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**Opium cities, carbon routes: World-ecological prehistory in Amitav Ghosh's Hong  
Kong**

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**Abstract**

This article situates Amitav Ghosh's thesis of anthropocenic modernity as a "great derangement" within the context of the British colonial city and its environmental vulnerabilities. Showing how Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy (*Sea of Poppies* [2008], *River of Smoke* [2011] and *Flood of Fire* [2015]) highlights the appropriation of natural resources by financial markets, the article reads Ghosh's narratives of magically altered landscapes – and the strange coincidences and chance encounters that they produce – as part of a "world-ecological" literary engagement with the transformations of the British empire's opium regime and its carbon-intensive infrastructures. If the colonial founding of Hong Kong speaks to the scale of these transformations, the floods, rising tides and typhoons that threaten the city can be read as narrative premonitions of capital's ecological limits, revealing the prehistories of the climate crisis from the coastal cities in which it originated.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh; opium; world-ecology; narrative; colonial urbanism; Hong Kong

Amitav Ghosh's historical fiction frequently evokes the ecological disruptions generated by coastal urban development across the British empire. From Bombay to Calcutta, Rangoon to Singapore and Hong Kong to Canton, his urban representations highlight not only the centrality of colonial port cities to oceanic trade networks in the 19th century, but also the nature-defying proportions of coastal development in the period. This is suggested by the terraqueous qualities of a number of cities in the Ibis Trilogy (*Sea of Poppies* [2008], *River of Smoke* [2011] and *Flood of Fire* [2015]): the foreign settlement of

Canton, for example, “was so thickly settled that nobody could tell where the land stopped and the water began” (Ghosh 2008, 392); Calcutta’s river traffic, ghats and shipyards produce “a forest of masts, spars and sails” (289); and Hong Kong’s waterfront resembles a kind of man-made island, whose “masts, flags and pennants were so thickly bunched together that it was as if a great fortress had arisen out of the water” (Ghosh 2015, 353). Speaking to the traffic congesting colonial harbours and docklands, these images of amphibious cities and strangely artificial islands gesture towards the “unnatural” rapidity of their construction and expansion, a process driven by the enforced cultivation and sale of narcotics. Thus the “muddy mess” of Singapore’s port seems to merge with the substance sustaining its economy, where “hotel, church, governor’s mansion, all are built on opium” (Ghosh 2015, 324-325), while Hong Kong’s rapid expansion on reclaimed land following the First Opium War leaves it vulnerable to the unpredictable behaviours of both typhoons and tycoons. In describing these cities as part land, part water, Ghosh produces an anticipatory sense of the *socio-ecological* fragility of the British empire’s port cities, alluding to their bases in highly fluid, financialized opium economies reliant on carbon-intensive steam technologies, their environmental precarity due to coastal deforestation and the selection of unsustainable construction sites, and their vulnerability to rising sea-levels, flooding and extreme weather events. In other words, these cities’ representations speak not only to the themes of coastal and cultural interconnectedness that pervade Ghosh’s fiction, but also to the more literal potential of the ocean to overwhelm and reclaim these spaces, affirming a sense of the socially-produced vulnerability shaping both their colonial pasts and their ecological futures.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh (2016) notes that because British colonial port cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, New York, Charleston, Singapore and Hong Kong were selected for their proximity to oceanic trade routes within

imperial networks, colonial planners tended to prioritize short-term economic objectives over long-term environmental sustainability. The result, he writes, is that those cities “brought into being by processes of colonization are now among those that are most directly threatened by climate change” (37). A case in point, for Ghosh, is the East India Company’s plan to build a new port on the banks of the Matla river in the mid-19th century, as a proposed alternative to Calcutta and Singapore. Despite warnings that the Matla – a word which means “crazed” or “intoxicated” in Bengali (57) – was unsafe due to the probability of storm surges, Port Canning was duly constructed on an extravagant scale, only to be struck by a cyclone three years after its inauguration and abandoned four years later. If this example encapsulates the short-term logic of colonial development, Ghosh suggests that the imperative of coastal urbanization resulted in the displacement of millions of people to dangerously exposed locations. A key example is the British expansion of colonial Bombay to low-lying and reclaimed land: while the city’s growth redirected trade flows away from the Mughal port of Surat, the failure of colonial planners to anticipate the site’s ecological vulnerabilities increased the potential of devastating consequences for the city’s residents – a fact that, Ghosh suggests, has today left some 18 million people at risk from cyclones, flooding, drought, resource shortages and attendant civil unrest. While it might be assumed that awareness of the ecological impact of such developments is anachronistic, a number of historical warnings emerged concerning the dangers of colonial coastal development. The naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace (1962 [1869]), for example, noted how the rapid deforestation taking place in regions surrounding British Singapore in the mid 19th century was a process with irreversible implications for the natural environment and species diversity. Indeed, because high levels of deforestation and soil exhaustion were systematically experienced in the coastal cities of the British empire, due to urbanization as well as experimental forms of colonial botany

