–907). During colonial times the trade became a high priority for British merchants and kings for centuries to the extent that it had become a major player in the overall structure of the Chinese economy during the rule of the Qing Dynasty. It “supplied fluid capital and created new sources of taxes. Smugglers, poor farmers, coolies, retail merchants and officials all depended on opium for the livelihood. In the last decade of the dynasty, however, a focused moral outrage overcame these vested interests.” (Spence 143–173) The British started this trade in 1773 and between 1811 and 1835, it accounted for more than 55% of the total export value to China thus becoming the “the best jewel in Queen Victoria’s crown”. (SP 92) The French, Dutch, and U.S. followed the trade and in “1839, the Chinese opium smokers spent 100 million taels (1tael = 1 ounce silver), while the government’s entire annual revenue was only 40 million taels.” (Shirley Ye Sheng and Eric H. Shaw) The opium trade has left its marks that are visible even today. This way it had become an important imperial project in Southeast Asia to the extent that “without it, there may have been no empire at all.” (Carl Trocki: 25)

River of Smoke, the second part of what in future will constitute the Ibis trilogy, is set in the opium trade centre, Canton in China, where the British and local opium traders are busy poisoning the local populace with this fatal drug just before the First Opium War thus taking the historical venture further that was kick-started in its prequel Sea of Poppies. River of Smoke is “one of the most inspired explorations of global encounters by a 21st-century writer,” (Shlachter) rich in historical detail about “the connections and the cross-connections” between the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean that takes the reader “back inside the chaos of when “then” was “now”. (Tessa Hadley) Both the novels are deeply rooted in the history of that appalling period which “is replete with compelling human predicaments?” (Ghosh). The novel is densely populated with a good number of characters both historical and fictional as is common with other novels of Ghosh and it is the “prism” of these characters that “allows for a kind of wholeness that is unavailable to the historian”. (Ghosh) The novel exactly traces the time just before the first Opium War and the devastation
wreaked upon China, economically, as well as socially by exposing the trade tricks played by the British who in the name of ‘free trade’ poisoned the native population with opium which exposes the contradiction between the rhetoric and practice of the civilizing mission.

The enforced cultivation of opium in India most particularly in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market caused widespread poverty and hunger. The ways indentured labours were acquired to be taken to work on the plantations and trade points of the East India Company in Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad was one of the most inhuman practices witnessed in history. Throughout the nineteenth century most of China’s opium came from India which was at first sold by the British and Indian traders to coastal Chinese traders and then illegally smuggled to inland markets.

Opium trade had received much impetus under changing treaties that allowed foreign traders to collaborate with a greater variety of Chinese merchants. The Chinese determination against this trade and its threatened end in 1830’s by the Qing government gravely irritated the British for whom it meant a huge economic loss and rendered them to declare war on China under the rhetoric of freedom of trade which was “merely a stick ... to beat others with”. (RS 238) This explains the “paradox of Enlightenment humanism” as “an alibi for imperial expansion as an engine of modernization, progress and civilization.” (Jeannie).

The tough stance of Lin Zexu, the imperial maritime commissioner in 1838 and the “incorruptible public servant” (RS 424), against the “crusaders in the cause of Free Trade” (RS 244) culminated into the war (1839-42) that ended with a shameful defeat for the Chinese. Lin was sent to Guangdong as imperial commissioner by the Daoguang Emperor in late 1838 to halt the illegal importation of opium from the British. He made an enormous number of arrests of Chinese opium dealers. His forceful opposition to the opium trade on economic, moral, and social grounds is considered to be the primary source for the war. The commissioner demanded an end to this inhuman trade and advocated taking hostage of all the opium present in Canton. The practitioners of this ‘free trade’ got extremely irritated and could not understand how the “subjects of the world’s most powerful nation” (RS 306) are exempted from the blessings of complete ‘freedom’. Lin, a real-life character having a well meaning place in the novel, crackdown on the criminal activities in Canton. He could not afford to see China
providing Britain with valuable commodities such as tea, porcelain, spices and silk and getting only this poison in return. In his memorial to Queen Victoria he writes:

