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## THE IMAGES OF FLASHBACK AND FLASH FORWARD DIGRESSIONS AND DISTORTIONS IN THE NARRATIVE SEQUENCES OF AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL *RIVER OF SMOKE*

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### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh is a well-known fiction writer he sets his Ibis novel the *River of Smoke* on a flashback mode and intends to the past reclamation of opium business and opium war episode in China through this novel. It focuses on the historical genre of a flashback and non-chronological order. According to Ghosh the History and Narratives have the same basic functions and he took a few exciting movements, fixed stories, uneven series, ellipsis, digression and disorder chronology in the novel. Local Languages are taken into consideration by the author while narrating the story. The description in the novel has the combination of first and third person narration. Ghosh comments "History is at the Heart of the Novel" on how he conceives the appearance of historical novels in postcolonial writing. In this novel Ghosh simplifies the time scheme of the narrative in flashback. The beginning part 'Island' contains both flashback and flash forward with digression and distortion in the narrative sequence in a simple form. This novel brings back the history and it represents the different shadow of historical aspects in view of oppressed and oppressing forces in society. This paper focuses on the historical aspects and how history imposed the present in the novel.

**Key words:** Flashback, Flash forward, Images, Contemporary Opium Trade and War, Digression and Distortion, Narrative Sequences and Oppressed and Oppressing Forces.

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### Introduction

Ghosh opinions about the history and the narratives are same in functioning and he also opines that the need of pre-historical events and incidents to face situations in the present. In the story it shows his interest towards history and the traditional features of a novel in historical mode of writing in a post-colonial time. Ghosh says in an interview on March 27, 2013 "I think the great thing about the novel and not just the historical novel is that it is an extremely generous form. It allows you

luxuries and liberties like no other form." *Zayni Barakat* by Gamal inspires Ghosh to take initiation in writing the novel *River of Smoke* which narrates the story of Cairo and its most outstanding aspect of proclamation in 18<sup>th</sup> century and the existed official voice. Later Ghosh comments here, "I found Gamal Al-Ghitani's use of compelling and when I was working on *River of Smoke* it was one of the things that were playing in my head." He says the particular tradition to convince history to shape his thinking in the substantial way. Deeti's explanation through memory and contemporary temples stands as the

personal preserver of experience of the people living in that specific period. River of Smoke has a set of frame work in a sequences of inter-related stories presented history presented in the various narratives. The central theme of the novel *River of Smoke* contains mainly the struggle between the Manchu and the British Empires whereas Chinese emperor tries to stop the drug import while the British Empire thinks about the profits.

### Images Used in River of Smoke

Image is generally a visual representation of a situation which represents the contemporary position and life style of people, here in this novel Ghosh presents the picaresque imagery places of the markets, river traffic, hotels, shop-houses, district's street; clubs, roadways and factories of Canton in China. The novel depicts the lives of various characters that are determined by the rules and regulations of the free trade and those of principles in the novel, which represents as the images of post colonial perspective. These images stand as the historical aspects in the novel and guide to know the contemporary life style in respect of economical and social point of view in addition to family relationships to move on in a standard way further.

### Flashback Aspects

Though the novel has many flashback aspects a few are considered in this paper. Ghosh's insertion of letter writing gives the enlargement and different points of view of life of Canton to modify the plot construction of the novel in addition to provide the past information about the crowd, funky, chaotic, and moist places. For the basic knowledge of historical aspects, the letters which are submerged the aspects of geographical and historical knowledge which make the story run around. Written in an exclamatory, breathless style and occupy time and room with these letters to explain to the period with different point of views, "And so at last to the foreign enclave or 'Fanqui-town' as I have already learnt to call it!" (181). "And yet it is a tiny place!" (184) "the lads will swarm after him, with their hands outstretched, shouting: 'Achha! Achha! Gimme Cumshaw!' (185). Ghosh tries to show the food habits which stood as flashback aspects like pork curry, turtle soup, sparrow fry,

stuffed crab, frog fry and goose liver are delicacies. These are a few aspects of flashback from the novel.

### Flash Forward Aspects

The touching aspects of the opium war influences the mind of contemporary characters in the novel that success over the historical facts and the main characters Bahram Modi, Neel, Zadig Bey, Robin and Chinnery exhibits the emotional effects. In such a way the novel presents an intuitive association which lies beneath and within the historical facts. In an interview of "From History of the Present" Ghosh said about the history with main characters which make the novelist's relationship in the past significantly different from the historians. A few of those who destines are written by others as Mr. King requests to Bahram Modi: "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 neighbors . . . our successors will not have to live with the outcome of today's decision in the same way that yours will. It is your children and grandchildren who will be called into account for what transpires here today (470)". This comment in an interview provokes the forwardness based on the past issues by the author.