and plantation agriculture, these locations witnessed some of the earliest effects of modern colonial capitalism's anthropogenic reorganization of natural environments. From this perspective, the port cities of the late British empire can be viewed as sites for an anticipatory ecological awareness, offering insight into today's systemic environmental vulnerabilities as well as their complex colonial origins.

For this reason, Ghosh views colonial cities as spaces whose economic and ecological contradictions produce truly *modern* themes. Reversing the Eurocentric temporal logic that places these locations second to "original" metropolitan sites of modernity such as London, he argues that cities such as Mumbai, Singapore, Boston and Kolkata were "drivers of the very processes that now threaten them with destruction"; hence "their predicament is but an especially heightened instance of a plight that is now universal" (Ghosh 2016, 55). In undermining notions of colonial belatedness, Ghosh complicates the "repeating island" narrative promoted by colonial architects, planners and administrators, which was embodied in toponyms such as New London, New England and New Britain (as noted by DeLoughrey [2010, 7], who draws on Benítez-Rojo's term), or in images of "replicas" like the "Liverpool of West Africa" (Lagos), the "Manchester of the East" (Bombay) and the "Garden City of the East" (Rangoon). Instead of imagining replicas, Ghosh turns these cities into the modern sites upon which our world prehistory is mapped: hence the cession of Hong Kong, for example, marks the beginnings of financial oligarchy based on drug smuggling and dark money; private military campaigns in defense of "free trade"; carbon intensive, coal-based modes of transportation; the rise of US imperialism and the "containment" of China; and unsustainable forms of urbanization and coastal deforestation. Furthermore, because Ghosh's historical vision encompasses not only booming opium cities like Bombay and Hong Kong but also deprived Indian hinterlands and sugar-plantation islands, his work supports a world-systemic understanding of the

extent to which new cities undermined traditional regional centres, local industries and trade routes, redirecting flows of wealth and resources away from inland areas, exacerbating socio-ecological crises and generating waves of forced and indentured migration. In this sense, colonial cities become important sites both for mapping the uneven development of the 19th-century world economy and for provocatively reframing modernity itself. Reconfigured as a “great derangement”, Ghosh’s model replaces the *telos* of development encoded in Eurocentric notions of a “great acceleration” with a *global* “deranging” process, a phrase that at once connotes insanity but also “disarranging”, “disorganizing” and “derailing”.

As this article will suggest, Ghosh’s notion of a global derangement is nowhere more apparent than in his representation of the construction of colonial Hong Kong as a port city which is haunted by premonitions of its own economic and ecological exhaustion. Mapping Hong Kong and the locations to which it is connected, I draw on the category of world-ecology – as informed by a Marxist ecocriticism attentive to the co-constitutive histories of capital and nature – to outline Ghosh’s materialist account of modernity as a re-routing process achieved through opium and carbon regimes, which function via the financial appropriation of “cheap natures” and the organization of natural resources by financial markets. Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* narrates the history of a commodity regime and the history of this regime’s reorganization of nature, from the emergence of cash crops to the construction of entire cities and banking systems. At the same time, his application of non-realist narrative techniques speaks to the modes by which these socio-ecological transformations, with their new regimes of value and cultures of abstraction, generate strange and supernatural experiences at the opium frontier. In this way, Ghosh narrates the lived prehistories of the climate crisis from the port cities in which it originated, providing the grounds for a historiographic method more politically attuned to the fact that – in his

own words – “the Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us” (Ghosh 2016, 62–63). Focusing on Hong Kong as a site of ecological memory, the following article reads the floods, rising tides and typhoons that threaten the colonial city as narrative premonitions of capital’s ecological limits.

