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Smoke and Ashes: Opium's Hidden Stories by Amitav Ghosh. First Edition. London: John Murray, 2024. ISBN: 9781-5293-4924-5, 400 pp. 16.99 £

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Award-winning novelist, cultural anthropologist, and environmental advocate, Amitav Ghosh is well known for his Ibis trilogy: *Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke,* and *Flood of Fire,* wherein he dramatizes the First Opium War between England and China in the first half of the nineteenth century. His nonfictional *Smoke and Ashes* is the fruit of his research notes collected while writing the trilogy, providing good background information for the trilogy's intricate world. Besides Ghosh's scholars, the book will prove worthwhile for postcolonial historians and anyone interested in the complex machinery of the British Empire in nineteenth-century India and China. The book's great intellectual charm and strength lie in its genre-defying quality. It synthesizes historical analysis with travel narrative, personal memoir, socio-cultural investigation, and the examination of artistic works related to the opium industry. In addition, it does not confine its analysis to the colonial past since it tracks the vicious consequences of the opium trade in modern times, in particular America. Indeed, the book is a scholarly endeavor to expose not only the fictionality of Western capitalism but also the depth of the British Empire's gross injustice to subjugated people and their world through critical engagement with extensive colonial archives. He achieves his goal thanks to his lucid prose, powerful arguments, thorough research, and ethical stance.

In *Smoke and Ashes*, Amitav Ghosh explains how the British Empire's illicit opium trade began, why the East India Company promoted it, how the illegal trade ended in war, how the colonial regime justified it, and who benefitted from the cultural

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and aesthetic encounter with China. Ghosh also illustrates who enjoyed the opium trade's vast revenue, how its adverse consequences gripped America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and where the solution to these damaging consequences lay. The East India Company initially engaged in a profitable tea trade with China. Nevertheless, it later could not pay Chinese merchants in silver bullion due to the diminishing silver resources in its colonies, especially in America. To overcome the problem, the company's merchants resorted to opium and saturated Chinese markets with illegal opium planted and refined in east Indian farms and factories. Through smuggling opium, the East India Company gained colossal revenues enabling its imperial expansions and adventures in other parts of the globe, thus the opium trade was the driving force of the British Empire.

Before the large-scale export of opium to China, the Chinese like Indians used opium for medical purposes. But their massive exposure to Chandu, highly addictive opium, led to their sweeping addiction and sense of decline crippling their political and military agency. To disclaim their responsibility for the wretchedness of the Chinese, the colonial regime employed a racial and orientalist arsenal alleging that the Chinese belonged to a degenerate race who had an innate inclination to smoke opium and idleness. In an attempt to counter colonial hegemony manifested in imposed opium and to save their subjects from sinking into paralyzing addiction, Lin Zexu, the Chinese Emperor's wise and resolute representative, forced the British and other Western opium traders in Guang Zhou, where they resided, to surrender their opium chests stored in their warehouses known as factories and leave the Island. Interpreting Lin Zexu's anti-opium measures as unpardonable temerity and a grave insult to its global prestige, the British regime spurred by the East India Company declared war against China. To justify war in a Machiavellian manner, they demonized China as an anti-free trade force blocking marine routes, prosecuting merchants, and spoiling their merchandise. In its asymmetrical war, the colonial regime defeated China thanks to employing their newly designed warship. As victors, the British imposed their unfavorable conditions on the Chinese resulting in the explosion of opium in Chinese markets and opening some hitherto sealed shores to the colonial trade. Looking critically, Ghosh refutes the legitimacy of free trade in the imperial context equating it with the rhetoric of domination. To portray this war's immorality, inhumanity, and

brutality, the writer echoes the civilized and humane voice of Lin Zexu, striving hard to dissuade the British from carrying the opium trade through dialogues and writing letters to Queen Victoria before destroying thousands of opium chests.

If the colonial opium and imperial encounter proved an imposed nightmare for the Chinese and their culture in the nineteenth century, it was a real blessing for the Indian, English, and American merchants and sailors living in Guang Zhou because their residence afforded them golden opportunities to witness, experience, and even envy Chinese rich culture. Their aesthetic contact fueled these Western foreigners' passionate desire to recreate its beauty and innovative ideas in their countries. Accordingly, the British traders adopted Chinese gardening, emphasizing visual delights rather than symmetry, the European merchants acquired Chinese floral mania, and Indian traders imitated and popularized growing flowers in clay pots as widely practiced in China. The Indians also borrowed the weaving skills, weaving, and the idea of the nation-state from the highly civilized Chinese. Similarly, Chinese architecture and art inspired American merchants. In building their mansions, they followed lavish Chinese architecture and interior designs characterized by unique arrangements of chinaware.

