

Postcolonial Perspectives on Cultural Trauma in the Opium Wars: Reading Amitav Ghosh's Flood of Fire

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Abstract

Trauma Studies was a field which presupposed certain universalities, mostly Eurocentric, till the introduction of concepts like postcolonial and cultural trauma. This paper studies the novel *Flood of Fire* penned by Amitav Ghosh to study its non-Western or decolonised portrayals of cultural trauma. The Opium Wars which inaugurated the 'century of humiliation' in China also resulted in loss and suffering among Indians, who were mere pawns at the hands of the imperialist Britain. It is commonly said that history records only the victor's version. Even if the Chinese version of the wars are considered, the Indian perspective would be omitted as it had people who were silenced by the colonial powers. Postcolonial Cultural Trauma Theory is taken as the vantage point here to study the novel.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *Flood of Fire*, Opium Wars, Trauma, War

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most widely recognised writers in English, whose works have gained great critical acclaim, winning several awards and major nominations. He has produced some remarkable works that involve reimagining of historical events and portrayals of diverse cultures. His novels in the Ibis Trilogy – *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) – explore the nineteenth century Opium Wars and address the socio-cultural dynamics of the time. In these works, Ghosh has explored the forgotten past of the early nineteenth century colonial India as a revisionist staging of the modern nation. Ghosh makes serious deliberations about the colonial exploitation of India as well as China, re-imagines the existing narratives by drawing attention to the marginalised groups. This paper studies the novel *Flood of Fire*, seeking rudiments of postcolonial cultural trauma in the events and characters that it features.

In the novel, Ghosh retells the history of the Opium Wars from a different perspective. The two Opium Wars, fought between 1839-1842 and 1856-1860, in which the British and later the French Empires clashed with the Qing Empire are conveniently forgotten or largely ignored in Western historical texts today. For the Chinese, the wars symbolise the resistance and painful submission to the Western imperial domination, with repercussions that are felt even in the present times. The conflict was fuelled by the greed and rapacity of the arrogant Western powers and was the product of the shabby treatment of the East for

centuries. The Eurocentric historians tend to downplay or ignore critical issues about the two wars and the previous books on the conflicts published in the West justified the motives of the Western powers to colonise a 'stubborn' nation.

While the Opium Wars were fought more than a century and a half ago, the impact on the nations involved has lasted till the present day. The War was born out of power and corruption, of human frailty, malice and disparity. Eventually, it was a narrative of cultural confrontation, the clash of two civilisations, each convinced of its own superiority, though the chief cause of the war was the international drug trade. The conflict involved fundamental moral, ethical, political, and social questions.

It was Britain's determination to espouse the doctrine of free trade that led to supplying millions of Chinese citizens with the devastating opium drug at the cost of a war. Britain forced China into the structures of modern, industrial global economy against their will and employed the dreadful tactic of importing opium to China to balance the latter's export of silk and tea. This was violently opposed by the Chinese. The British had imposed two wars on the Middle Kingdom in the space of two decades to force the sale of opium in China and also demanded the Chinese authorities to consider Britain as an equal trading nation. The burning of the Summer Palace the Chinese royal residence, was an obscene act of cultural vandalism and represented more than a conflict in economic interests. It was both a

culmination and a new beginning in the larger game of cultural confrontation – a conflict between two great world civilisations, one new and one ancient, each claiming to be the pinnacle of civilisation on the planet. The Chinese government vigorously condemned the trade and expressed its alarm with a decree in 1799 that criticised the foreign traders reaping profits but making the lives of the Chinese people miserable. The Chinese measures did not prevent the Company from selling opium in India to independent British and Indian merchants, who would then smuggle the drug into China. The profits were too enormous for the Company to ignore and the British revenue from the opium trade reversed the imbalance of trade between Britain and China (Hanes and Sanello 21).