### **Opium ecologies**

Key to the historical vision of Ghosh’s Ibis Trilogy is not only his vivid portrayal of the impact of world-historical events on everyday experiences, sensory affects and lived temporalities, but also, as Rita Kelly (2014) has suggested, his ambitious attempt to map the global and Sino-Indian dimensions of the opium trade. To this end, Ghosh relies on an omniscient narrator “whose ability to observe, document, and analyze”, as Nandini Dhar (2017) points out, “far surpasses the geographical, intellectual, and cultural reach of any of the characters written about” (30). The Trilogy is in this respect as much a “history from below” as a global and systemic approach to history in the tradition of world-systems theory. Read as such, Ghosh’s project is at once a global *economic* history – recording the experiences of opium producers, traders and consumers as well as the commodity’s role in the consolidation of transnational financial systems – and an *ecological* one, which documents colonial regimes of extraction and exhaustion as they disrupt local environmental and agricultural practices. Insofar as Ghosh’s approach to the opium trade operates at the intersection of the social and the environmental (or the “socio-ecological”), it anticipates recent “world-ecological” attempts to build on world-systems theory by understanding nature and society as mutually constitutive within a web of human–capital–nature relations. This matrix, termed the “Capitalocene” by the environmental historian Jason W. Moore (2015), requires an analytical fusion of global ecological disruptions with

the historically specific operations of capital. In his own analyses, Moore examines how successive commodity regimes – from 16th-century sugar plantations to contemporary coal industries – have transformed the frontiers of “uncapitalized natures” in pursuit of a “world-ecological surplus” (101). This surplus, he argues, is accumulated via the appropriation of the “Four Cheaps” (work, food, raw materials and energy) from a range of “human and extra-human natures”, including women, slaves, forests, oceans, rivers and soils. By emphasizing the agency of human and extra-human natures, Moore follows feminist critics in directing attention to the forms of accumulation that fall outside waged labour, examining how resources are defined, organized and (de)valued *as* nature by financial and economic systems at specific historical junctures.

Taking their inspiration from this method, the literary critics Sharae Deckard (2012) and Michael Niblett (2012) have viewed world-ecology as the “interpretative horizon” of world literature. Their own work shows how world literature from China to the Caribbean, when put into dialogue with world-ecological criticism, responds to phenomena such as new food regimes and monocultures, energy sources and fossil fuels, urban formations and financial markets, often registering the experiential effects of socio-ecological disruptions through experimental literary forms such as “hydrofiction”, “saccharine irrealism” and “petrofiction” (the latter a term coined by Ghosh). Importantly, for Moore, a world-ecological study approaches matter as “bundles of relations”, bringing together material resources with the concepts, values, symbols, abstractions and cultural meanings by which they are understood, organized and (de)valued. Literature, while it may not offer qualitative data on environmental change, is arguably well positioned to speak to (and to critically interrogate) the meanings, values and knowledges necessary to this process. As studies of world-ecological literature have shown (Wenzel 2006; Niblett 2015), this is especially the case when it comes to experimental forms such as magical realism or

“irrealism”, which, in the context of frontiers for commodities like petroleum, sugar or palm oil, can be seen to articulate the strange, jarring and “bewitching” effects of new value regimes as they transform local environments.

While previous studies have examined literary responses to ecologies of oil, ivory and water, among others, one commodity that has received surprisingly little attention within world literary studies is opium, despite its almost paradigmatic ability to fuse nature and finance. Marx famously used opium as a metaphor for religion, yet he also analysed the commodity’s formative role in global financial markets (which he believed would be a “poison” to British manufacturing industries), noting how the East India Company “was rapidly converting the cultivation of opium in India, and its contraband sale to China, into internal parts of its own financial system” (Marx 1951, 55). As Jairus Banaji (2013) explains, Marx paid attention to the way that London banks used bills of exchange to carry out vast transactions without cash reserves and to transmit the profits to London, Bombay and Calcutta, revealing how “the East India trade tied in with the financial mechanisms of the City, periodically blurring the tenuous boundary between trade and speculation” (Banaji 2013, 6–7). These blurred lines (which are also evoked by Rudyard Kipling [2005] when he describes the factory in Ghazipur, during a visit in 1888, as an “opium mint” [95]) – appear in Ghosh’s description of opium as both a material substance and an empty source of “fictitious” capital. Describing a character who stumbles into the auction at the Opium Exchange beside the East India Headquarters in Calcutta, Ghosh writes that “there were no goods on display [ ... ] [this] was a place in which people traded in something unseen and unknown: the prices that opium would fetch in the future, near or distant” (2015, 271). Echoing Marx, opium here is not simply an addictive substance but a vessel of value, a commodity whose modes of social consumption are shaped by the speculative machinations of the market. Nevertheless, both Marx and Ghosh situate this market within

the military-colonial context of the Opium Wars, as well as that of the coercive debt regimes compelling Indians, in Marx's terms, "to engage in the poppy culture" (Banaji 2013, 53). Yet what remains largely absent from Marx, at least explicitly, as Banaji points out, "is a *totalising* picture of how the peasant hinterlands of British capitalism were integrated into the expansion of capital" (2013, 7, emphasis in the original). By contrast, Ghosh's fiction speaks to opium's role in the integration of finance and nature at an almost planetary scale, involved in everything from cash crops to revolutions in logistics, and from new urban trading centres and property magnates to the devastating upheavals of drought, famine and indenture. Revealing the global reach of opium's effects, Ghosh shows how the trade produced not just a financial system linking London to Calcutta, but a vast assemblage of socio-ecological relations, extending from the poppy fields of Northeast India to the urban islands of the South China Sea.

