

## Amitav Ghosh Speaks about Opium, India, China, the British Empire, and Historical Fiction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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*The Indian writer Amitav Ghosh visited Houston, Texas, on April 10, 2014, to talk about the historical and political context of his Ibis Trilogy. Two books have appeared, *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011), and the third, *Flood of Fire*, is due out next year. His lecture, titled "From Bombay to Canton: Traveling the Opium Route to 19th Century China," was sponsored by the India Studies Program at the University of Houston and Asia Society Houston. After Mr. Ghosh's talk, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Houston, joined the author on stage for the following conversation.*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: You've written many kinds of fiction, from family sagas to science fiction, and you've also written non-fiction: your articles in *The New Yorker*, your several collections of essays, your *In an Antique Land*. Over the past decade and a half, though, your major projects have been historical fiction: *The Glass Palace* in 2000, and now the *Ibis Trilogy*. This genre seems to be a special love of yours.

Amitav Ghosh: Yes, this goes back to my childhood. We had several wonderful historical writers in Bengali—Saradindu Bandopadhyaya for example—and as a school boy, I also loved reading Sir Walter Scott and other authors of historical fiction. When I wrote *The Glass Palace*, it proved such an exciting and interesting project that I decided to continue writing historical fiction. I enjoy doing the research, and I enjoy the travel required to learn about historical settings. For me, writing has always been a way of educating myself.

CD: *The Glass Palace* has some connection to your own life, doesn't it?

AG: Yes, it does. My father's side of the family had a large presence in Burma. This was a common story in Bengal, especially east Bengal. Many Bengalis went to work there. My father's sister married into a well-known Bengali family in Burma, so I grew up hearing stories about the country. My father himself was in the Second World War, in the Burma campaign, and he also had many stories to

tell. So even though I never visited as a child (Burma was impossible to enter in those days), it was very much a part of my imaginative landscape. Here was a place that I knew through the memories of my family for generations, but yet to the world at large, Burma was a completely lost entity. *The Glass Palace* actually began as a family memoir, and somewhere along the line, it turned into a novel.

CD: How did you do the research for this novel?

AG: It was a complicated process. I used to write occasionally for the *New Yorker*, and I got an assignment to go to Burma to write about Aung San Suu Kyi. So I went and I wandered around Burma. I was on the Burma–Thai border, where I spent some time with a group of insurgents who were fighting the Burmese army. It was an extraordinary experience to be with these young men who, in 1988, had risen up in rebellion against the regime, and since then had joined in these insurgent groups. They'd given up so much in their lives, and there they were, in a dusty town in Thailand—part time guerillas.

Of course, I also did a lot of research in libraries, and I collected stories. For me, the critical moment in *The Glass Palace* is the long march, when hundreds of thousands of Indians left Burma to return to India after the Japanese invasion in 1942. This seems to have completely disappeared from historical memory. And unfortunately most of the survivors have passed on. Now my website has become a kind of clearing house for material on the march—survivors and their descendants often write to my blog.

CD: What kind of travel do you do to research the historical settings of your novels? Did you travel to the places you write about in *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*?

AG: Yes, I spent a lot of time in Mauritius researching the material for *Sea of Poppies*. I do like to see the places that I'm writing about, but this can also be a distraction because those places today are nothing like they were in the nineteenth

century, when the events of the novel take place. When I started writing, I wanted to excavate the whole story of the Indian indenture. It's another one of those little-told stories—not that nothing had been written about it, but I wanted to try and imagine that era, and imagine the experience of the people living it. I wanted to explore and discover that story for myself.

What was very useful in writing *River of Smoke* was the incredibly rich pictorial record of Canton that still exists, though most of the pictures that I've shown you this evening are now in American museums. Using this pictorial record, I could actually visualize the historical Canton. That's what I wanted to share with you this evening—the sense of an embodied place, and a sense of the lived history of my characters in that place.

CD: You do enormous research, collect a great deal of information, and yet one can't start a novel till something happens. Would you share with us the magical moment when something happens—when something *has* to happen?

AG: Yes, you can do all the research in the world and you still won't have a novel. That's not what a novel is. No one reads a novel for the research. You read novels for the stories, and the stories are about people. A novel comes alive when you have good characters. In that sense, I think that writing a historical novel is no different from writing a novel of any other kind. It's when the characters come alive that you feel your story getting under way. *Sea of Poppies* began with images of certain people, most of all Deeti, the central character, the woman who becomes an indentured worker and leaves India. And Bahram Modi was one of the first characters to come to me when I was writing *River of Smoke*.

CD: You told me that Bahram Modi didn't turn out as you expected.

AG: The extraordinary thing about writing a novel is that you're not really in control. At a certain point, if they're real characters and if they have their own volition, they're not your playthings. They have minds of their own, they do things, and they end up in places that you wouldn't have imagined.

CD: Bahram Modi has a strange dilemma. In many ways he's a good person, but he's doing a bad thing, and he knows it. He is transporting opium to China even as he sees its disastrous effects on the people who consume it. Would you comment on this contradiction and how your character confronts it?

