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Mapping Spaces: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the novel *River of Smoke* in the Ibis Trilogy written by Amitav Ghosh, one of the most prominent writers in English. The other two novels in the trilogy are *Sea of Poppies* and *Flood of Fire* which explore the nineteenth century Opium Wars and address the sociocultural dynamics of the time. This paper attempts to study how Ghosh's imagination of colonial India functions as a textual or cultural construct of contested spatiality. The author sketches the events that led to the First Opium War (1839-42), sympathises with the destinies of India and China – the nations that were stifled by the forces of capitalism and free trade, and lost their native economies and cultures to the massive British exploitation.

Keywords: *Amitav Ghosh, River of Smoke, Opium Wars, Edward Soja, Thirdspace*

River of Smoke deals with the lives and traditions of Indian migrants in Mauritius and also the people brought together by the opium business in the Chinese city, Canton. Ghosh provides in detail, the culture and traditions of these two places, which produced Indian diaspora. He writes about how the trade affects multitudes of Chinese people and how the British empire with its allies impose two Opium Wars on China in the name of Free Trade, while desperately trying to establish its sovereignty in the world. As the focus of the narrative moves from India to China, Ghosh portrays the lives of the characters

who stayed within the European ambit of power and grabbed numerous opportunities for profit making, defying the customs and practices of foreign lands. The book *River of Smoke* can be studied within specific historical and geographical settings, reflecting Edward Said's examination of imperialism as an endless struggle over geography. The book reconstitutes a number of spatial networks of colonial power, production and representation of colonial space, such as the modern factory system, the interstitial space of the ship, the colonial Indian city of Calcutta, Chinese city of Canton, the sugar plantations of Mauritius, the colonial prison and the coolie barracks of Calcutta.

Ghosh has written on the topics such as Chinese and Indian history, gardening and also about the languages, especially the pidgin spoken in Fanqui town (a small strip of land used by foreigners to trade with local Chinese traders) which lends great historical depth and dimension to the novel. This novel tells the fascinating story where people belonging to different nationalities – Indians (including Parsis and Bengalis), Chinese and Europeans – who are largely opium traders, come together along with botanists, artists and drug agents – in the Chinese city of Canton and Pearl River Delta. This book narrates a significant yet sordid chapter in both Parsi and Indian history, about the Indians involved in the infamous opium trade of nineteenth century. Relying on the premise of Free Trade, the British East India Company and other Western mercantile institutions with similar vested interests reap huge profits using China as the dumping ground for opium produced in their colonies in other countries, primarily India.

The phrase 'Free Trade' was first used by the British economist Adam Smith in his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). According to him, free trade provides the advantage of cross border transaction in goods, thereby allowing a fair competition in profit making among all the nations. When the Europeans relied on this economic policy to trade with countries like China, they hoped to be unsupervised and untaxed; exempted from punishment for violating the rules set by the local authorities as well as from taxes or tariffs of the local governments. Professing to be the ardent followers of Free Trade policy, countries like Britain, Spain, France, America exported large quantities of opium, a potentially lethal drug to make up for the import

of the tea, silk, porcelain and most importantly silver. The governments of these countries did not stop the shipping of opium by the merchants in enormous quantity to China, since silver was much in demand in all the European countries as a main part of their revenue and the governments received a part of the sordid profits made by the traders. In the novel, Ghosh portrays the machinations of opium merchants misusing the Free Trade policy of nineteenth century and he also provides a scathing criticism of globalisation of the modern times. There are certain undeniable progressive aspects of globalisation such as promoting international trade allowing rapid movements in capital, information exchange, travel and thereby promoting economic interdependence of countries worldwide. Nevertheless, globalisation also results in widespread competitive pressure, unemployment, resource depletion and human migration solely prompted by profiteering which can be seen in developing as well as the developed countries. History records that after reaping profits for more than a century, Britain agreed to halt opium trade in 1910-1911. But it has not disclosed how the poverty-stricken Indian farmers were forced to cultivate opium, how the trade had affected multitudes of Chinese people and how the British empire with its allies had imposed two Opium Wars to establish its sovereignty and to protect its finance and markets. Ghosh revisits this chaotic period in history through his rigorous research in history.