### The Past Imposed on the Present Unconsciously

Ghosh presents how earlier period is forced on the present automatically in the novel *River of Smoke*. In such a way the author invites and comprises the spectators to have the imagination of the procedure and conception of narratives. According to Sanjukta Poddar "this revisionary understanding of economic history is clearly portrayed in River of Smoke throughout the narrative (2015:5)". Like Ghosh narrates the story with pathetic, tragic heart rendering the aspects of Bahram Modi in different relationships as a father, a husband, a son, a friend, a lover, a benefactor and a business parson with the existed human beings and their relationships. This narration gives high degree of concentration in the action of the entire theme that center with the experience of the main protagonist of the novel is Modi comparison with other major characters in the backdrop of historical disorder. Ghosh as a novelist had the intention of

creating the past out of the present though the simple life of common man in the framework of grand historical events. And he deviates from a conventional reading of the past and prefer to understand the history in the point of view of those so far ignored traditional historiography. In an interview with Mahmood Kooria, Ghosh answered for the question "What makes you comfortable to write historical novels and not academic" as follows, that will testify to his intention of writings novels with the historical background. It is not to record history but to expose the impacts of historical events on an individual and its effect that marks a turning point in life.

### **Narrative Style**

The novel *River of Smoke* is the historical novel with different strategies. Amitav Ghosh has narrated the historical opium trade which flourished in canton of nineteenth century in a presently happening way. The story presents the scene of struggle between the empires of Manchu and the British in China as the form of free trade. Ghosh also re-wrote the past with various narrative framing devices to present the related personal history with national historical importance, stream of consciousness, interior monologue, genuine and authorized voices of great people in the history, original documents, edicts, famous journals from Canton, proclamations, translations, letters, drawing and painting to present the period of opium war took place in Canton. The novel has the narration of flashback in non chronological order with diverse perspectives in colonized period, the demoralized, the exploited, the victims and the marginal of the colonist and historical character present the account of vivid flashback aspects.

In the novel *River of Smoke*, the mode of presentation is in two ways the first one is telling and the second one is showing whereas more preference is given to 'telling' in a remarkable way as per the wish of the author and share utmost information of that particular period of British power politics and life in Canton. Ghosh applies his own techniques in characterization and particularly with the imaginary characters of Bahram Modi, Paulette a botanist, Zadig the traders, banishment of characters of Raja,

Neel and a little bit later Munshi and Ah Fatt is an opium consumer in addition to Bahram's separated son Robin Chinnery who is a painter in the story. To present the historical incidents in the way of real life the author has taken a few characters they are Charles King the American merchant, Jardin merchants from the British are Dent, Matheson, Mr. Innings including with the British Chief Superintendent of trade Captain Mr. Elliott and other American and British traders and officials members those who involve directly or indirectly.

Ghosh projected the voices of traders in the form of reproduction in Canton considering the members of migrants from different places, lascars (sailors from India), British officers, business persons, botanists, government officials, painters and even horticulturists. It is an open-ended novel that shows the change in the voice of narrator from third person to first person with the example of the character Neel who expresses the sorrowfulness at the closing line of the novel is:

"I realize that if it were not for those paintings no one would believe that such a place had ever existed (553)."

The conserved memory of the historical events and the sculpture and painting stood as the preserver of historical incidents and moments for example of Canton's painting by Chinnery in flames remained as the certification of life in Canton at the moments of riots and war in future according to his envision before the event actually occurred. The plot is simple and technique is threaded together in narratives and Ghosh tailored the memories of different characters in the form of the present tense to accomplish the precision of the incidents and to make clear the result of historical movements in the lives of people. The main and sub stories in the novel are narrated clearly about the famous city of 'Canton' located in China where people from various countries stay have the right to inhabitation and constructed the major business houses and established the major part in the opium trade. Most of the characters struggle to survive are clearly and lively characterized, they are Bahram one who was ruined completely and collapsed at the last part of the narration. Another character Neel who is known

as Raja convicted for the forgery case that caused for loss of his identity at last. The Anahita is the ship and its owner is Bahram faced the problems because of the cyclones that carry this opium trade ship from Indian coastal to Canton. Another famous ship of nursery on Botanical venture is The Redruth which is the third one carries a Horticulturist Frederick Fitcher, a well known Penrose who hunts the precious reserves of China.

### **Elements of Historical Novel**

Historical novel presents the details of a particular time period accurate and authenticate, including manners, social norms, customs and traditions in an actual historical figures or historical events with characters that endured a fuming past and future time in advance. These historical issues and incidents are the main source of history. In the novel author presents the present and future determination through the forces of nature, destiny, possibility, fate, policies and laws of the colonizers. A few incidents are stated because of opium addiction in the novel such are Bahram Modi has lost Chi-Mei his wife and his son, Ah Fatt. Modi lost chests of opium and his family in a storm whereas Ah Fatt also lost his parent's company that led him towards the consuming of an opium addict and at last placed him as a murderer. The terrible life of another character is Raja Neel Rattan, one who lost his property and he led his life away from his family as an unknown person in Canton as a Munshi to Bahram Modi whereas Robin Chinnery also lost his parents same as Paulette. Thus all these characters faced troubles and could remember their past incidents in their life. Author presents their struggle continuously with a positive hope to make a significant presentation and to have a better life in the future.

