Amitav Ghosh's novels belong to the genre of the historical novels. In an interview "History is at the Heart of the Novel" with Azeen Khan, Ghosh comments on how he conceives the appearance of historical novels in postcolonial writing:

There is a sense in which all novels are historical novels because every novel is an account of something that has already happened, unless it is a science fiction. So history is absolutely at the heart of the novel.

(“History is at the Heart of the Novel”)

With the help of different narrative strategies Ghosh, in his novels, has re-written history like his other contemporary writers. He wants to mirror different shades of history mainly through the eyes of oppressed rather than the dominating and oppressing forces in society. He thinks that history and narratives have basically the same function. One has to travel through history to encounter pre-history just as one has to go through narrative to encounter the surface of the story.

Ghosh admits that he has always been fascinated by history. About the tradition of the historical novel in post-colonial writings, he says in the same conversation: “I think the great thing about the novel and not just the historical novel is that it is an extremely generous form. It allows you luxuries and liberties like no other form.” In writing his novel River of Smoke, Ghosh informs in this talk that he was highly inspired by the novel Zayni Barakat by Gamal Al-Ghitani which was about eighteenth century Cairo and its most striking aspect was the use of edicts and proclamations, the official voice of history as it was. Ghosh further comments here, “I found Gamal Al-Ghitani’s use of this very compelling and when I was working on River of Smoke it was one of the things that were playing in my head.” Here Ghosh also talks about the particular tradition of conceiving history that shaped his thinking in substantial way:
One of the principal differences that I see between myself and a lot of Anglo-American historical writers is that I don’t believe that history is moving towards something, some sort of good point. I don’t believe it has teleology or that it has a redemptive message. One of the great things about the novel is that it allows us to different kinds of things. It allows us to address the environment the natural world, and the people’s position within the natural world . . . this is something that a historian can’t do. Or rather it’s much more difficult for them because of the nature of what they do. They have to have an evidentiary trail. They have to have whole apparatus of references and so there has to be some kind of boundary to what they are writing about. This is the strength of what they do but it is also a constraint. ("History is at the Heart of the Novel")

About his own historical narratives, Ghosh further comments:

The strength of what I do is that I can integrate many different aspects of the world into a narrative but the weakness of it is that I can’t support what I say with references. There is no evidentiary trail. I can’t make truth claims whereas, a historian can. But they are complementary exercise and both are necessary. ("History is at the Heart of the Novel")

Such issues raise further a bigger question like what kind of a claim does literature make to knowledge, to reality or truth. Here Ghosh has an answer as he comments: “. . . the wonderful thing about literature is that there is an incalculability that one cannot account for in any way.” It may be called a sort of lapse which he has called the “evidentiary trail”. Ghosh remarks in the same talk:

Novels create narratives and in this sense—and perhaps this is too large a claim?—they actually make history, or rather the telling of history, possible . . . a narrative makes it possible for people to
perceive and think about places, and the moments in time, that were previously unseen or invisible. ("History is at the Heart of the Novel.")

It is here that one finds the contribution of narratology in literature in presenting history and the present chapter discusses this contribution in all its depth. Ghosh further says on the same platform: “Novels . . . can open windows of perception.” He says: *Sea of Poppies* brought the opium trade to life for many people before that the subject had more or less vanished from public memory. It’s extraordinary that opium, which played such an important part in Asian history, had vanished from public memory in India. ("History is at the Heart of the Novel")

Ghosh has touched upon this historical event of opium trade because he thinks that in his earlier history based novel *The Glass Palace*, the history of indentured migration was touched upon very briefly and he informs in the same talk:

. . . there I didn’t have the opportunity to follow up on the indentured story. But it always remained in my mind and that was how *Sea of Poppies* began. I asked myself what was their material reality? It was literally in that process that I came upon this whole opium trade. There is a vast amount of material on it and I immersed myself in it. . . . The opium trade came into existence because of tea. Look at the way in which the British made their tea: it had to be drunk with sugar, and the sugar was being grown in plantations, first with slave and then migrant labour. This resulted in an economy that tied the whole world in a web. One set of ships would bring opium from India to China; another set would take tea from China to England; another set would bring sugar from the West-Indies to London. These cycles of trade in turn became the mechanisms for the repatriation of finances. ("History is at the Heart of the Novel")
Ghosh further tells in this talk that all this happened in the guise of freedom in trade:

The British Government was supported by merchants and traders. They made war on China in the name of free trade. They were trading in opium which was the monopoly of the East India Company. They talked about free markets and trade but in fact the markets were not free at all as the Asian merchants couldn’t compete with British merchants on equal terms. The merchants in Asia had a very long tradition and were trading for long period. They were extremely competitive and extremely canny. They had the knowledge of all local circumstances. Even when it was purely a matter of business they were often able to out-do the British traders and merchants. But the British had an upper hand as they maintained their control on business and trade by using their political and military power. (“History is at the Heart of the Novel”)

