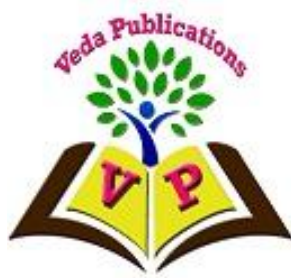


**HISTORY AS FICTION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *RIVER OF SMOKE***

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*(Department of English, ANU College of Architecture & Planning, Acharya Nagajuna University.)***ABSTRACT**

Indian writing in English has emerged as a sub-discipline of English literature. India enjoys an enriched heritage of different genres of literature- drama, poetry and fiction. The most significant genre which was used by the contemporary writers is historical fiction. This piece of work focuses on how Amitav Ghosh utilized history in his fiction. Amitav Ghosh's second of Ibis Novels *River of Smoke* (2011) is a historical fiction describing the nineteenth century Asian subcontinent with creative enthusiasm and deep historical insight. The aim of Amitav Ghosh is to remember or rethink the story or history which one had already experienced. Though there is fiction in history, studying of historical novel gives the new dimension to study the emotional feelings of those people, where historians may not recorded them in their writings is the objective of this paper. This piece of work focuses on how Amitav Ghosh utilized history in his fiction.

**Keywords:** *River of Smoke*- historical fiction- heritage of different cultures.

***The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.***

-Oscare Wilde

Indian writing in English has emerged as a sub-discipline of English literature. India enjoys an enriched heritage of different genres of literature-drama, poetry and fiction. In 1973 edition of his *Indian Writing in English*, Professor K.R.Srinivas Iyengar wrote "the future of Indian fiction, is indeed full of promise. Recant fiction has given ample evidence of vitality, variety, humanity and artistic integrity". Indian contemporary writers have played a prominent role in empowerment of literature. The most significant genre which was used by the contemporary writers is historical fiction. Literary trends change from time to time and this is the time to study history through literature. Historian's record dead facts of events happened in history. Historical fiction writers compiled events, incidents places and dates. Though there is fiction in history, studying of historical novel gives the new dimension to study the emotional feelings of those people, where historians may not recorded them in their writings is the objective of the study. This piece of work focuses on how Amitav Ghosh utilized history in his fiction.

**HISTORICAL NOVELS – EMERGING TREND IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

A novel is a work of fiction, where the author uses his or her imagination to create a story, but there is usually some relation to fact in all novels. Historical novels use facts from former time and weave them into an imaginary story. The term History is derived from the Greek work 'historia' which means 'to enquire' or interrogating into the incidents or events of the past. According to G.R.Elton "History may commonly be thought as the whole of mankind's past life, it is in truth equal to the surviving past. Historical study is not only the study of the past but the study of present traces of the past".

Thus history has been considered as scientific but the facts offered in the books if histories need to be examined and analyzed. It was from decades, history has been considered as an important field of human study. It has occupied almost a central place in the literary and critical discussions. Reocour defines "historical narrative as a kind of an allegory of temporality; a true allegory. According to him it

touches the large structure of meaning –figurative and allegorical".

History has attracted a good number of commonwealth and Indian writers. At the earlier stage, the fictional works of the writers like Bankim Chandra Chaterjee (*The Poison Tree*), Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao were mainly concerned with the down trodden of the society, the middle class life of the Indians and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of India. However, in the later stage, writers like K.S.Venkataramani, Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya (So Many Hungers), Chaman Nahal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Arun Joshi, Kushwant Singh and *Amitav Ghosh* and many other contemporary writers concentrated on the depiction of social reality of the times. These writers have made considerable use of History in their fictional works.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the popular contemporary Indian novelists. He reflects the historical truths of India through his novels. He was born in Calcutta in 1956 and was brought in East Pakistan which is now part of Bangladesh. Amitav Ghosh was greatly influenced by the memories of his childhood. He said that the stories of his mother were very interesting and straightforward. He developed the spirit of patriotism through listening to the true experiences of his family members. He was mostly influenced by the stories of his father, which dealt with the Second World War during 1939-1945. Amitav Ghosh is very prominent as post-colonial novelist from our country. His novels contains either colonial or post-colonial scenario. His intention is to bring to the notice of the readers about important historical incidents which our country experienced in the past.

Amitav Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) brings forward the life of a young weaver named Alu. His second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) tells the story of the three generations of the narrator's family spread over Dhaka. His third novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995) brings forward the questions of National identity and communalism in the sub-continent. His next novel *The Glass palace* (2000) highlights the latest expeditions done during colonialism. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) was his sixth novel. Seventh novel *Sea of*



*Poppies*, eighth *River of Smoke* and the ninth novel *The Flood of Fire* were a collection of historical novels called as Ibis trilogy. The first part of this trilogy is *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh gives a clear picture about tortures and punishments given by the British to Indian laborers in the opium factory.

Amitav Ghosh's second of Ibis novels *River of Smoke* (2011) is a historical fiction describing the nineteenth century Asian subcontinent with creative enthusiasm and deep historical insight. The aim of Amitav Ghosh is to remember or rethink the story or history which one had already experienced. In this novel he has re-written the history of the period of opium trade in Canton, in 1838. The novel is set during the terrible period of opium trade between India and China and later on opium war between China and England. Through the help of some fictional characters Ghosh elevates or brings forward the past history so that the readers can easily understand the past. The story is about the revolt of Manchu Empire against the British Empire who made war on China in the name of free trade. The action of time in this novel takes place before the second opium war in China between the British and China.

