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Visions of Nature Relationships in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract:

River of Smoke published in 2011 details opium wars of 1839-42. It is a historical background to the European exploitation of India and China particularly. Amitav Ghosh presents various characters in the novel—migrants, lascars, traders, government officials, British officials, businessmen, botanists, horticulturalists, boatmen and even painters. He describes the nineteenth century Asian subcontinent with creative enthusiasm and deep historical insight. The most obvious aspect of the novel is the cultivation of poppy flowers and the processing of seeds into opium in India and its illegal sale in China. Degradation of nature is legitimated by imperialists in the name of free trade and superiority or dominance. This sort of hegemony of imperial powers catastrophically destroys flora, fauna and human beings of the annexed bioregions. Ghosh stands against this superiority or dominance which is referred to as anthropocentrism. Ghosh in the novel seeks to present his eco-critical view point by opening the vistas of the cliffs of Mauritius, picturizing the Chinese landscape and gardens and by highlighting the ill effects of opium on Chinese people and their environment. The cliffs of Mauritius are presented as hostile dwellings. In contrast to the hostile landscape of Mauritius, China's landscape is described as fascinating and mesmerizing. It is portrayed rich in botanical varieties. It is blessed with unique, beautiful and useful varieties of flora. China's rich landscape entices Britishers and other foreigners to accelerate their efforts to obtain its most valuable trees and plants. In order to grab the valuable commodities like silk, tea and porcelain, Britishers forcefully introduce opium in China. As such, Ghosh in the novel documents plethora of incidents witnessing human exploitation of the earth and the less powerful. Through the characters of the novel, Ghosh presents myriads of deep ecological, social ecological and ethic illuminations and thoughts in pursuit of the ecological balance between nature and human beings.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Ecocide, Environmental Justice.

Amitav Ghosh's works have created a phenomenon in the genre of Indian Writing in English. He mostly portrays contemporary themes and brings to readers a sort of realization of the events happening in the past and the present. An intermingling of these time periods coupled with a tinge of the current ecological issues makes his novels a kind of fact cum fiction based readings. Ecocriticism is a theory which is about the relationship between nature and everything especially human beings, whether our behavior, our feelings or our mental and imaginary productions have literature. In a way, nature and human beings have a mutual relationship. Ecocriticism examines how the concept of nature is defined and what values are assigned to it or denied it. It further investigates how nature is used literally or metaphorically in certain literary or aesthetic genres. This analysis in turn allows Ecocriticism to assess how certain historically conditioned concepts of nature and the natural, and particularly literary and artistic constructions of it have come to shape current perceptions of the environment. Ursula Heise in *PMLA* very

rightly maintains, “Ecocriticism analysis the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history” (1097). Amitav Ghosh in *River of Smoke*, the eighth novel and the second part of his *Ibis* trilogy describes the nineteenth century Asian subcontinent with creative enthusiasm and deep historical insight.

In *River of Smoke*, Ghosh re-visits history and passes judgment over the power misused to exploit ecologies of imperial subjects in the past. It has both historical and imaginary characters from nineteenth century past. It charts out the destinies of characters from his earlier novel *Sea of Poppies* the first part of his *Ibis* trilogy. These characters include Neel, Deeti, Paulette, Kalua, Ah Fatt etc. The novel further elaborates the lives of drug trafficking merchant, Bahram Modi, the naturalist Mr Penrose and the artist Robin Chinnery, Chinese artist Lamqua, his apprentice Jaqua and a gardener Ah Fey or Mr Chan. Apart from *Ibis*, the novel focuses on two other ships- the *Anahita* owned by an Indian drug baron, Bahram Modi and *Redruth* owned by Mr Penrose, a British naturalist.

The novel entirely deals with the breakout of the opium war of 1839-42. After ruining the Indian landscape and looting its capital, British promote Industrial revolution and the expansion of the empire. They convert Indian land into a mere producer of raw materials for English factories. Rajnish Mishra quotes Fairbank, “In 1830, the auditor-general of the East India Company declared that every year at least £4,000,000 had to be carried back from India to England” (71). The cultivation of poppy flowers and the processing of seeds into opium in India and its sale in China by British, American and Indian traders is the most obvious aspect of the novel. Imperialists and colonizers are greatly responsible for death and destruction of native flora, fauna, cultures and human beings of the annexed bio-regions. The novel is about ecological imperialism as an exploitative system. All the enhancements of technology, science and commerce in the name of growth are mainly anthropocentric and certainly abandon the claims of our natural environment. To ensure their capitalist expansion, British approach China. They want tea, silk and other valuable material from China but China in return wants no English products. Eco-critical engagement that is noticed in the novel is the writer’s critique of globalized capitalism which has accentuated the deterioration of the environments and the plundering of earth’s resources. In his famous essay “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”, Lenin rightly points out, “The enormous growth of industry and the remarkably rapid process of concentration of production in ever-larger enterprises are one of the most characteristic features of capitalism” (qtd. in Mishra 74). Lenin further states that capitalism in its crassest and most dangerously exploitative form suck the marrow out of nature’s bone. In the novel, Chinese are presented as people, who believe that their own products, like their food and their own customs are superior to all others. This thinking of Chinese has actually presented a great problem for the British, as it leads to unequal flow of trade resulting in immense outpouring of silver from Britain. So in order to compensate this imbalance, British start forceful export of Indian opium to China. Mishra gives the explanation of *The Cambridge History of China* regarding this trade as:

. . . this money was used to buy opium that was exported to China, to be sold in Canton and the sale yielded another £3,300,000. Thus West had finally found a way to address the huge deficit it was facing in its trade with China. By 1830’s it had finally found something that it could supply to China in return of many valuable things. (71)

Ecocriticism seeks to examine how metaphors of nature and land are used and abused. Murray Bookchin, the great social ecologist, is the very first thinker to explicitly link an ecological understanding of society and its relationships to non-human nature to a thorough going critique of capitalism and modern technology. The capitalist society for Bookchin epitomizes the historical process of the development of hierarchy and domination. Like wise, in the novel, the economic motif or capitalistic greed of Britishers is depicted by Ghosh as main cause of exploitation of Indian and Chinese lands. It is a fact that finally Englishmen are successful in opening deep inroads into China. They exploit their natural resources and human beings under the unfair license of free trade. Free trade is the excuse that the English merchants give to explain away their unforgivable conduct. In actual practice, there is nothing free about their trade practices. The novel shows that it is not only the conservatives who favour this legalized and systematic exploitation, but even the liberals are on its side. The British parliament and Queen are in league with the merchants who bring the much needed revenues from all over the world. Ghosh, in his earlier novel, *Sea of poppies*, chooses Mr Burnham, an English opium merchant to confess the intensions of free trade. He ironically comments:

The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for the freedom of Chinese people. Free trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantage of British influence. (115)

Amitav Ghosh makes clear the tactics of the opium trade as a complete British monopoly. This trade has made them so rich that they cannot conceive of maintaining without it. They have made millions of Chinese people slaves to it. It has almost engulfed every one there—monks, generals, housewives, soldiers, mandarins and even students. Their role in China's enfeeblement is very clearly brought forth in Commissiner Lin's public dispatch to Queen Victoria. He blames the foreign merchants responsible for seducing the people of China. For sake of their own profit, they flood the country of China with illegally brought opium. It is a fact that Dutch introduced non-medicinal use of opium in China. In the very beginning, it was primarily used by leisured upper classes but adoption of opium as a commercial enterprise by British leads to death and destruction of land and people. Neel one of the characters in novel clarifies the British tactics:

The drug may come from India, but the trade is almost entirely in British hands. In the Bengal presidency, the cultivation of opium is their monopoly: few Achhas play any part in it, apart from the peasants who are made to grow it – and they suffer just as much as the Chinese who buy the drug. In Bombay, the British were not able to set up a monopoly because they were not in control of the entire region. That is why local merchants like Seth Bahramji were able to enter the trade. Their earnings are the only part of this immense commerce that trickles back to Hindusthan- all the rest goes to England and Europe and America (484).

Moreover exposing the wicked policy of Imperialists, author writes, "The traffic is the creature of the East India Company, itself the organ of the British government" (538). Ghosh in the novel sympathizes with both Indian and Chinese lands. He laments on the fact that it is these companies who have made the provinces of Malwa, Bihar and Banaras, the chief localities of opium cultivation by making the vast tracts of land of those Indian districts piles of poppies. He opposes the debilitating exploitations of weaker/ developing economies by more powerful

capitalist nations. It is fact that, the capitalist system has shown the capacity to commodify and reify everything, including people and human's relations, and, overwhelmingly, nature. Capitalism has resulted in a sort of clash between an economy based on unending growth and the desiccation of the natural environment. The exploitation of man and nature, as generated by both the opium trade and the selling of indigenous flora and fauna, brings out the monstrous impositions of Western colonialism exposing their capitalistic greed.