We find that your country is sixty or seventy thousand li from China. Yet there are barbarian ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit. The wealth of China is used to profit the barbarians. That is to say, the great profit made by barbarians is all taken from the rightful share of China. By what right do they then in return use the poisonous drug to injure the Chinese people? Even though the barbarians may not necessarily intend to do us harm, yet in coveting profit to an extreme, they have no regard for injuring others. Let us ask, where is your conscience? (Lin Zexu’s Letter to Queen Victoria)

River of Smoke traces the relationship between the imperial ideology and its practice as Denis Judd argues that “no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure.”(Judd) The foreign traders in Canton completely defied the orders of the new commissioner and further opened up opium markets at the shores believing that the whole thing “is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God” (RS\textsuperscript{463}).

At the centre of River of Smoke is Seth Bahram Modi, an Indian Opium trader, who tries to compete with the British traders. Allying with the foreigner he becomes a new persona: Barry Moddie, a man “confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful.”(RS\textsuperscript{52}) He is one among the profiteering traders from British imperialism. For him “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 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.”(RS\textsuperscript{105}) Bahram is a businessman of “exceptional ability and vision...a kind of genius” (RS\textsuperscript{224}), a self-made entrepreneur. He is confident enough and freely mixes with the British traders as their equal. It is through allies like Bahram that the East-India company could succeed in their enterprise of the opium trade converting at the beginning the leisured upper classes and then slowing the whole Chinese population into opium addicts which “is
such a thing that once people start using…they can’t stop; the market just gets larger and larger.” (RS 90)

Bahram’s huge financial loss as a result of a storm in the sea damages both his ship and the massive cargo of opium. The British traders’ “strategic business move” to handover their opium stock gave a final blow to his dreams. He is served with an arrest warrant and is scrutinized at everywherin Canton that complicates his situation: “Everywhere he looked, eyes seemed to be following him: although he strode along as fast as he could, the two-minute walk seemed to last an hour” (RS 494). Bahram, who professed to be “the most loyal of the Queen’s subjects” (RS 453) is shattered with a “sense of betrayal” (518) and everything seems to be an illusion for him. Characters like Burnham, Jardine, Dent represent the white exploiter with whom Bahram had allied squarely. Bahram regrets this when he is eventually betrayed. His character strikes a tragic note towards the end with his rising debts and with no hope of an aspired future he is lost into his own private world, dreams about his lost love and has hallucinations of suicide in the River Pearl. Bahram’s predicament echoes of Arjun’s realization towards the end in The Glass Palace when he discovers himself as a mere puppet in the hands of the colonial power left with nothing in the end. Arjun realizes: “We rebelled against our empire that has shaped everything in our lives, coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves.” (GP 518)

River of Smoke ends on 06 July 1839 just a day before the first riots began in Kowloon on 07th July thus showing what actually had happened before the declaration of war on China. It reinterprets history and tries to fill the left out spaces and absences in its fabric. Taking the reader deeper into the final destination of the opium drug it evokes this “most long continued and systematic international crime of modern times” (Fairbank) which had turned millions of Chinese, from ordinary labours to the upper classes, into opium addicts. Mr. Chillingworth, in Sea of Poppies, rightly predicts how history will evaluate their (colonizer’s) conduct: “we are never no different from the Pharaohs or Mongols; the difference is only that when we kill people we feel compelled to pretend that it is for some higher cause. It is this pretence of virtue….that will never be forgiven in history.” (SP 92) The overall design of the opium drug trade can be
interpreted through the words Deeti, in *Sea of Poppies*, speaks after she ‘controls’ her mother-in-law through this drug:

“(H)ow frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! for if a little bit of this gum could give...such power over the life, the character, the very soul...then with more of it why should (they) not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? And surely this could not be the only such substance upon the earth?” (SP 38)

**Abbreviations:**

*SP*: *Sea of Poppies*

*RS*: *River of Smoke*

*GP*: *The Glass Palace*
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