AG: In some sense, Bahram Modi's ethical predicament is one that we all share. For example, some of us have IRAs or investment accounts managed by financial managers, and we don't know where our money is being invested. We don't know the full extent of the corporate operations that we fund. They may be making armaments or landmines, for all we know. Another example: all of us are investing directly or indirectly in the carbon economy, which we may not necessarily approve of but from which we profit, one way or another. So I was addressing a dilemma that is common to all of us, and which a person like Bahram Modi confronts in a very direct way.

Bahram Modi is a Parsi, a Zoroastrian of Persian origin, born into a community that has maintained a distinctive identity in India for centuries. Zoroastrianism is a very interesting religion, and one that we don't pay enough attention to. It had a huge influence on the Abrahamic religions: angels come from Zoroastrianism, as does the idea of good and evil as opposing forces. There is Ahura Mazda, who is the creator, and Ahriman, his enemy: the clash of good and evil is a very vivid thing for Zoroastrians. So Bahram is confronting his dilemma in a frontal way, but he can't find any resolution.

It is the case that the Parsis profited enormously from the opium trade, but they also have a great tradition of giving. They are the greatest philanthropists in India, especially in Bombay. Most of the public institutions there were built with Parsi money—hospitals, everything—and they did this wherever they went. So you can see that they have been confronting this ethical dilemma over a long period of time and in a meaningful way.

CD: The *Ibis Trilogy*—certainly the first two books of the trilogy—are dealing with persistent historical and global questions. Things that were happening during the Opium War were not so different from some of the things that are going on today. Politically, there seems to be a lot of resonance.

AG: Yes, the Opium War was the first war of aggression in the name of free trade. I was writing these books in the aftermath of the Iraq war, which was justified in very similar terms. The similarities between what was said by the British about the Opium War and what was said in the US around the Iraq war are uncanny: “They’ll welcome us with open arms.” “There’ll be fireworks on the streets when we go in.” There are other similarities as well. The Opium War was a war that was contracted out. Merchants were making enormous sums of money from provisioning. In one of the military operations of the Opium War, Indian sepoy and British soldiers went hungry because these merchants had sold sub-standard provisions to the commissary. War profiteering.

When the history of our own period is written the Opium War will be seen as the beginning of an era of invasions in the name of freedom that led directly to the Iraq war. They’re book-ends of a sort.

CD: Free trade is a prominent issue in *River of Smoke*.

AG: Yes, and here, too, you see a peculiar resonance with our own times. Many of the opium traders were Scotsmen. They had studied in Edinburgh and were the first generation who imbibed Adam Smith’s message about free trade. Some of them would have been taught by men who had been Adam Smith’s disciples. So for them, free trade was almost a religious doctrine. One early governor of Hong Kong actually said, “Free trade is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is free trade.” There was this strange blending of elements of the discourse of evangelical Christianity with radical capitalism. It’s a kind of absurdity. The British were making war to protect the freedom of trade in a commodity—opium—that was produced under the monopoly of the East India Company, and forced upon China. When the Chinese government tried to prohibit the trade, they sent in British gunboats and soldiers. Yet they still thought that this was free trade.

How did the world buy these contradictions? “Free trade” that forces consumption of a commodity produced by a monopoly, not to mention the absurdity of making the trading of opium into a Christian virtue.

CD: Obviously, such contradictions are tolerated because they serve the purposes of empire.

AG: Yes, of course. One of the strangest aspects of British imperialism was that aggression was often presented as self-defense. The expansion of the British Empire in India was always presented as a response to their own victimization. For example, take the incident known as the black hole of Calcutta—a terrible incident in 1756 when British and Anglo-Indian soldiers and civilians were held prisoner, and some one-hundred and twenty-three reportedly died. This incident became a kind of alibi for British conquest for a long time afterwards. Yet even at the time of the incident not hundreds but thousands of Indians were dying because of British actions in India—and that is not even to mention the millions of Africans that British slave traders were then transporting across the Atlantic in conditions just as bad if not far worse than the “black hole.” It’s strange how particular incidents came to be picked up and turned into a *casus belli*. Of course, there is nothing new about powerful regimes attacking weaker ones; that is the history of the world. Genghis Khan did it, but he never pretended that he was a victim. He didn’t pretend that right was on his side. No, for him, the sword was what was righteous. This is substantially true of all empires. What’s strange about English imperial rule was that, even though they were running the world, they often thought of themselves as victims.

CD: Returning to the similarities between this period of history and our own times: there are inescapable parallels between the opium trade in Asia in the nineteenth century and our current “drug wars” along the Mexican border.

AG: Yes, and it’s not just the Mexican border. As you know, the U.S. is undergoing an opium plague. There are parts of America now where large sections of the population are addicted to substances derived from opium. West Virginia, Appalachia: Chris Hedges has written a very interesting account of this region, which has been devastated by this plague.

CD: Where do they get the opium?