Scholars who are interested in the concepts of mobility, plurality, hybridity and the margins or 'in between' spaces celebrate the ways in which new cross-border movements have facilitated the production and reworking of multiple identities, dialogic communications and syncretic cultural forms (*Handbook of Cultural Geography* 102). In migrant literature, the readers can recognise a border-zone or an "in-between" space between strangeness and familiarity, frequently blurring the line of demarcation between the past and present, the home and the foreign, the outside and the inside (*The Location of culture* 13). As a hybrid space caught in a myriad of trade activities, Canton is the backdrop for the formation of business alliances and new identities. For the Indian opium trader Bahram, Canton is an essential part of his life; apart from becoming a successful

businessman "..... in Canton he had always felt most alive – it was here that he had learnt to live" (*River of Smoke* 347). He felt liberated from his dominating in-laws, made friends, wealth and social acceptance which were denied by his homeland. "If not for Canton he would have lived his life like a man without a shadow" (348). In the unfamiliar space of the Manchu Empire, Bahram discovers his other self: "In Canton, stripped of the multiple wrappings of home, family, community, obligation and decorum, Bahram had experienced the emergence of a new persona, one that had been previously dormant within him: he had become Barry Moddie" (52). The name of an individual suggests his fixity in family, nation and ethnicity. While Barrie Moddie is "confident, forceful, gregarious, hospitable, boisterous and enormously successful" (52) in Canton, when he returns to Bombay his other self would be veiled and "Barry would become Bahram again, a quietly devoted husband, living uncomplainingly within the constraints of a large joint family" (52).

River of Smoke also provides a description of the Colver family in Mauritius, who are the descendants of the indentured labourers Kalua and Deeti. These indentured labourers, after reaching Mauritius, find themselves in radically altered settings. They struggle to overcome new fears, rebuild faith and hope to reshape their lives in a totally alien place. The leadership qualities of Deeti that were present right from the days of the Ibis journey became manifested in her later years also, and she reigned as the matriarch of the Colver family. The incidents that happened in Deeti's life were known to even the youngest of her clan from the drawings she had made in a cave, which later came to be known as Deeti's memory temple. The whole clan knew about their family history, their roots in India and the indentureship. Deeti's memory temple provided glimpses of intimacies across cultures and solidarities that were developed on board the ship. The Colver family's annual visit to the shrine was celebrated with great zeal, accompanied by some rituals. They considered it as a pilgrimage centre and followed certain prescribed patterns while visiting the place. The shrine, known to them as *Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*, contained Deeti's drawings to keep track of her memory. The shrine functioned as a gathering place that brought the characters from the ship together.

Among her drawings, after the image of the founding father, they came across 'The Parting' (*Biraha*): there was no inscription or engraving below it, but even the younger members of the family knew that it depicted a critical juncture in the history of their family – the moment of Deeti's separation from her spouse. Kalua figured here as the 'founding father' of this new clan. The transformation of Deeti and Kalua's story into a foundational myth for the family, was attested by the reference to the phrase "The Parting", which is not written but was still known to all the family members. The story of Deeti and Kalua's separation from each other, gave a reference to the foundation of the Colver family's identity. The subsequent generations of the family were aware of the details about the couple's journey aboard the ship and their separation during a storm. They existed as markers of the Colver family's ancestral origins. In the book, the readers also come across the linguistic merging and convergence of cultures that take place among the descendants of the Colver family. They conversed in Kreol, a language predominantly based on English and French words. For example, the phrase 'La Fami' meant 'the family', 'Tantinn', a creolised form of the French word 'tante' for aunt and 'mawsa', a Bojhpuri word for uncle. It draws attention to the fact that Mauritius is a transcultural space, where different cultures intermingle.

In this book, cultural memory is represented through the traditions and practices among the descendants of the indentured labourers. The people of the plantation diaspora who crossed the black waters forsake all hopes of returning to their homeland. They turned to memory as a way to make sense of their lives. Cultural memory is formed when there is a conscious recalling of past events and experience at both individual and collective levels. Memory perpetuates culturally constructed knowledge relevant to the group members' distant past. This shared knowledge and experiences are transmitted through the creation of traditions. It helps them to make sense of their past and construct new identities. We may say that Ghosh has made an effort to construct the collective imaginary of the migrants from India on the 'Thirdspatial margin', which acts as "a context from which to build communities of resistance and renewal that cross the

boundaries and double-cross the binaries of race, gender, class, and all oppressively Othering categories" (*Thirdspace* 84). The ideas regarding space and spatiality have been in the foreground of literary analysis for a long time. Setting is an important aspect of most of the stories, as events happen in a given place. The meaning and the effectiveness of a literary work depends on distinctive regions, locales, landscapes, or other pertinent geographical features.

