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THE TROJAN HORSE OF FREE TRADE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S TRILOGY ON THE EARLY YEARS OF COLONIAL EXPANSION

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Abstract

The beautiful Trojan Horse had been used as a bait to lure the people of Troy after a long battle had proven futile in yielding results. Free trade was the trojan horse that hid the forces of colonialism that captured the lands, leached away their wealth and left them tottering on the brink of devastation. The paper explores how Amitav Ghosh takes a look at the advent of colonialism in the early phase where it was disguised under the garb of free trade. It seemingly offered equal benefits to both parties till the vicious grasp of colonial powers choked the channels of outflow and forced the markets to become placid suppliers of raw material and consumers of produced goods. The tales of greed and ruthlessness that unfolded in the follow-up lie scattered on the shores of histories. Through the three novels Ghosh is exploring the idea of free trade from the beginning of the production chain of small farmers in the first book of the trilogy *Sea of Poppies*. Through the second book *River of Smoke* he traces the trade through the various channels, middlemen and liaison agents to the final consumers. The third book *Flood of Fire* shows how free trade was used as a ploy by greedy profit mongering companies hand in glove with political system ready to go to war to destroy the life, economy and culture of several peoples and cultures spread across the world.

Key words: Globalization, Ibis Trilogy, Amitav Ghosh, post colonialism, *River of Smoke*, *Sea of Poppies*, *Flood of Fire*, colonialism and globalization

When one of the most well-known writer of India sits down to write and dedicates ten years of his life “ down in a rabbit hole thinking of one set of things for years and years”(Ghosh, 2015) , the world should sit up and take notice of what he is saying. Especially if the writer is Amitav Ghosh and the subject is spread across three novels written on an epic scale. He deals what the world only now, in the beginning of the third decade of the twenty first Century feels, understands as the root of the

colonial history of the world - the opium wars between Britain and China.

Through the following discussions we try to understand why it is so important for us to go back into that phase of the history of the region and look at the events as they unfolded.

Peter Freyer notes that once right in India foreign merchants found a country whose development reached the most advanced European Nations India was specialised in agriculture and manufacturing India had a striking textile industry

cotton silk and wool was sold in Asia and their excellent iron processing skills and their own ship building industry. (Freyer 1993, 22). In the initial years the British were merely suppliers of Indian goods like spices and silks to the European markets. After the Battle of Plassey 1757 the Asian supplier European supplicant Baton was broken with the establishment of the Company rule in Bengal and then in most of Asia. (Calance 2013). The doctrine of free competition of Adam Smith gained credibility by 1757. This led to the breakdown of the monopolistic control of the company losing grounds to France in India. This led to the British resorting to creating importing cheap cotton from Lancashire making an exporter into an importer. And then they shifted focus to China and began exporting opium produced in India (*Sea of Poppies*) to China (*River of Smoke*), and on facing resistance, it forced China into free trade through gunboat diplomacy and two opium wars (*Flood of Fire*). It bought tea in return which they sold to Europe and America.

With the horrors of the colonial rule behind us, we began to slowly get into the process of entering a fresh phase of open markets and globalization in the last thirty years. The glamour and the prospects of prosperity that the first world offered in the form of technological knowhow has allured developing and underdeveloped countries across the world. But we need to take stock of the direction of our journey so far and also turn the pages of history to see if we are not too close to the situation that led to the two hundred years of colonial rule in the past. The present world order is once again revealing that free trade and Globalization can be tricky ideology with more than a fair chance for some few and end of the road for many. We need to question if after three decades of a dedicated policy of globalization and open markets there is a need to relook at the situation. Some of the answers might lie in this first economic war fought between Britain and China.

Simon Gikandi is of the opinion that “in the post-colonial times, both post colonialism and Globalization are concerned with explaining forms social and cultural organization whose ambition is to transcend the boundaries of the nation state and they seek to provide new vistas of cultural flows that

can no longer be explained by a homogeneous narrative of Eurocentric narrative of development and social change.” The point to note here is the idea of Eurocentric narrative. It is exactly what Ghosh is tracing in his trilogy. The development of the Eurocentric tendencies of government policies , of economies, of education systems, of literature were places where for the first time the colonial empire begins to assert itself as having more rights , rather almost exclusive rights than anybody else to bring changes it feels helpful for its purposes. In order to assert these rights it is willing to change the cultural, social and economic structures of a land, or embroil another country into a war. In the colonial period in the region, the British East India Company was just a face for the British government was a thinly veiled fact. The government could hide behind the veil when the need for opening avenues for trade was felt and emerge to indulge in ruthless arm-twisting if there was resistance.