In fact, *Sea of Poppies* begins in the very "peasant hinterlands" that Marx is seen to overlook, by focusing on the cultivation of Bengal opium along the Gangetic valley in the Indian state of Bihar, where a "flood of flowers [ ... ] had washed over the countryside" (Ghosh 2008, 213). In one sense, Ghosh's eponymous sea of poppies channels the physical hybridity of opium as a substance, which, over the course of its lifecycle from production to consumption, mutates from a plant to a cloudy liquid, and from a "dark brown, viscous substance, sticky to the touch" to a resinous gum and finally a vapour (Booth 1996). Equally, Ghosh's picture of the dramatic transformation of the land by a "flood of flowers" offers a metaphor for the transformative encounter of western colonialism itself, which, as Mark Frost (2016) points out, is represented as an alluring process that "corrupts and distorts, to the point where even the monkeys and butterflies are lulled into a doped-out reverie, and the land is eventually left parched and barren" (1540). Because Bihari farmers were forced to grow poppies at the expense of other crops, the

narrator explains, “lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies” (Ghosh 2008, 213). Ghosh’s image of the opium tide here speaks to the colonial transformation of nature, gesturing to the way that land-based sustenance is eroded by cash crops, and hinting at the ecological and human devastation that will result, from famine to forced migrations across the “black waters”. Later, Ghosh describes opium as a currency “pouring into the market like monsoon flood” (2015, 270), and the market itself as “flooded with opium” (272). While this language captures the mutability of opium as a substance, it also affirms a sense of the geophysical agency of financial forces, showing how opium is able to “flood” the market, “liquidate” the assets of the land and “swamp” the solid sustenance upon which its inhabitants depend. As such, Ghosh’s image of a rising tide of poppies works as a metaphor not just for colonialism, but for its world-historical reorganization of nature to meet the demands of financial markets.

If Ghosh creatively adapts the language of nature to account for the socio-ecological transformation of capital’s hinterlands, he also explores how opium has altered the lives of the Indian peasantry in decidedly unnatural ways – that is, in ways that are so inefficient that they become both economically self-defeating and ecologically hostile to life. As Kelly (2014, 249) notes, opium cultivation for the characters in *Sea of Poppies* entails both food scarcity and environmental vulnerability, a fact made apparent when one character, Deeti, finds herself unable to repair her roof due to the eradication of the wheat harvest. By eliminating the supply of straw for thatching, the introduction of monocrop culture has resulted in both a lack of sustenance for bodies and the physical erosion of protective environments, literally exposing individuals to the elements. One result is that their bodies, under the distortions of the opium economy, take on inhuman qualities: workers at the opium factory in Ghazipur resemble zombies who stare vacantly (“Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving. [ . . . ] [They] had more

the look of ghouls than any living thing” [2008, 99]) and Deeti’s husband’s narcotic addiction leads both to his untimely death and to the living death of an opium-induced stupor, as well as to a condition of sterility that renders him unable to reproduce life. From a world-ecological perspective, Ghosh’s images of flooded landscapes and lifeless zombies speak not only to capital’s historic appropriation of living labour, as in Marx, but also to its socio-ecological conversion and exhaustion of “low-value” lives as “cheap natures”, which are designated along race, gender, caste, class and species lines at the opium frontier.