The Indian involvement in the War, as farmers who grew the opium and soldiers who fought for the British Empire, has added much to the history of losses of the citizens. Indians were thrown into the war, to be a part of something in which they had no stakes. The novel features the traumatic incidents in the lives of many non-white characters who had to bear the brunt of the war. The Opium War inaugurated the 'century of humiliation' for the Chinese. The losses of Indians, scattered as personal histories of trauma, were unaccounted for. In this novel, Ghosh places on map the multitude of such stories which never found a place in history. It can be studied from multiple perspectives, out of which cultural trauma is one.

The concept of trauma, growing larger than its clinical origins, has entered popular culture as a metaphor, encompassing the challenges of a vicious and frenzied life fixated on pain and persecution. The word 'trauma', which meant the piercing of skin in Ancient Greek, signifies wound or damage. Occurrences, beyond the edges of normal experiences, both exterior and emotional, will shatter the normal working of one's mind and hurl the person into severe disorder. It transcends the perceptible realm into the depths of the subject's identity and may seem to substantiate the most persecutory of one's unconscious fantasies. Trauma emerged from psychiatry/psychoanalysis and later seeped into the realm of the Humanities. Literary theory, at least till the later part of the twentieth century, was considered to be indifferent towards historical and political realities. New theories, interdisciplinary in scope, mushroomed across the stream of humanities which also led to the conceptualisation of trauma. David Becker cautions against the universalisation of the term 'trauma'. He argues that social context create traumatic situations to which people react. It cannot be isolated from the political

and cultural contexts. The same applies to the different scholarly discourses on trauma, be it of any school. Trauma should be defined within the framework of the context, the situation or the discourse (Becker, 2001).

War trauma is the response to war experiences and it depends on the person. The conditions which were named shellshock, battle neurosis, battle fatigue, etc. now come under the broad umbrella term of PTSD. War trauma, though the symptoms are similar, is not PTSD. The proportion of civilians affected by wars is on the increase. Unlike soldiers who are physically fit, trained, possess weapons, and have a limited control over the situations, the magnitude of trauma in civilians is more due to their helplessness. Neil Smelser defines trauma as "an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole" (Alexander, 2004, p.38).

A process of meaning-making, cultural trauma arises when a group of people feel that they have been subjected to a dreadful occurrence that produces deep-seated marks on their collective consciousness, memories and identity, causing irreversible alterations. The theory states that events are not intrinsically traumatic and trauma is a collectively mediated creation. Trauma materialises through narration. Imagination represents experience, thereby constructing trauma which becomes the fresh cultural narrative, modifying collective identity. Smelser explains that "A memory accepted and publically given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (Alexander, 2004, p. 44). Cultural trauma is both an emotional experience whereby deep emotions are triggered by the shock of an event and an interpretative reaction to it. Like individual trauma, cultural trauma can only be understood retrospectively. A traumatic event can bring together imaginary collectives and sketch scripted identities. 'Carrier groups' express and signify trauma, making it accessible to communication. It moulds feelings into words and images. Responses and representations are interpreted in the light of culture structures and taken in as collective representations, which becomes a part of memory.

Irene Visser appropriately speaks of decolonising trauma arguing that "[a] response to trauma from a respectful cognition of culturally specific spiritual and religious perspectives, analogous to the recognition of

historical, national, and ethnic diversification, is necessary for a postcolonial theory of trauma to be truly decolonized" (Decolonizing, 2015, p. 259). These revisions are part of a deconstructionist approach to mainstream trauma studies and are conceived to include postcolonial experiences and texts into the ambit of trauma theory. The key objective is to account for trauma experienced by non-Western people and cultures, thereby moving outside the essentially Eurocentric paradigm of trauma. Cultural Trauma Theory follows what Rothberg calls the traditional event-based model of trauma (2008, p. 226) which believes that "trauma results from a single, extraordinary, catastrophic event" (Carps, 2012, p. 31) is inadequate in the postcolonial context where it is necessary to break "triumphalist accounts of the postcolonial that deny the continuing effects of racial and colonial trauma" (Carps, 2012, p. 71).

