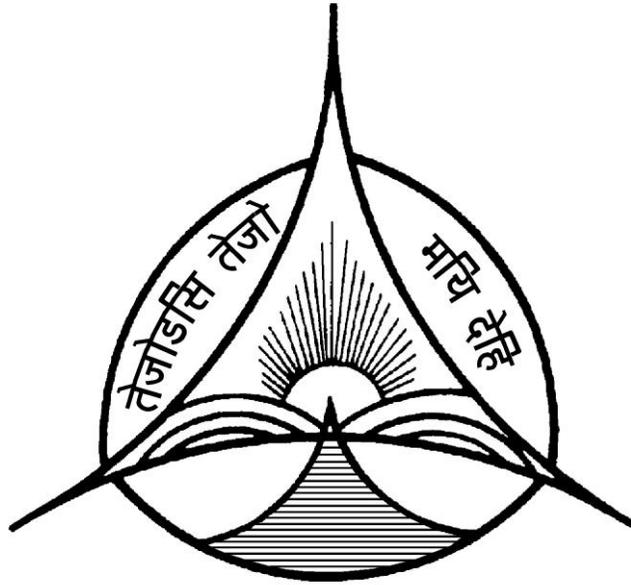


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Flood of Fire by Amitav Ghosh, Delhi: Penguin India, 2015

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Amitav Ghosh's *Flood of Fire* takes the narratives of both its predecessors, *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*, fusing them into a narrative where the past, present and future come together in a moment of unity. It moulds itself to being both a prequel as well as a sequel as it constantly shuffles between time graphs which lie distant to each other, but ones which are all intrinsically tied up into the final narrative of the inmates of Ibis and their fortunes. The narrative shifts its timeline from the distant past of Kesri Singh's life before being part of the army, which links it to the *Sea of Poppies*, into the intermediate past that presents the love affair of Zachary and Mrs Burnham, connecting it to the time-space of *River of Smoke* and, finally, the immediate present of the narrative through Neel's journals and Shireen's trajectory, both of which are poised towards an unknown looming threat of a future that promises to drastically shift subject positions.

While the chronicle takes off from the last movement of *River of Smoke*, it turns its authorial telescope on characters who had till now resided only as footnotes in the other stories. Thus, one has Kesri Singh, Deeti's brother, who had been a fringe figure in the earlier books; Shireen Modee, the docile and unsuspecting wife of Bahram; Raj Rattan, Neel's son whom we had last met expectantly waiting (one which proves to be futile) for his father to come fly kites with him in *Sea of Poppies*; Mrs Burnham, who had till now been seen as the conniving and boisterous wife of the sexually deviant Mr. Burnham along with a host of other characters, each of whose destinies tie them indelibly to the tapestry of the Ibis, even if they have never been one of its voyagers. Answering to the call of the unrepresentable other, an 'other' who has been lost in the pages of officious history, Ghosh, in this novel, refuses to create heroes; his characters are more often than not weak, conniving and helplessly lost in the turmoil of the present.

Ghosh divides the novel into four distinct narratives which intersect at various points: Shireen and her journey to China to claim her husband's share in the opium war, Kesri Singh and the Indian army that fights on behalf of the British in the Chinese wars; Zachary and the Burnhams and their tryst with the Chinese opium trade, which interestingly links itself to the chronicle of Raj Rattan who, with the help of Baboo Nobo Kissan, goes in search of his father; and finally, Neel and Compton and their representation of the Chinese side in the war. While each of these strands acts as a gateway to new debates and discussions about the politics of trade and cultural exchange, they also provide valuable insight into the role of nations in examining as well as exploiting such policies.

One of the main concerns that *Flood of Fire* hinges on is the nuances of free trade and its moral, ethical and economic effects which resonate through history right into our present. In the novel, Ghosh often wrestles with the ideas of whether the possibility of economy and trade being humanistic existed, and while he critically analyses other forms of trade beyond the globalised

profit-driven circle in *River of Smoke*, here he tries to find an answer to present global migratory practices and the problems associated with it through newer ways of looking and exploring countries to trade. The narrative of Paulette and the search for the idyllic space of nature, one that will usher in a world of nurture, stands as a testimony to the novel ways of countering the exploitative merchant trade whose eventuality lies in war and destruction.