Julia Lovell, a noted historian, has the following observations on the opium trade in China:

By the 1780, Britain was running up a serious trade deficit: while China government was quite happy to service the growing British tea addiction, it seemed to want little in return except silver. As East India Company profits failed to offset the cost of rule in India, British tea-drinkers pushed Asia trade figure into the red. By the 1820s, the British thought that they had found a perfect solution to their difficulty: Indian opium, for which Chinese consumers had increasingly developed a taste over a preceding couple of decades. Between 1752 and 1800, a net 105 million silver dollars (approximately £26.25 million) flowed into China. Between 1808 and 1856, 384 million travelled into the
opposite direction, the balance apparently tipped by booming opium
imports. From 1800 to 1818, the average annual traffic held steady at
around 4000 chests (each chest containing around 140 pounds of
opium); by 1831, it was nearing 20,000. (02)

To reproduce the opium trade and pre-war conditions in Canton, Ghosh has relied
to a great extent on original historical records to create an emotional and fictional
response to the conditions of the sufferers. Ghosh has paid attention to photographs,
historical documents, dictionaries, paintings, drawings, images, visions, dreams, etc.
which are used as narrative aids in the text. His novel River of Smoke internalizes these
various techniques as he feels that the genre of novel is wonderfully generous and
capacious form and he has always been interested in images.

In an interview “From History of the Present” for a journal History of the Present
(A Journal of Critical History), Ghosh presents his views on relation between narrative
structure, history and human predicament:

The circumstances in which these predicaments arise are particular to
those places and those moments: that is what gives them their resonance.
The predicament thus becomes the hearth that makes it possible to inhabit
this moment, this history. It shapes the narrative and determines the
design and the content of the book. (“From History of the Present”)

The opening chapter of River of Smoke focuses on Deeti’s life after she departed
from Kalua in a stormy night on the ship the Ibis. The ship, after enduring a storm, safely
reaches Mauritius with Paulette, Deeti and other refugees on the vessel. Afterwards in
the successive years (exact time is not specified in the narrative) the dominant and
doughty Deeti, as the matriarch of Clover’s clan (Kalua’s descendents) commands the
regular and ceremonious visits to her cliff-side shrine. The story of her escape as an
indentured labour is recalled as a ritual in every visit by their descendents.
The narrative comes back to 1838, and introduces the reader to the person Bahram Modi who holds centre stage throughout the novel. Bahram Modi is a shrewd, canny, middle aged Parsi businessman from Bombay. With a large vessel the *Anahita*, he stars sailing towards Canton carrying large opium. This trade is a reason and a chance for him to stay away from the hold and dominance of his rich in-laws in Bombay. The *Anahita* confronts the same fate as the *Ibis*. There is all chaos in the hold as the chests of opium break loose and splinter. Later, Bahram is seen swarmed into the “muddy sludge” (ROS30) of opium as he falls all of sudden which can be marked as the symbolic fall of this opium trader. However, it’s with the arrival of the *Anahita* to its destination that the novel gains its momentum and hits its stride. Ghosh has presented vivid pictures of life and people of “Fanqui-town”. The surroundings, the foreigner traders, the business activities, quarter of Canton, food, clothing, leisure activities and even gossips—all are captured with exactitude and verisimilitude. With great dexterity Ghosh draws picaresque images of the river traffic, district’s street, maidan, clubs, hotels, markets, shop-houses, roadways and factories along with the characters whose lives are determined by the laws of free trade and those of conscience.

In the beginning section, the omnipresent narrator shows Bahram who tries the best possible way to profitable dispose of his ship though he is badly affected by his unavoidable circumstances. The narrator presents other counter narratives such as those of Neel, the exiled and dispossessed landlord of *Sea of Poppies* who becomes Bahram’s munshi in *River of Smoke*. In another storyline the narrator captures and projects the endeavours of Paulette; the orphan botanist of *Sea of Poppies* and an English horticulturalist Fitcher to locate rare species of plants but this storyline doesn’t go too far in the narrative. Paulette is in the guise of an intrepid explorer on a special botanic venture with Fitcher. Another narrative comes in the shape of one-sided epistolary
correspondence done by Robin Chinnery who writes letters to Paulette. A painter by profession Chinnery arrives in Canton on an artistic and botanical venture. His entries in the novel are registered in the form of his long winding and gossiping letters to Paulette giving commentary on the life in Canton.