As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. And insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism. There is a great difference, however, between the optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness . . . and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in our century's migrations and mutilated lives. (*Culture and Imperialism* 332)

The reimagination of Western cartographic discourses is theoretically placed within the postcolonial project of challenging and subverting the governing systems of cultural signification. Since the colonial period, colonised populations have been globally dispersed, and it has changed the cartographic representation of the imperial geography in diverse ways. There was massive global human transportation in the age of colonial expansion. Spatial remapping is a prominent and indispensable feature of contemporary postcolonial literature and it is an effective method adopted by the writers to question and rewrite the colonial perceptions of space and geography. The notion of 'home' carries with it the terms 'identities' and 'belongings', which have to be negotiated and re-imagined. The concept of 'home' is thoroughly contested in migrant reimaginings. It is not considered to be an endpoint of permanent arrival or settlement, but as a marker of new geographical exposition of real-and imagined spaces. We can discern certain similarities between Soja's theory of 'Thirdspace' and Ghosh's cultural/historical re-discovery in the trilogy. Ghosh makes

abstract generalisations of the physical space of the country under colonial rule by reflecting critically on the cultural space. It is depicted in the narrative as objective and subjective, empirical and discursive, real and imagined at the same time. According to Edward Soja, these are "the terrain[s] for the generation of "counterspaces", spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning" (*Thirdspace* 68).

Soja's theory of thirdspace is based on the spatial theories of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Fredric Jameson, Ernest Mandel, John Berger and other thinkers. From the mid nineteenth century to the latter half of twentieth century, there was a preference for 'modernist cultural politics' in the sphere of critical social theory and cultural practice. Some of its basic principles of sociological enquiry emanate from the discourse of liberal humanism. It tries to analyse social space by means of the historically produced variations between such classifications as the centre and the periphery, the oppressor and the oppressed, the bourgeois and the proletariat, individual and the collective, the coloniser and the colonised and so on. According to Soja, the modernist cultural politics appears as an unsuccessful or incomplete project, as it surrenders 'space' to historical temporality, and ceases to provide an adequate critique of the geographies of empire, nation and modernity. Therefore, he advocates for an inevitable postmodern reassertion of social space in critical social theory. Soja is keen on developing his own reading strategy for searching the silenced or marginal voices in colonial texts. His concept of 'critical thirding' or 'thirding-as-othering' suggests the re-imagined geographies of social resistance, community and identity to authoritarian conjuring of social space as 'representations of space'. Edward Soja's theory on cultural politics of 'Thirdspace' calls for a deconstruction of the opposites as well as the questioning and re-evaluating boundaries and cultural identity. His 'critical thirding' is a concept that continuously crosses dualisms and moves toward an 'Other'. From the Thirdspace perspective, Soja argues that there will be a massive change in the way we understand the world and obtain a different outlook along with it. According to Soja, "Studying the historicality of a particular event, person, place or social group is not intrinsically any more

insightful than studying its sociality or spatiality. The three terms and the complex interactions between them should be studied together as fundamental and intertwined knowledge sources, for this is what being-in-the-world is all about" (*Thirdspace* 262).

While describing the concept of 'thirdspace', Edward Soja exhorts the readers to rethink 'space' in a transdisciplinary manner, where there is an understanding of the inseparability and interdependence of the social, historical, and spatial elements. He creates a profound awareness about the meanings and significances of space and its related concepts such as home, place, city, landscape, region, territory, and geography. While analysing the mixing and hybridising of thoughts and ideas, Soja's 'radical postmodernism' discards the 'either/or choice' perspective and encourages a 'both/and logic' view. It becomes "a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives" (*Thirdspace* 5). Thus the 'spatial imaginary', for instance, that of the West, is opened up by this creative process of discussion and interrogation, by the working of a third perspective through a different set of choices blurring the binary distinctions such as East/West, real/imagined, or old/new. In this process of 'critical thirding', Soja does not completely discard the two original positions, instead, they are subjected to a critical process of restructuring that generates a more sensitive understanding of an 'expanded' space. There occurs a restructuring of the assumed binary that "firstspace" is real and that "secondspace" is imagined, by the concept of a "thirdspace" that is both real and imagined. Thus, thirdspace, is a combination and mixture of both first and secondspaces, making a perpetual moving between the two.

This study of the novel deals with immense geographical and historical space showcasing immense fluidity and cultural hybridity. The places are central to the communities that human beings trace. The hegemony practised and the borders drawn across space define human identities and cultural geographies, which give people a sense of place. The places also provide thorough understanding about domination and resistance as aspects of power, which are also linked to culture and geography. *River of Smoke* portrays an ex- era of

globalisation across a different landscape, where bonding takes place among people of various cultures, customs and languages, transforming their lives in many ways. Through the vibrant characters and cultures, the author infuses life into the splendid Canton and Pearl River of the nineteenth century, thereby raising issues related to the human initiatives in art, trade and commerce.

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