River of Smoke: Assessing the costs and gains of Globalization

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Abstract:
Any good historical novel should teach the reader some history as well as sweeping him or her along with on unfolding narrative. Amitav Ghosh’s novel *River of Smoke* has reminded us that globalization is not a discovery of our own times. He has taught us elsewhere, for instance, about links between the medieval merchants of the Nile and India and about the Burmese timber trade. This paper tries to unfold the reactions of globalization. There are more losses than gains. Nationhead is a porous and imaginary construct. Profit from commerce has gulped indigenous identities and the result is a medley of personas.  Globalization results into sensitization of the new migrants and immigrants. This paper reads this humanizing effect of globalization on the world.

Index Terms-Identity, Globalization, Nationstate, cosmopolitanism

Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke* (2011), is the second novel in the Ibis trilogy is an example of historical fiction, engages with the conflicted phenomenon of globalization, identity and cosmopolitanism the nature of transnational trade networks and their effect on host/captive nations; and the kind of mobility apparently facilitated under such economic and political conditions are the related aspect of cosmopolitanism.

*Globalization, in transnational corporate lingo, is conceived as the last of the three stages of global transformation since 1945. In a more socio-historical vocabulary, globalization could be linked with Western expansion since 1500 and cast in terms of either Immanuel Wallerstein’s ‘world-system’ or Norbert Elias’s ‘civilizing process’ (32).*

On the other hand, the celebratory discourse on globalization views it largely as a twentieth-century phenomenon, peaking with “technological explosion, largely in the domain of transportation and information” (Appadurai 3), which facilitated speedy communication and mobility of an unprecedented kind. This is understood to have propelled access to manifold opportunities and mobility in people, products, ideas, culture, and finance (ibid.). While Appadurai, citing other scholars like Janet Abu-Lughod and Immanuel Wallerstein, accepts that global networks of exchange and communication have always existed, he still contends that the most current
version is the one which can truly be termed ‘globalization’

While these approaches have enabled the charting of a somewhat more historicized perspective as well as a sustained engagement with the implications for culture, economics, politics, and the nation-state, yet a theoretical blind spot remains. Further, as Behdad comments in this regard, both these camps have been indulging in a vocabulary of neologisms, differences and disjunctures as well as being trapped within polarised positions, whereas exploring the continuities might be more productive (67-69).

The academic literature on globalization privileges the phenomena of change and novelty over those of repetition and restructuring, undermining thus the mimetically mediated nature of paradigm shifts and the interconnectedness of social orders. While technological advances have dramatically altered the velocity of global flow, the general structures of economic and political power do not differ that radically from their colonial counterparts (69).

Fredric Jameson rightly calls globalization the “proverbial elephant,” perceived differently by various “blind observers” (xi). Almost two decades since that statement, the phenomenon of globalization continues to generate a wide array of opinions. In “Notes on globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” Jameson reiterates that an optimistic “decentering and a proliferation of differences” and a pessimistic “unification and standardization” are “indeed the two antithetical features of that elephant we are blindly attempting to characterize” (66). Two schools of thinkers have long dominated the cultural discourse on the phenomenon, aligned along the lines Jameson indicates, which, despite internal differences, have arguably ignored one or the other aspect of this behemoth. On the one hand, the more celebratory and optimistic assessment of globalization and its related counterpart, cosmopolitanism, can be credited to Arjun Appadurai and Anthony Kwame Appiah, while a more cautious and critical stance is taken by Masao Miyoshi, Enrique Dussel, and Fredric Jameson himself, amongst others. However, a third view (Abu-Lughod; Behdad; Gupta), with its own internal variations, is emerging, which is able to offer more nuanced and updated arguments on the matter and move beyond polarized positions.

The most significant subject-position in River of Smoke is that of the Indian Parsi trader BahramMody. Having traded in Canton for several years, he has ignored any moral compunctions he may have felt about the ramifications of his participation in the opium trade. The fact that people from all over Hindustan in Canton were collectively called “Achha” (which implies “bad” in Chinese; ironic, since in Hindi it means the opposite—“good”), even though they had little similarity in language, appearance or customs and certainly did not regard themselves as citizens of one nation, is significant. It reflects the fact that the Chinese were aware of the involvement and role of ‘Indian’ merchants in this exploitative trade. As a citizen of another colonized territory and one who condemns British commercial practices in India yet continues to participate in the illegal trade in opium in China, Bahram is censured heavily for his hypocrisy on the issue of “free trade.” He deliberately chooses to remain ignorant of the irony of participating, profiting from and extending the same principles and practices of exploitation to another nation through his trading activity. In the novel, when Charles King calls upon him to agree to the ban on opium, he ignores the ethical for financial safety. While his subordinate, Neel, now having gained insight through his own experience as a displaced ‘raja’, contextualizes Bahram’s participation as the result of constricted circumstances created by colonial economic stipulations, the opium trader is ultimately unable to forgive himself. Ironically, he falls victim to opium addiction at this desperate stage, implicating himself in the same evil he has promoted for so long. In his opium-induced vision, he confesses to his bursar Vico that he had
sold his soul to Ahriman, the embodiment of evil in the Zoroastrian faith he is a practitioner of. His sense of guilt leads to suicide when he drowns himself in the “river of smoke” of his own creation. The novel ends at this point but history documents that Jardine, Matheson and others the largest stakeholders in the opium trade returned to England and lobbied successfully for military intervention in China, which led to the war and even greater ruin for the Chinese (Hanes and Sanello). Deploying authorial discretion, Ghosh envisages a more ethical end for the fictional character of Bahram Mody, which redeems him in the eyes of the readers while allowing facts to speak for historical characters such as Matheson and Jardine. The last section of the article discusses possible avenues of a constructive and alternative exchange beyond the one controlled and informed by exploitative and authoritative structures. It is important to distinguish the two forms of cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism since there has been a dangerous development in current times wherein the champions of globalization laud the apparent mobility of people, ideas and culture as a facet of “cosmopolitanism” while simultaneously forwarding exploitative economic projects.