### **Opium Business and War**

Ghosh in The novel *River of Smoke* presented the happened things before the first war of Opium and about the main history related to the tedious free trade with its inhuman form. To project the seriousness of opium war in the lives of people and Ghosh chosen the narration of oral tradition of story-telling and tradition of Europe which has more

focus of an essential trafficking in taking of opium of nineteenth century.

Ghosh as an anthropologist presents the ethnographer's eye on the problems faced by the people in through illegal trade in place Ghangzhou a city located in China which is previously known as Canton. This puts Canton as a unique place during the opium war which attracts people from different countries of India, Europe, Japan, China and others speaking different languages. In oral activities like meetings, conversations and discussions among traders the present tense is used.

### **Effective Use of Language**

To present the particular atmosphere of Canton and personal history of a few characters, some key words, idiomatic sentences, quotations, phrases, and the local languages in Canton of the period (patois, pidgin and Creole) Ghosh uses skillful structural device. This technique helps to develop the text through the polyphonic and showing the intense expressions of various characters through mother tongue. Such characters apply in their conversations idiomatic sentences in Hindustani, French, English, pidgin and Creole. For example Bahram reminds his mother's sayings in Gujarathi like "You know what people say about sons-in-law: kutra pos, bilara posperjemeina jenyane varma khos rear a dog, rear a cat, but shove the son-in-law and his off spring into the gutter (48)". Now and then these characters apply their language in informal way in addition to broken and unfinished sentences in the novel. Like Ah Fatt says his testimony of broken and deserted heart to Neel: "We both half Achha, but never see India. We talk about India, about her mother, my father. And then (93)". Ghosh also presents nautical fictional language which was existed nineteenth century. There are a few sequences in the novel are long and the dialogues are among the members from English community in Canton related to their concerns. The narrator and characters practice an unmodified English language of nineteenth century International Standard English. In this novel the 'Maidan' and Window are used as metaphors with different narrators and character focalizers through which they could see the activities in „Maidan“.

**Narrative Sequences**

The narrative presents with sections of 'Sea', 'Canton' and 'Commissioner Lin' and on its spatial setting with a change of atmosphere on the ships Anahita, Redruth' based on seasonal Indian trades in city of Canton in China which is known as the hub trade and activities particularly opium trade. Ghosh creates a masterpiece through the voices and the use of flashback, expression of inner thoughts (Interior Monologue), memory and stream of consciousness in addition to the changing narrative point of views respectively. He departs from emancipator narrative to confront the conventional historiographies narrating to promote the historical events of opium wars and opium trade, and finally making it an open ended narrative in the construction of the plot through different narrative strategies. Novelist also applied the techniques of post modern novels' like disintegration, disorder in construction of the plot and change in the voice of narration, to oblige the reader to illustrate an interpretive frame work keenly. The sections of novel are inter connected with two major characters of Mr. Bahram and Raja Neel with an object of opium which has changed the fortune of characters. In such a way Ghosh applied the narrative techniques to communicate his remarks and thoughts to scheme them clearly and categorically using various pictures and related scenes of the contemporary period. Ghosh applies metaphors 'Maidan' and 'windows' in narration to set the place to project life in Canton. Burnham reaction is "An open threat has been issued against us; our lives, our property, our liberty are in jeopardy. Yet the only offence cited against us is that we have obeyed the laws of Free Trade and it is no more possible for us to be heedless of these laws than to disregard the forces of nature, or disobey God's commandments (435)".

Thus the novel is concluded with discussions and conversations related to the opium trade and war. Ghosh used a pure investigative chronology in the novel to establish the overall idea of the major rhythms of the narrative. Through he narrative sequences mentioned above, it is observed that three major points related to the time they are the meeting of Deeti and Neel, background narrative projecting Bahram as the main protagonist in the

history of opium trade and the description of changed picture of Canton through the painting after thirty years by Neel as well as Chinnery. This narrative presents the flashback journey, life and stay of major characters in Canton after Commissioner Lin orders issued on opium wars in China.

**Conclusion**

The title, theme, plot, setting, language and dialogues, background, narrators, characters, the modes of narration and narrative technique all are taken to put together to portray the events and issues during the opium war period in Canton located in China. Through this novel Ghosh tells that opium not only affect the lives of people but also the elements of nature. As Ghosh says about the history and the narratives are same in functioning and it is required to know the pre-historical events to face issues of present and future. Thus the imagination of flashback and flash forward aspects presented clearly through his personal observation during the opium war period in china with effective narrative sequences in the novel the *River of Smoke*.

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