Global Workforce Project of SUNY Levin Institute defines Globalization as “Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in societies around the world” (Globalization,

In the above definition we see how the economic, the political and the cultural are all intrinsically bound together. But there is another face of this globalization that the actual working of the phenomenon has shown us. This is also globalization when people leave to earn a living in far off lands only to realise that they are in no better a condition than would have been back home. Their exploitation changes the face but still does not let them go free. Their lives are debt ridden and their income just enough to give them subsistence. The lure of globalization uproots them but does not give them an equal chance. The way we understand globalization today, trade is based on companies and governments are facilitators for conducive trade environment. Political policies and relations are

moderated to get optimum profits for the companies in their trade. The first time this kind of moderation of laws to facilitate trade happens in the beginning of the colonial rule when companies take control of the political environment of a host country so that they are able to make laws conducive for optimum economic profits. Through the three novels Ghosh is exploring the idea of free trade from the beginning of the production chain of small farmers in the first book of the trilogy *Sea of Poppies*. Through the second book *River of Smoke* he traces the trade through the various channels, middlemen and liaison agents to the final consumers. In the third book *Flood of Fire* shows how free trade was used as a ploy by greedy profit mongering companies hand in glove with political system ready to go to war to destroy the life, economy and culture of several peoples and cultures spread all over the world.

In the first part *Sea of Poppies* he tells the story of how the British East India Company built a system of producing opium by exploiting the small, poor farmers, enticing them with hopes of high profit and finally trapping them in debt and rendering them landless. This gave complete control to the company to produce poppy and process it into opium without any resistance. The labourers were either addicted to the opium or deep in debt of the company – in either condition they were in no position to resist the conditions laid down by the Company. The company compelled them to sell their crop at throwaway prices and after processing it, sent it to be sold at exorbitant prices in the prosperous Chinese markets. Company tries to gain control over the Indian economy through its laws regarding control of farming as well as through its encouragement to the farming of poppies so that the opium trade could be fuelled. The farms were rendered useless because of the very harmful nature of opium farming resulting in thousands of farmers turn into landless labourers. It was then tricking this debt-ridden labour into joining the work force in the Mauritius as indentured labour. This is where they were offered to enter into a contract with the company and go to work abroad to repay the debt. They did so without knowing that once they were sent away, returning home would be impossible.

These people who entered into the contract were the *girmitiyas*, those who entered the agreement. The “Agreement” that they sign is sealing their fate for ever but they do not realise this. For them it is a redemptive move from the debt trap at home. Getting these people to register as indentured labour was a very convenient way to bypass the restriction imposed by slavery laws in Mauritius. So this is very important for us to note here that it is bypassing the laws of slavery and using indentured labour almost as slave labour, it was closing for these people every road to ever come back to their homeland. This is one of the classic examples of human trafficking which is defined as “people working in private sector industries, such as domestic work, agriculture, and manufacturing, as well as individuals trapped in bonded labor, in which people are made to repay loans or inherited debts in exploitative situations” (Globalization). Ghosh uses the story of Deeti to show this is a gradual process happening all over central India (Ghosh 2008). Deeti is saved from being burned on the funeral pyre of her husband by Kalua. They escape from the evil social system but get into the trap of an even greater evil which will efface their very identity and roots by sending them as labour through the ships of Burnham to Mauritius to work as indentured labour in the sugarcane farms of the company. The trading Company of Burnham is one of the countless mediators who flourish and facilitate the unfair trade practices of the Company and feel no qualms about being a part of a heavily skewed and unethical setup.

