



A lavish linguistic salmagundi

FICTION

RIVER OF SMOKE. By Amitav Ghosh. John Murray. 522pp \$32.99.

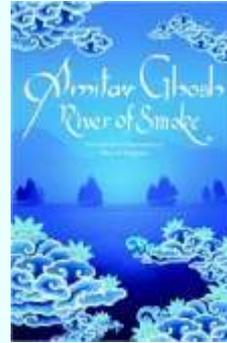
Reviewer: **CLAUDIA HYLES**

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing but just a little more can drive one to distraction. Taught always to have a dictionary at hand when reading in order to improve one's vocabulary, it was necessary to resort to no fewer than three for elucidation of *River of Smoke*. Countless archaisms and foreign words led to hours of etymological fossicking in *Hobson-Jobson*, the Anglo-Indian dictionary published in 1886, its 2003 successor *Hanklyn-Janklin* and the *Macquarie Dictionary* which, while diverting, lead to a certain disturbance in following the complicated scenarios of characters and plot.

Language is clearly a glorious obsession for the author, considered by many to be one of the top Indian writers of the day. *River of Smoke* is the second volume of his Ibis trilogy, following the successful *Sea of Poppies*, short-listed for the Man Booker prize in 2008. His highly successful historical fiction combines an exciting plot, historical accuracy and marvellous local colour. Delving into the Anglo-Indian dictionaries one discovers that the pidgin English spoken in Canton and other Chinese trading ports, contains many words that both emanated from, or later entered, Indian languages, Portuguese phrases and the French Creole spoken in Mauritius add to the salmagundi. As well as linguistic or philological observations, the author puts wry remarks into the mouths of his characters, such as, "Really there is no language like English for turning lies into legalisms".

Language is but one of the intriguing facets of the book, which is a rollicking tale set in tempestuous times in the first quarter of the 19th century. Ghosh paints brilliant pictures of landscape and interiors, costume, customs, plants, food and art. Whether listing the courses in extraordinary Chinese or Macanese banquets, describing the perfumed wisteria pavilion at a plant nursery or detailing the scene inside the atelier of a famous Cantonese painter, his vivid, often humorous prose transports the reader to salivating over the food, inhaling imagined scents or sighing at fascinating scenes.

Descriptions of art techniques are particularly good – stencils used in Chinese paintings or the migration of a folk-art tradition from Bihar to the walls of a cave shrine in Mauritius; the accuracy seems faultless and the



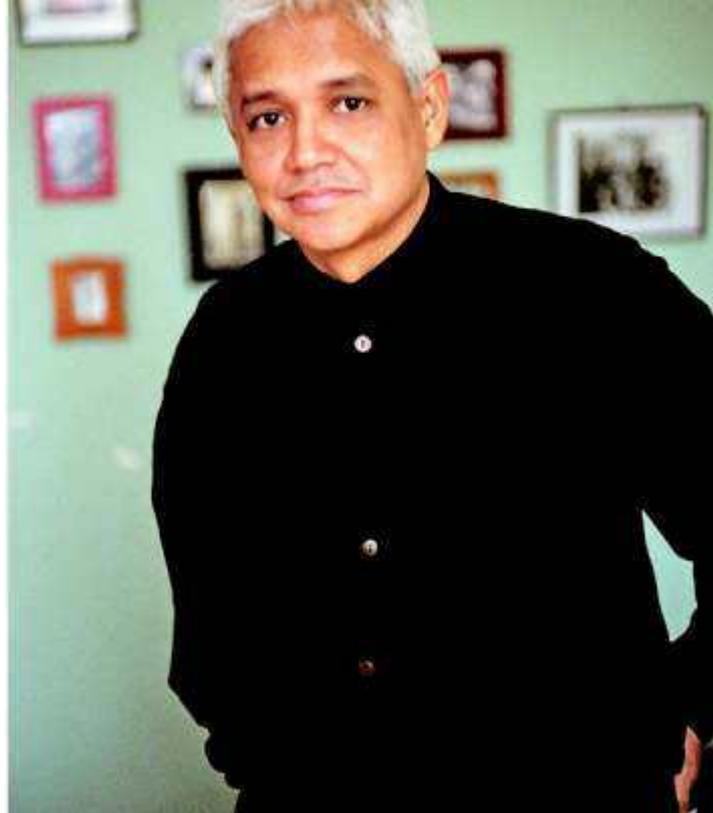
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enlivenment a delight. The extraordinary coincidences which punctuate the story seem never contrived, couched as they are in such rich narrative.

The novel's background is a storm at sea in the Bay of Bengal and the lives of some of those who survive it as passengers on three different ships. One vessel carries a cohort of indentured labourers, another, the largest consignment of opium ever to leave India for China, and the third, a nursery ship from England, has a plantsman passenger intent on collecting a return cargo of Chinese horticultural treasures. The voyages of discovery sail from Mauritius to Bombay and Calcutta, to Hong Kong and Canton, and even include a flashback vignette of St Helena and a meeting with its most famous resident, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Historical characters blend seamlessly with those invented, lending truth to fiction and the novel is one long, discursive and delightful history lesson. The letters to his friend Paulette, written from Canton by Robin Chinnery, the supposed son of the famous artist George Chinnery, are amusing and gossipy and a foil to the more serious accounts of meetings of the foreign merchants. They live in an all-male society; foreign women are not allowed to enter the port. Some find solace, in fact true love, with Chinese women; others resort to dancing with each other when the fiddles strike up after dinners at the Chamber of Commerce. The livelihoods of the taipans as importers of opium is threatened by the arrival in 1838 of Commissioner Lin, newly appointed by the Emperor, with the express purpose of putting an end to the trade.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the foreigners are smugglers of the drug which threatens China as it ruins tens of thousands of lives, and one is not allowed to forget these important facts. Commissioner Lin's 1839 open letter to Queen Victoria on the subject is quoted. In this tinder-box atmosphere, where free trade and Christian



Amitav Ghosh: serves up a rich narrative. Photo: Reuters

piety are the hypocritical watchwords, the letter had no effect whatsoever. One feels no sympathy for the greedy traders in their turmoil but the character of Bahram Modi, the Parsi Seth, has real warmth and charm. He, like other personalities, real and imagined, has risen from humble origins to an important role in history but, like others, he will suffer a great reversal of fortune.

During the blockade of Fanqui-town, the foreign enclave of the town, some of the young Parsi members of the Achha Hong or Indian trading house are introduced to cricket and vow to start a "native" club on their return to Bombay. In fact, the Parsi community were the earliest enthusiasts and the first official cricket match played by Indians in India was between a Parsi side and a European one in 1877. Details, such as the improvised Canton cricket match, lend a personal realism to the book with links to the present day. It's a cracking good read.

• In another life Claudia Hyles would like to have been a 19th-century plantswoman in China and India.