Perhaps where Ghosh converges most with world-ecological themes is in his attention to the financial abstractions upon which these processes of accumulation depend. Chief among the opium frontier’s life-exhausting conditions, for the characters in *Sea of Poppies*, is their state of perpetual indebtedness:

[T]he factory’s appetite for opium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asámi* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. [ ... ] And, at the end of it, your earnings would come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just about enough to pay off your advance. (Ghosh 2008, 31)

Due to the circular logic of the debt regime, the only alternative for many is the speculative sale of indebted bodies. Yet when a factory clerk advises Deeti to go to Mauritius – assuring her that “It’s not as if you don’t have any choices” (163) – Ghosh shows how her passage to indenture, which she anticipates in a dream at the beginning of

the novel, is driven more by the British empire's insatiable "appetite for opium" than by any personal "choice" on her part. As Dhar suggests, Ghosh's non-realist forms of coincidence and narrative prolepsis – in which characters dream of events to come, have ghostly encounters or are connected in highly improbable ways – produce an overwhelming sense that individuals have not chosen their fates (2017, 20–21). Through Deeti's dream of her journey to Mauritius, Ghosh focuses less on the element of decision-making involved in indenture, than on the push-factors driving individuals away from environments that formerly sustained them. That these environments are no longer capable of sustenance is, from a world-ecological perspective, a consequence of the self-perpetuating cycles of extraction and exhaustion unleashed by the opium regime; yet given Ghosh's emphasis on the power that debt, cash advances and contracts hold over the characters' lives, the novel's magical sense of predestination could also be seen to gesture towards the "real" power of debt as a mode of socio-ecological organization. In this way, his formal use of narrative premonition speaks not only to the choicelessness of indenture as something preconditioned by social, political, economic and ecological factors, but also to a lived sense of the way that indebted lives in the poppy fields, opium factories and sugar plantations are almost entirely governed by financial abstractions. Such a reading links the narrative temporality of the Ibis Trilogy – in which the future is written into the first page through Deeti's apparition – to the commodity regime's own reconfiguration of life into calculations of future value, or what world-ecologists call the organization of life by finance.

Insofar as Ghosh's use of narrative prolepsis mirrors the opium trade's own distortion of lifecycles, then, the Ibis Trilogy tells the history of colonial modernity in relation not to temporal stages but to the cyclical regime of opium. Imbued with a kind of supernatural agency and "magical power" (Ghosh 2015, 258), opium is not depicted as modern at all:

its traders essentially perpetuate feudal debt economies, active deindustrialization, war capitalism and forms of slavery (and are therefore hostile to Neel's modern learning, preferring his father's embrace of "tradition"); while Ghosh imagines the opium factory as a "great medieval fort" (2008, 94), the plight of opium as a Hindu curse (suggesting the "resource curse" inflicted on farmers), and the *girmitiyas*' superstitions about the white men – who, they fear, will extract oil from their brains – as a genuine anticipation of the energy to be extracted from their bodies. Rather than reflecting modes of "older" or peasant consciousness, these superstitions constitute modern responses to the opium regime and its own maintenance or active creation of "pre-modern" pasts through cycles of accumulation and dispossession. Linked to the numerous premonitions and coincidences of *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh's narrative method captures a sense of both the lived temporalities of opium at the commodity frontier, and the non-synchronous modernity that this regime produces in world-historical terms.

### **Artificial islands**

If *Sea of Poppies* portrays the opium trade's reorganization of nature into a vast socio-ecological assemblage, then the subsequent volumes of the trilogy can be seen to shift from the commodity frontier to a network of financial and trading centres, which are imagined as cities "built on opium". At various points, Ghosh shows how the history of opium was pivotal to the fortunes of colonial cities including Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore and Hong Kong, as well as the foreign trading quarter of Canton. Of particular importance to this history is Hong Kong, which Ghosh describes as a kind of artificial island that has emerged virtually overnight: "a great fortress [that] had arisen out of the water" (Ghosh 2015, 353), whose "sampan and junks were anchored so closely together that it was as if the very soil of the island had expanded" (549). Visualizing the city at the onset of the

First Opium War, *Flood of Fire* evokes the land reclamations that facilitated Hong Kong's rapid development from the 1840s onwards, observing the sudden appearance of "godowns, barracks, parade grounds, marketplaces and clusters of shanties" on land that "had been empty except for a few little villages" the previous year (549). Effectively, Hong Kong becomes a space that challenges definitions of the natural: not only is the harbour magically transformed by traders, but the city is also a location of "urban botany" for one of the main characters – a role that challenges Orientalist notions of a "pure", uncultivated nature, as Kanika Batra (2013, 322) points out. Connected to this is Ghosh's attention to the role of the region as both a scientific and military laboratory, transformed beyond recognition by weapons technologies that unleash "hailstorms of bullets", "as if a tempest of fire and iron were pouring up the hill" (Ghosh 2015, 463). Just as with the image of Hong Kong as a fortress emerging from the sea, Ghosh's fusion of anthropogenic and meteorological activity generates an experiential sense of the region's nature-defying expansion and militarization, suggesting humanity's virtually geological agency as a force of environmental change.