The inclusion of letter writing is a narrative device used by the author to give enlarged and varied points of view of life in Canton. This is a narrative strategy used by the author to change the structure of the novel and also to provide the background information of the crowded, chaotic, funky and luscious place called—Canton. To give more and more information of this historical background, these letters are suffused with historical and geographical knowledge, making the narrative run around. Written in a breathless, exclamatory style and occupying much time and space these letters enlighten the period from different points of view.“And so at last to the foreign enclave—or ‘Fanqui-town’ as I have already learnt to call it!” (181) “. . . And yet it is a tiny place!” (184) “. . . the lads will swarm after him, with their hands outstretched, shouting: ‘Achha! Achha! Gimme Cumshaw!’” (185)

Ghosh gets immersed into his character’s mind, thinks as they do, speaks with their voice and watches with their eyes. In his narratives he draws a parallel between the individual process of psychological recovery and a historical and national progress. It is through the omnipresent narrator, first person dramatized narrator Robin Chinnery and different character focalizers that the reader experiences the historical period of the opium war. We observe through the characters’ life and from all their perspectives, memories and conversations about the world they lived in—the foreign merchant’s quarter of Canton, the cliffs of Mauritius, the inner sanctum of walled Chinese garden and on the board.

River of Smoke centers its focus on the vital trafficking in opium in the 19th century. An anthropologist, Ghosh turns his ethnographer’s eye to the after effects and
hazards of this illicit trade in Ghangzhou—the city in China, earlier known as Canton. The novel presents the details of the period in highly decelerated pace quite often very engrossing that sometimes even comes in the way of narrative flow. What makes Canton a unique place during the opium war, is that it is actually the place where there are people from different countries—Europeans, Indians, Chinese, Thais, Japanese and others speaking different languages. It is this historical period of Canton—the period of opium trade and war—that Ghosh writes about in the novel *River of Smoke*.

The abrupt opening of the novel links the narrative to the previous the *Ibis* trilogy *Sea of Poppies* through narratological devices like analepsis, prolepsis, memory, stream of consciousness, interior monologue; through other narrative devices like visions, dreams, premonitions and mind images and even through incorporating different genres. In the very first chapter Neel draws the figure of Bahram Modi on Deeti’s Memory-Temple wall introducing this image as the opium trader. Later Bahram becomes the main character focalizer focalizing about the opium trade in China. The narrative unfolds and reveals the stories of Ah Fatt’s life, Bahram’s past, Paulette’s endeavours to get rare species of plants, Neel and Ah Fatt’s relationship, Zadig Bey’s relations with Bahram and Chinnery, childhood acquaintances between Chinnery and Paulette, arrival of Ah Fatt, Neel and other characters in Canton etc. These are the stories which are conceived in the first section using different narratological devices like stream of consciousness, memory, interior monologue, analepsis and prolepsis. In this section, coherence is denied and both mimesis and diegesis devices of narration carry forward the narrative in time and space to project the historical period. *River of Smoke* is about re-inventing or re-writing the past through the eyes of the colonized. The chapter discusses how Ghosh has used the narrative techniques to present vivid pictures of Canton in 1838. Here the main characters are Bahram Modi, Ah Fatt, Neel, Robin Chinnery, Paulette and Zadig Bey.
who remember their past life and incidents. They are in fact the reservoir of memories and thus their memories are used not only to present their personal history but nation’s history as well.

Ghosh’s novels have different periods of history at their backdrop. There are different methods of dealing with past in these novels for example *The Shadow Lines* and *The Circle of Reason* may be called thoroughly memory novel while the *Ibis* novels are about re-inventing and re-writing the past not only through memory, interior monologue, stream of consciousness but also through the authentic and official voices of historical personas, edicts, Canton journals, *Hukamnamas, Farmans*, proclamations, letters and memorials. It is only through the use of such aids, i.e. the original voices in his narratives that Ghosh could adequately draw the portrait of the period effectively and emphatically.

To project an intense representation of the effect of the opium war period upon the lives of people, Amitav Ghosh in *River of Smoke*, uses both the traditional Indian oral and literary tradition of story-telling as well as European novel tradition. To create vivid pictures of the past Ghosh has tried to reproduce the Cantonian different voices of traders, migrants, lascars, government officials, British officers, business men, botanists, horticulturists and even painters.

The open-ended novel shows shift in narrator from omnipresent third person narrator to first person character focalizer Neel who expresses his sorrow in the closing line of the novel: “I realize that if it were not for those paintings no one would believe that such a place had ever existed (553).” Here it is not only memory that may conserve and uphold historical events but art itself becomes the preserver of those moments, e.g. Chinnery’s painting of Canton in flames which become the testimonials of life in Canton during riots and war in future as visualized by him long before the event actually
occurred. On micro level, Deeti’s drawings on the wall of her Memory-Temple are the preserver of personal history of the people living in that period.