AG: From their doctors, and sometimes from unscrupulous people who resell their prescription drugs pill by pill to anyone who will buy. These are prescription medications that the pharmaceutical industry pushes on a large scale. The curious thing about the U.S. is that things get

reabeled, and as soon as they do, they assume a different character—in the case of opioids, a far friendlier face than they deserve. For example, oxycontin—an opioid pain medication. The use of oxycontin has reached epidemic proportions in the U.S. Many Afghan and Iraq war veterans get pumped full of these opiates and within a week or two, they are addicted. And yet the U.S. talks about eradicating opium production in Afghanistan—even as American soldiers come home from Afghanistan addicted to these highly processed versions of opium.

CD: I'd like to ask you about the third novel in the *Ibis Trilogy*. When will it be published? But before you answer, let me quote a comment that you made in an interview in the *New York Times*. "I am so deeply involved with my characters that I may carry on to a fourth and fifth book. I would be happy if this became my life's work." Can you talk a little bit about book three, and maybe others?

AG: The third book is called *Flood of Fire*, and I'm hoping to finish it in the next couple of months. I'm near the end, but it still seems very far away. I've been working on this Trilogy for ten years now and maybe some day I will return to it. But the effort—even just the physical effort—that these books require is so great that I wonder if it will be possible a few years down the road. I think that I must have realized this when I started this project. I set myself this Herculean task because if I hadn't, I don't think that I would be pushing myself as hard as I am right now. The vastness of the scope: sometimes I think I was mad when I began this project.

CD: Well, the first two books are wonderful, and I'm sure that the third one will be, as well. But this is a different kind of trilogy. Trilogies often start a story and develop it from one book to the next, but you had a different vision for your trilogy.

AG: Yes, I was thinking along the lines of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. The books have certain thematic connections, and characters are connected, but they are completely different from one another as well. So that was my idea, but it hasn't turned out quite that way. This last book will gather together the threads.

CD: All of the characters will come back?

AG: Well, not all!

CD: Here is a question from the audience. What do you see as the political and social function of literature? Do you think that it is different in India, as compared to the U.S.? Do you think that literature is more overtly political in India, as it has been, for example, in Latin America?

AG: Certainly in India, our literature has played a very significant role, especially in the past twenty or thirty years. It has become an important part of Indian political discourse. But unlike Latin America, where books actually create a worldview, in India, the way that books become politicized is through attacks, as in the case of *The Satanic Verses*. This phenomenon has become so widespread that the space of free expression is shrinking dramatically.

I was talking to a very well known Indian writer about this. She said that there's less freedom of expression in China than in India. This was certainly true once but of late things have changed so much that I think it could be said that the space for free expression is perhaps greater in China than in India. The difference is that in India it's not the state that is responsible for the repression. Repression now comes from non-state actors: political parties and various identity groups of one kind or another. In any event the space for free expression in India has certainly diminished significantly.

CD: Speaking of self-expression, will you tell us a little bit about your own writing life? You spend half of the year in Goa, and the other half in Kolkata and New York. How do you manage? Is it difficult to move from place to place?

AG: For me, the most important aspect of writing is that I need to be in a familiar space, surrounded by familiar things. I have such a space in Brooklyn and I have it in Goa. Far from interrupting the writing process, traveling between the two actually energizes me. Sometimes you get to the end of a long period of writing, you've sort of worn yourself out, and you need to be somewhere else. A lot of writers like to go to writers' retreats, but I don't care for that at all. I need to have my familiar space. For

me, it works very well like this, and I should say that it does for my wife as well. She is also a writer.

CD: Does being in India allow you to write more easily about India's history, or is it actually more difficult, being surrounded as you are by present-day India?

AG: I find that being in India helps with my writing. I doubt that this would be the case if I lived in Delhi or Mumbai, but we live in rural Goa, surrounded by rice fields. The atmosphere of Goa is very conducive to my work. It's tranquil, and yet there are lots of interesting people, including many writers. I used to do a lot of writing in Kolkata, but now when I try to write there, I find it very difficult. The street noise is overwhelming. There is a fad now in India that when people put their car in reverse, it starts playing a tune—completely appalling, unmusical little tune. So you're at your desk writing, and suddenly your neighbor starts to back out, and your focus is shattered by a ghastly tune. The level of noise pollution in Indian cities is hard to take.

CD: It's wonderful that you have your retreat in Goa. Houston, too, has a wonderful community of writers, and I am sure that there are some in the audience. Can you share with us what has helped you as a writer? Could you make some suggestions, or give some advice?

AG: This is very hard to do, as you know yourself, Chitra. Every writer is different, and what works for one doesn't work for another.

CD: What has worked for you, then?

AG: Reading a lot. Working a lot. There is a tendency now, which arises out of the way that the literary world is configured, for writers to become completely absorbed in that literary world. I do recommend that writers balance several different areas of inquiry as a matter of intellectual habit, training, practice, whatever you want to call it.

To conclude the conversation, Chitra asks Amitav to read the first paragraph of *Sea of Poppies*, which he does.

The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the holy Ganga disappeared into the Kala-Pani, "the Black Water."