By the same token, Hong Kong's challenge to definitions of the natural intersects with the economic discourses framing its narrative of foundation in the 1840s. The island was famously described by Lord Palmerston as a "barren rock" in the sea, an image that, by obscuring its precolonial history as a centre for pearl fishing, allowed the city to be envisaged as a new "free port" and bastion of free trade which would offer an economic alternative to Chinese protectionism in line with the "laws of nature". While Ghosh's representation of Hong Kong as a city conjured *ex nihilo* might appear to support the colonial narrative of the "barren rock", it also comments on the identification of nature – or the use of the language of nature – to justify British interests in the region. Despite, for example, his reliance on the British military, the British opium merchant Mr. Burnham

insists that what is happening to the area is the result of natural processes, a belief reinforced by the near constant use of aquatic similes. Opium, from the Free Traders' perspective, "is like the wind or the tides" (Ghosh 2011, 187); "[t]he accrual of demand in the Chinese heartland was thought to be like that of the Yellow River before a flood" (Ghosh 2015, 350); and "[i]ndividuals and nations could no more control this commodity than they could hold back the ocean's tides: it was like a natural phenomenon – a flood" (375). Channelling the language of neoclassical economics, with its flooded markets, cash flows, liquid assets and funds that are plunging, sinking, pooling or draining, this rhetoric suggests that capital is flexible, expansive in its limits and uncontrollable. Yet Ghosh shows how this language ultimately serves to naturalize what is in fact – to use Duncan Bell's (2014) description of British liberalism – a "deep reservoir of ideological contradictions" (691). Indeed, Burnham's free trade discourse and self-avowed role in the spread of economic freedom is contradicted by the way that his trading company literally follows Britain's military vessels in their mission to forcibly "open up" the Chinese market (hence the irony when he accuses Chinese protectionists of "meddling" with nature), and his surname reflects the incoherence of his own liberal position if interpreted as a pun for burning not only opium but also Chinese villages. In this context, Ghosh's tendency to play with the language of nature when describing Hong Kong in *Flood of Fire* highlights both the rapidity of the region's colonization and the discursive construction of nature itself as something essential to this project's justification.

Yet if Burnham's liberal discourse appears contradictory, Ghosh complicates this further by revealing its utility in the context of the Opium Wars. While even pro-military commentators such as Kipling viewed Free Traders' reliance on British naval power as a particularly galling contradiction, Burnham's discourses of Chinese emancipation suggest the compatibility of economic liberalism with war capitalism, affirming the expediency of

liberal economic and humanitarian discourses to the justification of military intervention. Not only does Burnham use the idea of economic freedom to justify war, but his character also highlights the historically unprecedented role of private traders and corporations in influencing British military policy, mirroring the way that traders such as William Jardine actively profited from the military as an industry in its own right (see Yue-Wo 1998, 311). In this context, Ghosh's representations of Burnham and his interests in Hong Kong attest to the enduring marriage of liberal economics and illiberal foreign policy, as well as to the lasting effects of this marriage as they extend from opium smuggling to "flags of convenience" as a strategy for special tax and customs arrangements, and from "open border" policies promoting transnational contractual labour (while curtailing genuine freedom of movement), to deregulating policies of "fair competition" that benefit monopolistic corporations like Jardine Matheson or the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. In this way, the opium city becomes both a concrete embodiment of British liberalism's contradictions and a site that anticipates its contemporary mutations, foreshadowing the kind of corporate transnationalism associated anachronistically with "globalization" or "neoliberalism". Provocatively, Ghosh views the opium trade as "the foundation of free markets" and the basis for many of the institutions that mediate our ability to know and understand this economic history, pointing out the drug's role in the rise of institutions such as Yale and Brown (Ghosh 2012, 35). Rather than simply echoing colonial narratives of a barren rock in the sea, then, his description of Hong Kong as an artificial island underscores the city's position as a laboratory essential to both the foundation and imagination of today's financial world-ecology.