The story of the King Neel Ratan Haldhar (Ghosh, 2008) is narrated to us showing how the British laws were stripping away the bigger and more influential land-owning classes of their land, their economic privileges by tapping into their hypocrisies, insecurities and greed. His fate shows the nature of legal system implemented by the British which did not have any sympathy for his status and could be used to the advantages of those the company wanted to benefit. In case of Neel Ratan Haldar, the man whom the Company is obliging is Burnham – the man whose ships carry on the trade of the company. Burnham is not just a trader but a crucial cog in the wheel of the Company

machinery. He is the quintessential lesioning agent and intermediary who had gained clout and wealth by means more foul than fair. He imitates the ways of the Europeans and is typical of the colonized mindset in this respect.

In the first part of the trilogy we see things happening at the level of production. The company takes over the agricultural economy of the company by directly acquiring the land, controlling it through the laws being imposed on the landowners. For facilitating this process, the Company introduces changes in the cultural, social and political system of the country so that the Euro-centric mind-set gets firmly rooted in the country.

The idea of free trade advocated by Adam Smith gained currency in Europe and more and more European countries like France began to take recourse to the nascent markets of India. With a stiffer competition from these European countries entering Indian markets, trading in Indian goods became a venture of loss since the monopolistic control was now no more there. The company adopted a two-pronged approach to deal with the situation. Locally it began flooding the markets with cheap and low-quality Lancashire cotton. This destroyed the production of high-quality Indian cotton and compelled farmers into entering farming of other cash crops like indigo, tea and poppy which the Company used for entering the markets of other countries. As free trade had become a cause of loss to the Company in India, Ghosh shows how the situation reverses in China. In the second part *River of Smoke* (Ghosh 2011) we see how the Company uses the same weapon of free trade to enter into the Chinese market. It displays its product as a lifestyle product and propagates its use through initial trap of easy access and cheap offers. Once the society is addicted, it starts doing business by controlling the price and selling it at exorbitant rates. It does so without any sense of responsibility for the havoc the opium is wrecking on the lives of people and the cost that people have to pay is far beyond money.

Time and again in throughout the trilogy, the representatives of the company are stressing on the idea of free trade, on the opening up of the economy. Here the moot question is the direction

that this free trade is intended to take. We need to search for this direction in the first two parts of the trilogy. In the second part of the trilogy Ghosh shows us the underbelly of the idea of globalization at the point of markets for the goods produced by the company. With the control of much trade and lands in India, the Company moves with the sole motive of profit-mongering. So far the company has procured the raw material at a pittance and destroyed centuries old agricultural and indigenous industries of India in the name of free trade. Now in *River of Smoke*, the Company is seen moving ahead with another face of the idea of free trade where no country can keep its market closed even if the product being sold is opium, is having a catastrophic impact on the health and well-being of its people and is simultaneously destroying its economy. The Company is willing to use every unethical means including bribe blackmail and threat of violence and war. It is actually forcefully trying to tear open a market against all rules of ethical trade practices in the name of free trade. The Company feels that this kind of free trade is its sacrosanct right.

The third part of the trilogy (Ghosh 2015) shows us the consequences of any attempt to stop this kind of a blatant violation of the spirit of free trade. China tries to resist but the stakes are very high for the East India Company and it has to reveal its actual political face of the British Empire. It is revealed that the empire and the Company are hand in glove and they will leave no stone unturned to claw their way into the huge Chinese market. If friendly face of the Company fails, the vicious and aggressive empire is right behind ready to lend a helping hand till finally it gives up all pretense and stands revealed for all it means. In the war that follows, the British Empire intervenes in the name of protecting the rights of its company and maintaining the spirit of free trade. The fact is that with the kind of profits involved in opium trade, it cannot stop at anything and declares a war against China. Thus one of the first economic wars in human history is fought.

It is at this point that we need to take a look at the fundamentals of the definition and the actual practice of Globalization. We need to take a look at the flip side of globalization to see if it is serving the

purpose of opening the markets and thereby creating an equitable level playing grounds for all the economies or only crating channels of profits for a select few countries. Calance points out that “linking private interests to national aims remains one of the free-market dangers” (Calance, 2013). The trilogy makes us realise that we are still caught in a world which is hugely Euro-centric. It is creating a kind of system where the consuming economies are hostages to the producing economies in the form of the first world countries led by America. With a strong control over research and development situated in these countries, the rest of the world being used only as a market to reap profits. This kind insistence on free trade practice does not lead to a development in these countries. They remain passive consumers to the out-dated and rejected technological and consumer products, borrowing the formulae and methods of production of first world countries.

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