Flood of Fire deals with the events between 1839 and 1841 that culminated in the Opium Wars, British acquisition of Hong Kong and their contribution to what the Chinese call 'the hundred years of humiliation'. In this book, the perfidy and brutality of British 'free trade' comes into sharp focus. Colonialism relegates the natives to the stature of the subhuman, simply by looking through them and denying their existence. When talking about colonial encounter, in order to settle in a new place, the colonisers acquired the space by ignoring or dehumanising the inhabitants. When the scholars opposing colonial practises explore the evacuating power of maps and mapping, they put forth the argument that the blankness of the map is not an innocent ignorance because it bears responsibility for the inhuman colonial practices of dispossession and annihilation. In the works of Amitav Ghosh, there is a constant preoccupation with the lives of migrants, refugees and displaced persons.

While Ghosh sketches the larger sweep of history, he navigates through various details ranging from naval and military terminology to food and clothes, from boudoir to battlefield. He reinforces the idea that the unforgiving and brutalising opium trade greatly influenced international relations, communities and patterns of migration. The effects of this period of history were enormous and wide-ranging. The book wonderfully portrays the growing Sino-British tensions that finally end in a full-blown conflict, between a state struggling with unfettered trade that has generated widespread addiction in its population and a group of individual and corporate entities fervently committed to the cause of free trade. Ghosh also strives to depict how the map of the region is redrawn owing to the imperial demands, especially, the siege and transformation

of the backwater port of Hong Kong into a globally influential trade centre. In this book, as the focus of the narrative changes from India to China, Ghosh vividly brings to life the characters who deal with the European ambit of power, the numerous opportunities for profit making, challenging the customs and practices of distant lands and the formation of some unbearable conflicts of loyalties. Ghosh has carried out thorough research with proper attention to minute details to bring alive the social and military milieu in India in the 1830s.

The book revolves around four major characters: Kesri Singh, who was mentioned as Deeti's brother in the earlier novels is seen here as an Indian soldier in Bengal Native Infantry, who has volunteered to be part of an expeditionary force for the East India Company; Zachary Reid, who gets entangled in a legal tussle is freed by the jury and starts a new life taking up the job of refurbishing one of the houseboats of Burnham; Shireen Modi, Bahram Modi's widow who travels to China to retrieve her husband's fortunes; and Neel Rattan Halder, a rajah who after the separation from his family in Calcutta following his arrest by the British, lives in exile in Canton and starts working for the Chinese by carefully chronicling the forays of the East India Company on Chinese territory and the failures of diplomacy to avert war. All these characters try to overcome some challenges in their personal lives. Kesri Singh discovers from his superiors that his sister Deeti has brought dishonour on the family, having eloped with a low-caste labourer after the death of her husband. Zachary, fearing social rejection, being the son of an American slave, pretends to be a White man and grabs opportunities to enter the opium trade largely dominated by the Whites. Shireen Modi fears that her relationship with Zadig Karabedian, the Armenian man who was her husband's close friend, would surely be frowned upon by the Parsi community, to which she belongs.

The novel begins with the description of Bengal Native Infantry's 25th regiment led by Kesri Singh. The battalion also known as 'Pacheesi' is marching down to its new camp in a remote part of Assam. It is described as a 'tamasha', a spectacle for the villagers – marching along with the sepoy and the British officers are also the camp followers, comprising of dhobis (washermen), bhishtis (water sellers), bazar girls (sex workers), pundits (priests) and shopkeepers. Later in the novel we see some of these camp followers like the little "banjee boys" who march among the soldiers with their drums and pipes, also comfort them on their path of destruction; the bhishtis who help them to

quench their thirst in the battlefield, also signal the soldiers that the charge is about to begin. Kesri, son of a farmer, who ardently wished to serve the British army in India, went against his father's wish that he should join the native Mughal army. From his younger days, he practised wrestling in the akharas in his village, where no one was differentiated on the basis of caste. This quality comes to his aid later when he comes to know about his sister's elopement with Kalua. Kesri doesn't feel any resentment against both of them unlike his superiors in the army who are extremely biased and harsh even towards him when matters of caste are involved. ". . . in their eyes he had always been an interloper and they would have found some pretext for evicting him. And the worst part of it was that none of this was truly new: he had known it all along, in his heart, but had failed to recognize and act on it. This realization brought on a wave of disgust, directed as much as himself as towards the men he had considered his comrades-in-arms" (Flood of Fire 176). He regrets the decision to serve the British army and realises that he is only a mercenary who does not fight for one's homeland but for the invaders of his country. Though he helps the British army to defeat the Chinese, he can never experience the passion the Chinese feel as they fight for their country.