This notion of Hong Kong as laboratory resonates with Ghosh's focus on another major commodity central to world-ecological history: coal. Describing the steamships used by the British in the First Opium War, the narrator of *Flood of Fire* observes that:

there was so much iron on [the *Nemesis*] that a special device had to be fitted on her compass to correct the magnetic deflection. Her two massive paddle-wheels were powered by engines of one hundred and twenty horsepower which daily devoured eleven tons of coal. (Ghosh 2015, 403)

Given that these are Burnham's coal-devouring steamers, his name can be read as a pun on yet another commodity of world-ecological significance. Equally, it gestures to the forms of creative destruction necessary to the rise of British fossil fuel dominance in the first place. When the Parsi trader, Bahram Modi, acknowledges that a superior ship may once have come from Bombay, Ghosh ties the expansion of the British economy to the deindustrialization of India, revealing how the destruction of local shipbuilding and associated forms of technical expertise allowed the British to gain a monopoly on carbon-intensive industries in the period. If the British empire "lit the fire" for the current fossil fuel crisis, as environmental historians have suggested (Malm 2016), then *Flood of Fire* creatively imagines this process by linking it to the British empire's opium regime and the carbon-intensive technologies upon which it relied. Given that cargo ships continue to be some of the world's worst polluters, the final section of the trilogy constitutes less an ending than an apocalyptic beginning in ecological terms.

### **Typhoons and tycoons**

The notion of Hong Kong as a flashpoint in on-going socio-ecological issues, from free-trade interventionism to carbon emissions, suggests that it operates in Ghosh's fiction as a site of ecological memory and warning. Read in this context, the typhoon that occurs in the final chapters of *Flood of Fire* can be understood both as a historical event –

documented for the sake of accuracy and revealing Hong Kong's environmental vulnerabilities – and as a narrative premonition of future socio-ecological disruptions. The final 100 pages of the novel narrate events between May and June 1841, beginning with Queen Victoria's birthday and concluding with the city's first land sale by auction, held on June 14, 1841. These are overshadowed by the onset of stifling, suffocating weather, which develops into a storm that clears the island, blowing away “shacks and shanties” and leaving junks and sampans “battered to pieces” (Ghosh 2015, 585). Historical records from Hong Kong show that two typhoons occurred just after the island was declared a free port, between June 21 and 26, 1841, while subsequent land sales were followed by a two-month outbreak of dysentery and malarial fever (*Historical and Statistical Abstract* 1932). Notably, in *Flood of Fire*, the build-up of the typhoon is paralleled by the social phenomenon of wealthy tycoons circling the island, who use their share of the Chinese indemnity to purchase land tracts. Jardine, Matheson & Co. purchases three contiguous lots, and the largest is made by Burnham, who – together with the new partners of his Anglo-American firm, including a former opium smuggler – raises his arms in triumph to usher in the dawn of a new age. Although the traders confidently imagine the concession of a new port “embodying all the ideals of Free Trade”, the militaristic language undermines their idealist rhetoric by suggesting that “tycoons” such as James Matheson were “manoeuvring to be the first out of the gate when the island was seized” (Ghosh 2015, 283). In bringing these two events together at the novel's close, *Flood of Fire* draws a parallel between a weather phenomenon in the western Pacific and the predatory activities of wealthy individuals hoping to seize control of the island's territory. This parallel is reinforced at the etymological level: the word tycoon comes from the Japanese *taikun* and is related to the Cantonese *daai-baan* (rich and powerful person), while the word typhoon derives from the Cantonese *daai-fung* (strong winds). Juxtaposing

phenomena from the same linguistic and geographical region and echoing a longer historical connection, prevalent in Hong Kong, between the geological force of typhoons and the “force fields” of wealthy tycoons, the novel underscores the fragile separation of natural and economic forces, each of which has the power to transform the region’s ecology beyond recognition. In this way, the ending turns a natural disaster into a disaster of “historical nature”, anticipating both the island’s coastal vulnerability and the volatility of its financial ecosystem.

What does this tell us about Ghosh’s method as a writer and historian? If the Trilogy ends on a note of anticipated socio-ecological crisis, then perhaps its historiographic method can be seen to dovetail with recent ecocritical challenges to Hegelian historicism, of the kind articulated by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) in “The Climate of History”, which recommends replacing the universal dialectic with a “negative universal history” predicated on a shared future of ecological exhaustion and catastrophe (222). Ghosh might be seen to articulate a similarly negative universal history in the Ibis Trilogy, insofar as he emphasizes the catastrophic vulnerability of the ground upon which our modern world economy is built. Yet, if Chakrabarty’s negative history has a tendency towards political catastrophism and inertia, as Daniel Hartley (2015) has argued, then it is telling that the typhoon in *Flood of Fire* offers little in the way of political possibility. This stands in contrast to the ending of *Sea of Poppies*, which concludes with a cyclone that derails the Ibis on its journey to Mauritius and provides a crucial opportunity for the *girmitiyas* to escape. Drawing on Daniel Maximin’s reading of hurricanes, cyclones and earthquakes as events that “helped to engender in the oppressed a ‘dream of revolt’ by destroying the physical structures of plantation and colonialism”, Sharae Deckard (2019, 10) has shown how both geophysical forces and slaves can say “no” to domination in such moments. Likewise, the typhoon that destroys the opium shipment in *River of Smoke* can be seen to