Staring at the abyss of the crisis that postcoloniality has immersed itself in in the 21st century, trying to find newer avenues of representation, Ghosh, through his analysis on other forms of trade, the movement associated with it, tries to accommodate innovative ways of resolving this crisis, a crisis not only of identity but also of remembering. Moving away from the dichotomy of 'good us' versus 'bad west', Ghosh, through his mouth piece character Neel, while being immensely critical of the doctrine of free trade and what it entails for those who remain at the receiving end of it, also condemns China's suspicious disposition towards foreigners, which often acts as a hindrance to its own betterment. The years of mistrust among the South Asian countries as well as their inhabitants, which is succinctly captured in the anecdote about the Gurkhas— their military plans to attack Bengal in order for the British to withdraw from China and defend Bengal— is not supported by the Chinese, which, in turn, leads to a concentrated attack on China, reinforces the divisive politics of the South Asian countries which have often been used by the foreigners to their advantage.

Flood of Fire is also an arena of play of languages. Following from the earlier forays into laskari and pidgin language, the *Anglo-Hindoosthani* that peppers this chronicle once again shows Ghosh's belief that language itself needs to be broken down and re-assimilated into a union of various cultures for the 'other' to be truly allowed a space in the politics of representation. The broken-down languages also bring forth the crisis of ideation that plagues not only the sensibilities of the characters, but also in the process of creation of historical knowledge, one that is constantly caught up in a state of flux.

In this crisis of ideas, Neel ponders over the role of the intellectual. Neel's character from the first novel onwards takes on an interesting trajectory, from being the indifferent Raja, to being convict at sea, taking up the role of Munshi to Bahram and finally, in this, moulding himself into the role of an advisor to the Chinese on Indian matters. While Neel's love for words and languages as well as cultures makes him an excellent narrator of the crisis of the opium war, he is also the frustrated intellectual who helplessly watches the destruction of not only a civilisation, but also its future. His words, "Thoughts, books, ideas, words—if anything they make you more alone, because they destroy whatever instinctive loyalties you may once have possessed" (p. 83), bring out the inherent loneliness and angst of the intellectual in times of ideological emergency. Unlike his other narrators in his earlier works, Neel is not an absent yet present future (like the narrator of *Shadow Lines* or *The Glass Palace* where the future narrator is often omnipresent in understanding and chronicling the past) that looks at the past with introspection and retrospective knowledge; he is an equal participant in the saga whose fate is indelibly intertwined with the history that is in the making around him.

Flood of Fire vindicates Ghosh from being often tainted with the stigma of creating women characters who are a shadow of their male counterparts and often lack zeal. The four major

women characters in the novel, Shireen, Catherine Burnham, Paulette and the absent present Deeti, not only become mistresses of their own fates but also the catalysts of change in this overwhelmingly masculine enterprise.

While it wrestles with many questions of ethics, righteousness, representation and the postcolonial crisis of understanding and reworking of history, *Flood of Fire* somewhere fails as a fitting tribute to the multifarious nature of its subject. While it remains grand in its scope and vision, it lacks in its humaneness, thus relegating itself to the same categories of history that it had aimed to debunk in the first place. The characters, more often than not (other than a Neel and Catherine Burnham), remain ideas and sketches rather than actual contenders in this rewriting of historical consciousness. It is precisely here that the novel fails itself as well as its loyalists who had painstakingly taken this journey on the Ibis over the decade. It awes you in the sheer scope of its narrative, but leaves you with nothing to take back after the final lines have been read, other than a sense of unease. Ghosh has already started working on another book based on his research for the Trilogy. What readers can hope for is that it will give us a sense of closure, however ill-fitting it might be, rather than this sense of betrayal that one carries through.