Ghosh talks about the corruption that permeated through the British campaign which extended from the hiring of inferior transport vessels to even distribution of substandard provisions. These irregularities, in turn, led to the deaths of sepoys and soldiers during the occupation of Chusan, by the British expeditionary force, during 1840-1841, which is officially recorded as well as implied in several dispatches. It was a well-known fact at that time that the Indian sepoys were not treated at par with their British counterparts. The corruption on the part of the British is almost never mentioned in the literature on the Opium Wars, whereas, the corruption by Chinese officialdom remains a recurrent theme in these texts.

Flood of Fire highlights the enormity of the war and how it shifts meanings and contours. The book reveals the traumatic experiences of the Indian soldiers who served the British army in the Opium War. They could never experience the passion or the dedication of the Chinese soldiers, who were defending their own country. The Indian soldiers in British army became tools for usurping lands and exploiting resources of other nations eyed by the British. They formed a strong unit, a force to be reckoned with, even in the face of difficult terrains and formidable enemies. The British considered them to be the biggest asset for conquering

territories all over the world. In the colonies, the empire shamelessly used caste against caste, and community against community for their project of looting. Though the Indian soldiers played a key role in the wars fought for British interests, there was a considerable difference in the identity of the Indian soldiers and their British counterparts. Only a paltry amount was paid as salary for the Indian soldiers. For the rest of the world, they were mercenaries, killing and butchering people, but they themselves lived under the false representation as emancipators. They travelled to unknown lands to fight for their imperial masters, but were bereft of dignity while serving the British. They had to endure extreme racism and violence from the English soldiers, while fighting for the same masters and incurred same losses. Majority of the Indian soldiers were recruited from the villages in promise of good incentives and a better life. The novel focusses on the plight of these unfortunate Indian soldiers, who were deeply disturbed by the fact that they were not serving their motherland and were risking their lives for the benefit of their colonial masters. The Indian soldiers were deeply aware of the futility of their efforts, fighting for the colonial power and many of them sympathised with China's uncertain fate in the war with the imperial powers. The author also deals with the perspective of the Chinese, when he describes how they had resisted the onslaughts made by the foreign powers on their means of survival and ways of life.

Flood of Fire is essentially a narrative of a war that was conveniently forgotten or largely ignored in the West today. Along with sketching the events that led to the First Opium War, the author also sympathises with the destinies of India and China, strangled by the forces of capitalism and free trade resulting in massive exploitation and destruction of their native economies and cultures. Kesri Singh ponders on seeing the massive destruction on the battlefield,

So much death; so much destruction – and that too visited upon a people who had neither attacked nor harmed the men who were so intent on engulfing them in this flood of fire. What was the meaning of it? What was it for? . . . deep within, he knew that his actions would have to be answered for in many lives yet to come. To combat the dread in his heart, he reminded himself of those heroes of the Mahabharata who had fought, against their own inclination, on the side of evil, only because it was their duty; because not to fight would have brought dishonour. (Ghosh, 2015, p.505)