enact a “revolt of nature” which imposes a limit to capital itself, affirming what Sudesh Mishra (2017), in the context of Conrad’s typhoons, has called “[e]lemental furies that set themselves against the project of surplus accumulation”, which can induce crises insofar as they “delay or imperil the work of capital” (91). This strongly resonates with the storm in *River of Smoke* – with its ability to turn opium cargo into nothing but “mud-brown sludge” (Ghosh 2011, 30) – yet the typhoon of *Flood of Fire* has less of an impact on the workings of capital, and perhaps even facilitates Hong Kong’s first land auctions by “blowing away shacks and shanties”. As such, it speaks to the ways in which investors have historically taken advantage of environmental disasters to buy up public assets, imposing what Naomi Klein (2016) calls “shock doctrines” that can be structurally racist or reliant on neo-Malthusian discourses (as part of a “let them drown” mentality). Thus, while typhoons can offer a certain respite from relentless accumulation and can serve as allies to the oppressed, they can also become an opportunity for more direct and brutal forms of expropriation. If extreme weather is a limit to capital, it is also an opportunity. Not only does *Flood of Fire* speak to the systemic vulnerabilities that determine the effects of extreme weather events, then, but it also anticipates ongoing forms of environmental opportunism as they continue to target marginalized populations. Yet if this renders Ghosh guilty of catastrophism, it does not necessarily make him apolitical. Rather, his effort to trace socio-ecological issues back to 19th-century India, China and their oceanic diasporas redirects attention towards the locations in which climatic issues are most urgent today. Indeed, if the Trilogy reconstructs the “moment before the storm” of contemporary climatic disruption, it does not anticipate a catastrophic future for “all of us” but rather makes visible the catastrophic present that is already here in those locations directly confronted by the effects of flooding, heat-waves and other extreme weather events – effects which colonial history has both produced and exacerbated.

On the one hand, then, Ghosh's fusion of the historical narrative of Hong Kong's foundation with the event of a typhoon gestures towards the social and historical nature of the climate issues facing a number of island cities; on the other, the typhoon's strangely premonitory quality can be seen to turn the island into a site of ecological anticipation and nonrealist narrative experimentation, in response to the representational demands posed by climate change. As the weather changes in Hong Kong, the calm before the storm mirrors the pause in the narrative itself, when one character, Paulette, senses a strangeness in the air and is compelled to go to the "unnaturally still" water, where she discovers the washed-up body of a distant yet connected character (Ghosh 2015, 542). The storm here, as a narrative intervention rather than a natural phenomenon, facilitates Ghosh's broader novelistic effort to link characters from diverse parts of the globe through chance encounters and premonitions. Put into dialogue with the ecocritical arguments of *The Great Derangement*, the typhoon in *Flood of Fire* affirms Ghosh's sense that representations of climatic events pose a number of formal problems for the novelist, insofar as they "defy" traditional realist modes of representation. Faced with the fantastical events and unpredictable disasters caused by climate change, Ghosh opposes the English novel's alleged silencing of the nonhuman and instead calls for the return of nonhuman agency of the kind found in Indian mythology and epic (Ghosh 2016, 65). While *Flood of Fire* ends by emphasizing the nonhuman agency of the typhoon, it is telling that the penultimate scene in which the tycoons celebrate their land purchase is viewed through the eyes of the Indian mystic, Burnham's *gomusta* or clerk, for whom the triumph of the opium traders represents the end of the *Kali Yuga* – the world's last stage in Hindu belief – and "the coming of the pralaya" of dissolution, reabsorption and death, "hastening the end of the earth" (Ghosh 2015, 606). Given the clerk's shrewd social insight and the fact that he has been the secret force behind many of the novels'

coincidences, this might suggest a more literal vision of apocalypse as the logical endpoint of the carbon-intensive capitalism set in motion by the opium traders. At the same time, Ghosh invokes the nonhuman agents of Indian epic to imagine capital's ecological limits and to open up alternative methods of representing them. By framing the event through non-European eyes, he not only reinforces the novels' postcolonial commitment to those subjects for whom environmental concerns are most urgent, but he also illuminates the possibilities for non-European literary conventions – both for meeting the representational demands posed by world-ecological crisis, and for locating alternative subjects of resistance to it.

#### **Notes on contributor**

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