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Amitav Ghosh. *Smoke and Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories*

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One of the observations Amitav Ghosh makes in *Smoke and Ashes*, an eighteen-chapter social history of opium, is that contemporary studies and news articles about the ongoing opioid crisis in the US hardly ever refer to coerced opium use in eighteenth or nineteenth century China; nor do they typically mention the extensive global trade networks that formed a cornerstone of colonial British (and later American) power and wealth. Ghosh, author of many non-fiction and fiction works including the Ibis Trilogy, which depicts the years preceding the First Opium War, here succeeds in writing a historical work with the accessibility of fiction. *Smoke and Ashes* is often personal in its narrative, sharing family anecdotes as well as Ghosh's experiences researching and writing the Ibis Trilogy. It is also episodic; rather than a single chronological arc, the book is composed of short chapters, each with a thematic focus with clearly-rendered characters and events that interweave an expansive and engaging history that can be enjoyed equally in long stretches or in short bursts.

Ghosh's observation of the strange silence surrounding China in contemporary writing on opioids comes towards the close of the text but is illustrative of its first central claim: that, at the expense of China, Great Britain's imperial actions included both the exaggeration (and

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sometimes outright fabrication) of its own cultural influences upon globalised modernity, as well as the effacement of its active role in promoting opium use, addiction and trade in China. The Enlightenment narrative of (white) Progress in this era benefited from the profits of a booming opium trade that required forcing product into an unwilling China and at once casting a racist portrayal of inevitable human weakness and susceptibility to addiction.

Citing Mark Twain's adage that history tends to rhyme, what Ghosh's wide-ranging book demonstrates is not merely cycles of repetition but historical contiguity through the non-passive role of opium in the machinery of colonial capitalism. Twain is one of a number of well-remembered literati and other cultural icons that appear in the book, including others with more direct links to opium production or consumption. One of these figures is Washington Irving, who helped his nephew William secure a job in Guangzhou at Russel & Co., a key player in the opium trade at the time. Rudyard Kipling is another recognisable writer who appears; his 'In an Opium Factory' aided in creating pervasive and persistent racial biases among Europeans about the use of opium in China and its production in India. The familiarity readers likely have with these famous names and other entities including Royal Dutch / Shell, a descendant of the Royal Dutch Trading Company that once monopolised opium trade in the Dutch East Indies, is itself dispositive of Ghosh's thesis; while the construction of Western cultural identity has largely silenced (and required the silencing of) China's influences, much of what is considered Western cultural legacies, *including* much of what colonisation itself purports to have spread, in fact follows from complex trade patterns through which opium traversed global routes and Chinese objects, practices and knowledge dispersed *to* Western powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Just a small handful of the examples Ghosh convincingly details are tea-drinking, contemporary banking, architectural preferences, garden aesthetics and even the FDIC.

In other words, the cross-cultural paths of objects and practices that came, finally, from China through the opium trade indicate both a physical and 'mental' colonisation that included the erasure of China itself as well as of the deliberate proliferation (market creation) of opium among Chinese peoples and the violent exploitation of farmer-producers in India. Tracing an honest history of opium therefore illuminates

the ways it produced the development, in its specific historical forms, of colonialism and racial capitalism, up to and including not only rhyming but still-existing dynamics of power and exploitation as they relate to capitalising on opium in manners both licit, as in pharmaceutical corporations, and illicit, as in cartels. These are dynamics in which 'Euro-descended elites and their allies' participate in the wildly profitable proliferation of dangerous substances while 'the burden was [and is] borne by non-white people in faraway countries' (pp. 212, 211).

The second of Ghosh's major claims, and the one more pertinent to critical plant studies, is that, in concert with human actors, the poppy that produces opium, *Papaver somniferum,* is itself an 'independent biological imperial agent' that is 'distinctive in its social history' (pp. 31, 30). Careful not to risk further objectifying the subjects of colonial subjugation, Ghosh makes clear that the agency of opium never replaces that of human individuals and states. Instead, he writes, '[i]t is because opium is a historical force in its own right that it must be approached with due attention to the ways in which it has interacted with humans over time' (p. 31). That 'these interactions are difficult to conceptualize… [is] compounded by the fact that the necessary vocabulary does not yet exist for thinking about history in a way that allows for the agency of non-human entities' (p. 31). True. And although Ghosh's book will no doubt provoke its readers to think more critically about the place of opium in the historical development of colonial capitalism, it spends relatively few of its 320-pages demonstrating the agential nature of the plant in question. The exceptions make up the most compelling passages in the book to those readers interested in plant thinking, agency or personhood.

The most foundational example of botanical agency in Ghosh's book is opium's evolutionary trajectory through which it developed psychoactive, medicinal and addictive properties and invited its own cultivation and propagation by humans. Ghosh argues that, while many plants produce the same responses in humans, opium is peculiar in its successive but fairly slow generation of new, more potent forms such as heroin and oxycodone. Ghosh likens the dangerous and increasingly addictive path of opium's biological and social evolution to an 'opportunistic' pathogen: often dormant or limited in its effects, when conditions are ripe, 'outbreaks' 'rapidly expand its circulation' (p. 32). The analogy is furthered in its colonial specificity; opium, he writes, was used by the British to

generate wealth by knowingly creating addicted markets in China in much the same way that diseases spread by European settlers were used to kill large portions of the Indigenous populations in North America.

One fascinating example of botanical agency in this book is the manner in which opium creates its own temporality. Citing Robin Wall Kimmerer, Ghosh describes the cycles of spikes in opium use, followed by languid 'amnesia', that ends with a fury of research into the development of new forms of opium and its resurgence. Ultimately, this, Ghosh argues, is the agential force of opium that spun out of colonial control, and what has made it a contemporary 'American' problem:

> What they [Anglo-American smugglers] did not understand was that they were colluding not only with human criminals but also with non-human entities that operate on a wholly different timescale. The unintended consequence of their collaborations was to empower the opium poppy and the coca plant—and the criminal cartels that trafficked them—to a point where they were able to establish a grip on the United States against which all human efforts have proved unavailing. (p. 213)

While I wish the concept of opium temporality and the agency of addictiveness were further developed, Ghosh convincingly argues that human-opium interactions have been far more globally intricate and political and have produced far more *multidirectional* cultural cross-pollination than commonly recognised, particularly in Western discourse. And the bulk of readers who pick up this book because it promises a social history, rather than plant theory, will not only be intrigued by the suggestion of opium's active role, but also strongly satisfied with the book's careful and incredibly detailed telling of the opium trade.

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