Ghosh's scrupulous depiction of army life forms a formidable part of this novel. He writes about matters related

to the inadequacies of the British army and the unfair treatment of the Indian sepoy in the army. In the course of his career, especially during the soldiering days in China, Kesri becomes uncertain about his loyalty to the British army, abhorring the cause of maintaining someone else's empire. In most of the colonial situations, 'race' was the obvious and immediate marker of difference; even the legal structures, including British Army were promoting racial divisions. In the novel, the author portrays the discontented Indian soldiers who realise that caste and clan relationships come to the fore when matters of promotion are decided on in the army. It is the same British who boasts being liberal and progressive, slips to conservatism when it comes to acknowledging a person of low birth. Kesri Singh feels ashamed as he realises the stark contrast between himself and the Chinese soldiers giving up their lives for their country. The Indian soldiers fighting for the British army can never understand what fighting for one's homeland feels like. He suffers feelings of guilt,

thinking about the young soldiers who lose their lives for no fault of their own. . . . lying in his cot, Kesri thought of the two boys who had tried to desert in Calcutta and how they had revealed, under questioning, that they were afraid that their provisions would be rotten and their ships unseaworthy – all of which he had dismissed as lies and rumours. He remembered also how he had commanded the firing squad that executed them and how they had died, falling forward on their blindfolded faces. (Flood of Fire 406-7)

One would be appalled by the gruesome colonial aggression and conceit that fuelled the Opium Wars. The greed and arrogance of the business tycoon Burnham is evident when he addresses a group of military men aboard his new possession, the Anahita, on the eve of a battle with the Chinese.

It is you, gentlemen, who will give to the Chinese the gifts that Britain has granted to the countless millions who glory in the rule of our gracious monarch, secure in the knowledge that there is no greater freedom, no greater cause for pride, than to be subjects of the British Empire. This is the divine mission that the Almighty Himself has entrusted to our race and our nation. . . . On one side stands a race that is mired in depravity, tyranny, self-conceit and evil; ranged on the other side are the truest, most virile representatives of freedom, civilization and progress that history has ever known . . . Let no one say that our government has voluntarily sought this conflict. To the contrary, we have been exemplars of patience; we have suffered insults,

indignities and oppression with unmovable fortitude . . . let it not be said for a moment that our present crusade is motivated by a desire for monetary restitution. This was a predestined conflict, as inevitable as the struggle between Cain and Abel. . . . at the heart of this conflict lie two precious and inviolable values, freedom and dignity. This war will be fought not only to liberate the Sons of Han from Manchu tyranny, but also to protect our own dignity, which has suffered greater outrages in this land than in any other. (Flood of Fire 436)

Burnham and other traders have utmost belief in the efficiency of the British Empire and feel that the obstinate Chinese authorities will be forced to meet all their demands. In the novel we see how the nascent free trade of the region leads to a major conflict, which has to be resolved through military force, paving the way for the First Opium War. When it was possible for discussions and negotiations to avert a war, Neel ponders over the impact of the war on the future generations of people,

"How was it possible that a small number of men, in the span of a few hours or minutes, could decide the fate of millions of people yet unborn? How was it possible that the outcome of those brief moments could determine who would rule whom, who would be rich or poor, master or servant, for generations to come?" (388)

War brings out profound human emotions, including love, for one's country, familial as well as fraternal. It is also closely associated with human values that are considered to be desirable; such as the sanctity of life, the delivering of justice, and the defence of territory from the invaders. War is often endless, leaving its trails beyond ages, offering competing values, involving distressing experiences for human beings living across various periods. War invites contemplation of certain philosophical ideas and claims such as courage, justice, freedom, responsibility, loyalty, love, friendship, emotion and death. In Flood of Fire, the portrayal of camaraderie between the two boys, Raju and Dicky and also between Captain Mee and Kesri has a powerful bearing upon the readers' emotions. The waging of war can be traced back to the ideas, and ideologies of certain individuals, with their decisions, interests, obligations and loyalties playing a major part in it. The wars take a physical toll on the soldiers and many suffered from disabilities such as amputation, disfiguration and scarring, which also created harmful impact on their emotional and mental health.

The novel abounds in traumatic experiences that are culture-specific, which cannot be addressed using the

Western theorisation of trauma. Apart from poverty, fear of death and war trauma, which are universal, there are pains that can only be felt as nuances of a culture. The plight of caste distinction, the brunt of widowhood in a poor and patriarchal nation, the pain of having to fight someone else's battles, the woe of being ignored and unacknowledged, etc. are among those which find place in the work.

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