The description of the faustian aspirations and attitudes of British traders in the novel, echoes Harold Fromm's concept of 'trade-offs', which represent the greed towards economic progress. Harold Fromm in "From Transcendence to Obsolescence" very aptly writes that trade-offs sacrifice, "the luxury of an uncontaminated environment in order to permit economic "progress" (36). Man's faustian posturing take place against a background of arrogant, shocking, and suicidal disregard of his roots in earth. Like wise, Ghosh in the novel clarifies that for sake of their personal profit, British seduces Chinese people to opium. The tactics of British trade is a solid proof of the barbarity of capitalistic or economic greed. It is the parasitical system that exploits humanity and nature alike. Its sole motor is the imperative towards profit and thus the need for constant growth. This sort of greed wastefully creates unnecessary products, squandering the ecosphere's limited resources. It returns only toxins and pollutants. Its prime motif is to measure how much more is sold every day, every week, and every year— involving the creation of vast quantities of products that are directly harmful to both humans and nature. It involves the production of commodities that cannot be produced without spreading diseases both in human and non-human life forms. It does not spare even forests that produce the oxygen we breathe in; it demolishes ecosystems and treats water, soil and air like sewers for the disposal of industrial wastes. It exists on every level, from the individual enterprise to the system as a whole. The insatiable hunger of corporations is facilitated by imperialist expansion in search of ever greater access to natural resources, cheap labour and new markets. Economic greed and capitalism has always been ecologically destructive and these assaults on the earth have accelerated and are still accelerating. The present market societies are structured around the brutally competitive imperative of grow or die in which enterprises are driven by the pressures of the market place to seek profit for capital expansion at the expense of all other considerations. The imperative stands radically at odds with the capacity of the planet to sustain diversity of life forms, and in turn leads capitalist societies and nations to plunder the planet. William Howarth in "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" quotes Alfred Crosby, "capitalism becomes the source for all conflict, oppression, and environmental abuse" (79).

In the novel, Ghosh depicts Chinese urge and action on British Government in the race of freedom for existence. Chinese government finally decides to remove opium—the mainstay of British trade equation through an imperial edict that bans its trade all over China. The government of China stops opium import from other neighbouring countries and declares it, "deadly poison" (432), "The flowing poison, the vile dirt, the dire calamity brought upon us by foreigners" (538). They call it a poison responsible for killing enumerable people and robbing their land of every sort of riches. The novel elucidates ill effects of opium on its addicts. These ill effects are expressed through imagery of death. Ghosh maintains how in the sequel, the poison takes dreadful effect leaving the sleeping smokers like corpses and like haggard demons. China in a struggle to throw off the coils of the drug, sends a proclamation to the foreigners who have completely ensnared the Fanqui-town of the city of Canton, now called the Guangzhou. Ghosh through this proclamation declares, "you bring opium to our central land, chousing people out of

their substance and involving their very lives in destruction? I find that with this thing you have seduced and deluded the people of China for tens of years past; and countless are the unjust hoards that you have thus accumulated. (431)

Highlighting the concerns about the economic greed of Britishers, Ghosh emphasizes humans to follow certain ethics in their relationship to the land. It is a fact that the growing demand on natural capital such as forests, water, soil, air and biodiversity outstrips the world's capacity to renew these resources. This is what Aldo Leopold, the great ethicist has warned more than seven decades ago in his essay on land ethics. He says that even though it may not be possible to prevent the alteration, management and use of natural resources, it is certainly possible to affirm their right to continued existence. Ghosh's belief in adopting land ethics to save the land resonate with Aldo Leopold who begin his ruminations on land ethics by giving an ecological definition of ethic as a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. The philosophical definition of ethic entails differentiating between social and anti-social conducts. According to Leopold, the first set of ethics deals with relationship between individuals. The second set of ethics deals with the relationship between individual and society. Third step in the ethical sequence is to connect man and land because land is still looked upon as property, "The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations" (*Sand County Almanac* 168). As such, in order to save the earth and its inhabitants, Ghosh wishes humans to shift their role from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. He emphasizes that humans should have respect for their fellow members and land community that includes soils, waters, plants and animals. He urges human beings to cast off the belief that economics determines all land use. Aldo Leopold also believes that land relations hinge on investments of time, forethought, skill and faith, rather than investments of cash. He very aptly maintains, "As a land user thinketh, so is he" (qtd. in Sumathy 22). Being a writer of ecological consciousness, Ghosh in the novel introduces two types of characters:

1. Characters who exploit Nature
2. Characters who idealize and worship Nature

Through the characters of novel, we observe the cliffs of Mauritius, Chinese landscapes, inner sanctum of walled Chinese garden and plant life on a vessel *Redruth* owned by Mr Penrose from an ecological view point.

The members of the chamber of commerce including Mr Lancelot Dent, Mr Slide, Burnham, Captain Elliot, Mr Jarden, Mr Innes, other foreign opium merchants, an Indian opium merchant Bahram Modi and a British naturalist, Mr Penrose are shown as characters who exploit nature. On the other hand, there are characters who worship and care for nature like Paulette Lambert, her father Pierre Lambert, Robin Chinery, Mr Chan, Commissioner Lin and Charles King. Through the characters of novel, an attempt has been made to present the ecocritical interpretation of the text by focusing an ecocritical gaze on the cliffs of Mauritius, landscapes of Canton, inner sanctum of walled Chinese garden and plant life on a vessel *Redruth* owned by Mr Penrose.