It is also observed from the famous historical book *Glimpses of World History* by Jawaharlal Nehru that-

China was under the Manchus, suspecting, with good reason, the foreigners who came in the name of trade or religion, and trying to keep them out. But the foreigners continued to shout and misbehave at her gates, and especially encouraged the traffic in opium. The Chinese emperor prohibited the entry of opium but smuggling continued and the foreigners carried on an illegal trade of opium. This resulted in a war with England, rightly called the opium war, and the British forced the Chinese to take opium. (pp:395-396)

The characters which were introduced in Ibis trilogy first novel *Sea of Poppies* were again reintroduced in this novel. Deethi was the main protagonist in the novel *Sea of Poppies*. The story of the novel *River of Smoke* is revealed through the meeting of Deethi and Neel. They both moved back

to the flashback. It is observed from the novel that Neel is trying to draw some pictures of their past life and making Deethi to remember the past. First he draws a picture of a person called Bahram Modi, the opium trader in the first novel but now in this *River of Smoke* this Bahram Modi is the central character. It is through his eyes that the reader comes to know about the opium war in China. In this novel it is observed that all the main characters Bahram Modi, Al Fatt, Neel, Robert Chinnery, Paulette and Zadig Bay gathered in a quarters for discussion and started recollecting their past experiences about opium trade. This recollection of their personal memory is used by Amitav Ghosh as an opportunity to recollect the national history.

The novel is divided into three sections Island, Canton and Commissioner Lin. Each section consists of six unnamed chapters. Canton is a place in China which is famous for opium trade. In the section Canton the readers understand the voices of different traders, migrants, lascars, government officials, business men, botanists etc. Among all these the main protagonist of the novel Bahram Modi (the Paris opium trader) shares his pains and sufferings which he faced in his life.

Historical records say that opium traders suffered a lot during this trade. It is also observed that there was a sudden increase in opium-smuggling, and the Chinese government at last decided to take strong action to suppress it. Amitav Ghosh in this novel *River of Smoke* used introduced the character Commissioner Lin who fights to control the opium trader near Canton which resulted for war between British and China. The point which the readers have to identify is, the name and character of Commissioner Lin is directly used by Amitav Ghosh as it is in his fiction. It is observed from the third part of the novel that Commissioner Lin as the title is suggestive enough moves around the diktats, edicts and 'farmans', 'hukumnamas' or orders passed by Commissioner Lin on behalf of the Chinese Emperor and the retaliation and opposition of British officials and traders involved in opium trade. Commissioner Lin ordered the traders strongly to surrender opium in Canton. "Commissioner Lin in his letter commands Captain Elliot and asks him that he should give clear commands to the foreigners to obey the order,



requiring them to speedily deliver up all the opium that is on board their store-ship. Thenceforward all the foreigners will conduct a legitimate trade.”(ROS 513).

This most important scene which was used by Amitav Ghosh is the perfect example for historical fiction. Amitav Ghosh used history as it is in his fiction. Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Glimpses of World History* explains clearly the incidents happened in the during the opium trade in China. He says “Lin Tse-his was appointed as a special commissioner to suppress the smuggling, and he took swift and vigorous action. He went down to Canton in the south, which was the chief centre for this illegal trade, and ordered all the foreign merchants there to deliver to him all the opium they had.”(P.445)

The sufferings faced by Bahram Modi and other merchants who were sent by East India Company were also described as it is by the Amitav Ghosh in this novel. The novel explores various aspects of European imperialism in the Asian subcontinent. The narrative is mainly about a Parsee merchant and his rise and decline of Modi, his professional and personal struggles. Modi's ship which carries cargo was caught in a storm near Canton. This ship named *Anahita* was financed for him by his in-laws. “The most expensive cargo that Bahram Modi had ever shipped” but also the single most valuable cargo that had ever been carried out of the Indian –Subcontinent.”(P.45ROS).

It is observed that the Chinese official's attitude towards the traders was very harsh and unambiguous. When the traders refused to hand over the opium they had the Commissioner Lin forced them to obey. He ordered to cut them off in their factories. Made these Chinese workers and servants not to leave them, and allowed no food to go to them. They booked 20,000 opium cases over them. The consequences were war with Britain, defeat of China.

Thus this paper concludes by saying that *River of Smoke* is a novel which repudiates the -“forces of evil that celebrates their triumphal march through history”(P.553). Amitav Ghosh skillfully used history in fiction and done justice for the emerging literary genre that is historical fiction. Through this novel it is Ghosh once again proved that, literary

trends change from time to time and this is the time to study history through literature. Historians record dead facts of events happened in history. Historical fiction writers compiled events, incidents places and dates. Though there is fiction in history, studying of historical novel gives the new dimension to study the emotional feelings of those people, where historians may not recorded them in their writings is the objective of this paper. This piece of work focuses on how Amitav Ghosh utilized history in his fiction.

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