For this section, I refer to Akhil Gupta’s essay wherein he discusses “discrepant globalizations” and “cosmopolitanisms,” an anthropological and historical revision of these concepts. Gupta’s essay is informed by the awareness of the pejorative links between mercantilism, territorial acquisitions, and globalization which were further concretized by the rationalizing impulses of the European Enlightenment. His critique of globalization reifies these concerns but does so by positing an alternative paradigm of global contact which includes economic and cultural exchange actualized in vastly different conditions, prior to the formation of the hyphenated entity—the modern nation-state. By delinking the idea of cosmopolitanism from its present oppositional position vis-à-vis the nation, he is able to recuperate the positive connotations of the term on its own merits. Referring to the work of Sheldon Pollock on medieval India and travelogues from the fourteenth century, Gupta also argues that an understanding of globalization and cosmopolitanism as a recent phenomenon (Appadurai and Appiah), is a-historical. Further, he contends that such a stance displays a limited understanding of the history of trade and international contact, which only serves to moor it more firmly within the constrictions of a Eurocentric Enlightenment genealogy that bypasses prior formations. While it remains a limited attempt since cosmopolitanism is Eurocentric in origin and draws its legitimacy from Enlightenment discourse, particularly Kantian philosophy, it is crucial that novel forms of theorizing global contact are proposed, especially at the level of individual actors, to avoid the proverbial risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.16 What his stance enables is, first, a critical engagement with present forms of globalization and cosmopolitanism and second, the opening up of the possibility of alternative paradigms of relationships between individuals, if not nations, based on practices (and not the mere rhetoric) of mutuality and respect. Discussing the Indian Ocean trade network between the seventh and fifteenth centuries (before the disruptive arrival of the Portuguese), Gupta comments:

*Not only did these networks lead to an incredible exchange of ideas, technologies and goods, they also brought people from different lands into contact with each other, often for extended periods of time. This created centers of cosmopolitanism that, in their extensiveness and reach, were comparable, and perhaps even more intensive, than anything we can observe in the world today—at a very different moment of globalization.*

Within the novel, it is only through those characters who have been sensitized to various cultures and accepted the intricacies of both, that there are hints towards the possibility of an alternative cross cultural practice. Figures such as ZadigBey, Paulette and Neel, and Baburao and
Asha, who have endeavored towards a plural mode of being beyond ascribed cultural codes or regional affiliations, indicate a redemptive possibility. Paulette’s French father is presented as an ardent botanist beyond any mercenary motive who allows his daughter to be reared unhindered by racial prejudice. In fact, Paulette develops a close relationship with her ayah’s son, Jodu, and both grow up as close as siblings. Thus, she is able to move beyond the image of the colonial “memsahib” to a woman who is comfortable in both a sari and a gown, and in French as well as Bengali. Similarly, Baburao and Asha represent an interesting paradigm of heterogeneity as ethnic Chinese who are also comfortable with their Bengali affiliations. Finally, the several shifts in Neel’s character also delineate his gradual cultural and ontological evolution, even while it runs parallel to his economic and social decline. As a humble munshi of the rich seth Bahram, he reflects upon his past life and realizes his earlier naiveté, arrogance and disengagement with reality. Neel’s key role in saving Bahram from imprisonment and his astute understanding of the role of colonialism in the destruction of not just nations and their economies, but in the corruption of the spirit of these nations and their people too, reflects this change. Towards the end of the novel, his attempt to compile a Chrestomathy of pidgin takes him deeper into an understanding of the Chinese worldview and indicates an optimistic trend for the future. In conclusion, Ghosh’s River of Smoke is a significant text in the study of globalization and cosmopolitanism. It cautions us against the patterns of history as well as indicates the avenues for multicultural contact which can bypass the exploitative transnational financial networks. Gupta correctly highlights the fact that there are limits to the concept and practice of ‘cosmopolitanism’. He writes:

*If by cosmopolitanism one means the seamless negotiation of difference, and the ability to operate in different cultural and social contexts without any difficulty whatsoever, then it could be argued that this is an utopian ideal which even the high modernist versions of that term could only gesture toward, but not ever possibly fulfill. Cosmopolitanism always has a shape, a character, an ethos and an ethics (13, my emphasis).*

Certainly, River of Smoke reflects the awareness of the impossibility of such “utopian ideal(s),” particularly in the case of macro-formations such as nations, trade lobbies or large business enterprises. However, fiction, like history, is an interpretative tool, limited as well as enabled by the author’s subject-position. Within the enabling space of fiction, fleeting utopian moments of connection at the level of individuals are actualized. The book opens with the description of one such moment—Deeti’s vision atop the Ibis when the convicts attempt their daring escape. At the heart of the chaos that is the storm rests the calm “eye” through which Deeti has a glimpse of the future. Arguably, Amitav Ghosh, the author, like his female protagonist, perched on a vantage point as a creative visionary, is making a similarly daring prediction about future possibilities, expressing hope for mutuality and equality within the chaos of globalization and mirages of cosmopolitanism.

**Work Cited:**