The cliffs of Mauritius are presented as hostile dwellings where in the indentured coolies and labourers involving Deeti from Northern India are forced to live. These coolies are made to work under poor and hazardous working conditions and face extreme environmental injustice as

environmental justice affirm the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment. In the novel it is shown that the coolies work there without any motivation and often go without basic necessities like food and water.

Depicting the life in Canton, the illegal and forced trade of opium is highlighted which is responsible for draining the Chinese economy. It presents a disturbed life that people of China go through due to ill effects of opium on their environment and their physical senses. Ghosh sounds an alarm about a kind of pollution that is visible to senses, can accumulate over time in body tissues, and can produce chronic as well as acute poisoning. This poison has addicted so many people and many people lost their lives. The foreign merchants destroy and pollute the local environment—terrestrial and aquatic, human and non-human life forms. The condition of the Pearl river is presented pathetic which is choked by factory's affluent and deadly smoke of opium. It has been turned into stream of poison. The foreign merchants react with war to the resistance offered by Chinese authorities to opium trade. War is considered to be a stark example of ecocide. It brings about the destruction of people as well as physical environment. Canton's Fanqui town is set ablaze in the smoke of opium and bombardments by British gunboats. The place is destroyed beyond recognition.

China is portrayed rich in botanical varieties. It is blessed with unique, beautiful and useful varieties of flora. There is description of various plant species like *golden camella*, *chrysanthemums*, *peonies*, *tiger lilies*, *wisteria*, *rhododendrons*, *azaleas*, *asters*, *gardenias*, *begonias*, *camellias*, *hydrangeas*, *primroses*, *heavenly bamboo*, *a juniper*, *a cypress*, *climbing tea-roses* and roses that flower many times over. The China's landscape, gardens and plants are described as fascinating and mesmerizing. It is the dazzling variety of floral species that actually attracts the foreigners towards it and this becomes the root cause of opium war.

The voyage of transportation of rare species of plants from Canton to other countries through the vessel- a ship *Redruth*, occupies a major part of the novel. The vessel is owned by a British naturalist, Mr Penrose who is presented as an imperial explorer and exploiter of nature. He has revolutionized the business of transporting plants across the sea by inventing miniature green houses on his ship. His inventions and spirit are devoted to his own self. He finds nature as commodity to be exploited for. He is so much dissolved in his passion that he destroys other life forms like plump porpoise—a kind of bird. He offers rewards for capturing these birds, kills them and use their carcasses to add as compost for his plants. He is presented as matching mentality and actions similar to white races that make technological advances so that nature can be exploited more easily. He forms schemes of benefitting from what ever he could lay his hands on. He follows western philosophy and religion which has encouraged the anthropocentric nature of man situating man at the top of Great Chain of Being, believing God made plants and animals for man's use.

On contrary, characters like Paulette, Commissioner Lin, Mr Chan, Robin Chinnery and Charles King are presented as great lovers of nature. Paulette is presented as child of nature and in a form of spiritual communion with nature. Commissioner Lin stresses that all the life forms and inorganic forms on the land have their own inherent values. He is conscious of the fact that ecological imperialism empties nature of its intrinsic values and turns it into a wholesale commodity. For Mr Chan/ Ah Fey, plants are more important than his own self. He boldly

opposes the anthropocentric attitude of foreigners towards third world's flora and fauna. Robin Chinery opposes Penrose's mobile garden and echoes that plants are not meant to grow on ships and it is cruel to deprive them of their natural habitat. Lamenting over the ecocide due to opium war, he out bursts the fact that Canton has gifted the Western world with the choicest of flowers but in return has got permanent curse of slavery to opium. He prophesys that China will ever be remembered for its flowers that are immortal and will bloom for ever. In a way, he turns to nature to seek solace from the trauma of war.

The novel with all the above descriptions gives the details of ecological imperialism with anthropocentric world view of western nations over third world nations leading to over all dominance, ecocide and environmental injustices. It documents plethora of incidences witnessing human exploitation of the earth and less powerful.

Through the characters of the novel, Ghosh presents myriads of social ecological and ethic illumination and thoughts in pursuit of the ecological balance between nature and society, and even within human beings themselves. The social ecological wisdom as adopted by Ghosh, urges readers to respect, protect and care for other humans as well as nature. It is the need of the time to reconsider the relationships within human beings, between nature and human beings, between nature and society and between nature and human spirit. Ghosh stresses the fact that humanity is part of nature and the development of our awareness and human freedom is an important step in ending the environmental crisis. He wishes that all beings whether human or non-human should be free from all the unnecessary kinds of control and exploitations.

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