In his book, Ghosh superbly illustrated that China was not the only victim of the East India Company's immoral opium trade. It was disastrous for India's economy and Indian farmers. After establishing its foothold, the company gradually started to seize the huge swathes of Indians' arable lands in eastern India and cultivated poppies. For Indian farmers and landowners, it meant forsaking the growth of profitable crops such as tobacco, cotton, and sugarcane. In doing so, it impoverished them and turned them into badly paid slave-like workers in poppy farms and opium factories where opium was refined under massive and inhumane surveillance and unhealthy conditions. For Ghosh, the sinister legacy of colonial opium is still visible in eastern India suffering from rampant crime and poverty as well as poor health and education systems. Nonetheless, Indian western regions escaped the grim fate of the eastern terrains thanks to their revolt and resistance against the colonial regime's draconian measures to curb and control the flow of opium trade by Indian merchants and this prevented them from turning into miserable functionaries in opium farms and refineries and this explains their better lot than their counterparts.

British merchants and the state were not the exclusive beneficiaries of the illegal lucrative opium business though they relished the lion's share. The Indian Parsi and Peranakan communities along with Boston Brahmins enjoyed its cake too. Unencumbered by religious taboos such as eating pork (Indian Muslims) and crossing seas (Hindus), Indian Parsis eagerly cooperated with the British. They invested both in the shipping industry and the opium trade, amassing an enormous fortune. Thanks to opium revenues, they played a significant role in modernizing and industrializing India. Like their Indian counterparts, the Peranakan, the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia accumulated enormous wealth by managing opium farms in Southeast Asia and safeguarding British economic interests. Lastly, Boston Brahmin, well-educated and well-connected merchants from elite families in the Northeast regions of America like the well-known Forbes brothers, immensely benefitted from smuggling opium to China. Nonetheless, they remained silent about their involvement in morally dubious commerce in America. To escape the opium trade's disgrace, these merchants cultivated a new identity by styling themselves as upright donors building universities, schools, and museums. The hefty profit from opium enabled them to invest in railroad construction and the steel industry. The writer here reminds his American readers that part of American modernity is linked to the illicit opium trade imposed on the wretched Chinese.

Distinguishing features of *Smoke and Ashes* are studying the consequences of the British opium trade in modern times and suggesting a solution to the opioid epidemic. Once, the colonial order employed opium to subjugate the Chinese people, but in modern times the table is turned. In the twentieth century, the US giant pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma targeted 'others' within their communities rather than exotic 'others.' They flooded the markets with opioid-based drugs like OxyContin and strongly promoted them. In doing so, they created epidemic addiction and later emergency conditions. Just like the East India Company in the nineteenth century, these companies justified their business by claiming that they met only the unsatisfied needs of the market. Their opioid-based products provide healing for the rare cause of addiction. To build their empire, these pharmaceutical companies made politicians, doctors, police, and judges collude with them by overlooking the dark side of their drugs. Even though pharmaceutical companies have tremendous

power, Ghosh is still an optimist who believes in a plausible solution. For him, the best way to cope with opioid epidemics is to build a transnational, multiracial, multiethnic coalition created by civil societies since the practice was successful in India and China. In India, Pandita Ramabai, Soonderbai Powar, Dadabhai Naoroji, and Rabindranath Tagore with their writings, lectures, and anti-opium tours mounted opposition against the British Empire's opium trade bedeviling the lives of many, especially Indian peasants toiling in opium farms. In China, the chief anti-opium political figure was Prince Gong. He inflamed anti-opium sentiment on a global scale by sharing his anti-opium views with leading Western journalists.

Despite its flowing prose, persuasive argument, ethical stance, in-depth historical examination of the inhumane opium trade, and despite supporting his critical attitude by employing vast imperial archives, *Smoke and Ashes* suffers from minor shortcomings too. When the reader reads the book, he/she forms an implicit impression that the British Empire's sole and most important source of revenue had been the opium trade. The problem with this kind of presentation is overlooking and downplaying British colonial practices in other parts of the globe. Moreover, the reader expects the author to explore the modern consequences of the opium trade in Britain as well, not just in the US which does not take place. Ghosh does not refer to William Dalrymple's well-known historical book: *The Anarchy* which deals with the East India Company and British imperialism in eighteenth and nineteenth-century India. He could enrich his book by using Dalrymple's sympathetic attitude towards Indians and critical perspective towards British colonialism. Lastly, Ghosh could increase the literary charm of his book by exploring opium and its representation in English literature even though he refers to Charles Dickens and his uncritical outlook towards the opium trade. Overall, the book yields illuminating insights into the opium trade, its dark legacy in modern times as well as into colonial machinations and its inhumanity and injustice scarring the colonizers and the colonized people at the same time.

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