*River of Smoke* is not a univocal narrative. It frames a series of inter-related stories from history presented by multiple narrators. The psychological effects of the opium war upon the psyche of the people sometimes outweigh the historical facts. This is presented mainly through the main character focalizers—Bahram Modi, Neel, Zadig Bey, Robin Chinnery, etc. Thus, Ghosh’s novel reveals the psychic subtext that lies within and beneath the historical facts. This psychological presentation doesn’t come within the compass of history which is related only with facts, record evidence and figures. Ghosh comments in an interview “From History of the Present" for a journal *History of the Present* (A Journal of Critical History):

> Approaching history through characters makes the novelist's relationship to the past substantially different from the historian's. In most respects the novelist's understanding of the subject is far less complete, far less rigorous than that of the historian—this goes without saying. But there are also some respects in which seeing the past through the prism of a character's experience allows for a kind of wholeness that is unavailable to the historian. This may seem like a tall claim so I think I had better illustrate it with an example: this instance is taken from my last book, *River of Smoke*, which is set mainly in Canton (Guangzhou). (“From History of the Present")

As *River of Smoke* is set during an appalling period of opium trade the plot of the novel is manipulated not in a simple manner. In fact, Ghosh’s technique is to thread various narratives together and sometimes he has presented the memories of characters in present tense just to achieve vividness and accuracy of the events. Through character focalizers in the novel, the writer unfolds the effects of historical events in the lives of
people. The stories focus mainly the city ‘Canton’ in China where foreigners are permitted to inhabit and prominent business houses have established shops. The character, whoever is introduced to the audience in the narrative, is affected by the events of the day today life. The main characters among others struggling for survival are— Bahram, totally ruined and shattered by the end of the narrative, Neel—the raja, convicted of forgery and embezzlement and finally losing his identity and Paulette, strangled on another ship the Redruth in the mid of her search of different species of flowers.

The Anahita, the ship owned by Bahram also comes under the grip of the same cyclone that the Ibis faced. It is a ship with the biggest cargo of opium from India to Canton. The Redruth, a nursery ship on Botanical venture, is the third ship that carries a horticulturist Frederick Fitcher, who is also called Penrose. He is determined to hunt down the invaluable treasures of China that are concealed in plain sight and its rare species of plants that have power to heal, beautify and intoxicate. There is convergence of all in the Canton’s Fanqui town or Foreign Enclave. It is a place where civilizations clash and different cultures and languages merge and fuse. It is a tumultuous world, a sort of powder cask or a small ready fuel tank, waiting a spark to afire and ablaze the opium wars. Ghosh presents the disturbed life that the people like Bahram, Ah Fatt, Deeti, Neel, Paulette, Chinnery have to go through during the opium trade and war period in China.

All the meetings, conversations and discussions among traders and British officials are presented in present tense in the form of mimeses as if the whole drama is enacted before the audiences’ eyes:

‘But Mr. Slade!’ It was the voice of Charles King. ‘If freedom is merely a stick for you to beat others with, then surely the world has lost all meaning? You have blamed Lord Palmerston, You have
blamed Captain Elliott, You have blamed the Emperor of China—yet
you have not once taken the name of commodity that has brought us to
present impasse: opium.’ (238)

In the second volume of the *Ibis* trilogy, the main place is given to Parsi trader
Bahram Modi who represents the opium traders of that period and his fate and fortunes
depend on China’s Opium War and banning of opium trade—the illegal business that has
brought easy, slow but definite drain to its denizens. Aboard the *Anahita*, Bahram
combats his conscience and the ethics of opium trade; on board the *Redtruth*, Fitcher and
Paulette struggle to search an uncommon species of flower. The interest of the novel lies
in horror and beauty with which Bahram Modi, the Parsi opium trader from Bombay and
also the main protagonist in the narrative, comes to terms with his memories inviting the
readers to share the pain and suffering of his life. The memories of the past and worries
of the future haunt Bahram Modi, who remembers the life he spent with his wife or
dreams of his dead mistress Chi-mei time and again. Here the narrator shows how the
past is imposed on or interspersed with the present unconsciously. In this way Ghosh
invites and includes his audience to use their imaginativeness in the process of
conception of the narratives.

By narrating the pathetic, heart rendering and tragic story of Bahram Modi as a
father, a son, a husband, a lover, a benefactor, a friend and a businessman, Ghosh
questions the very existence of human beings and their relationships in the face of hostile
and unpredictable outer world. It gives *River of Smoke* a high degree of intensity because
entire action of the story is focused on the unlimited experience of the main protagonist
Bahram Modi along with other characters at the backdrop of historical upheavals.

There are only two modes of narration in narratology irrespective of any language
and these modes are ‘diegesis’, i.e. ‘telling’ and mimesis, i.e. ‘showing’. In ‘telling’ a
story the writer / narrator often interferes, comments and gives information about the fictional material in the course of narrative. While in ‘showing’ the writer minimizes his/ her presence in the narrative and it is upon the reader to experience and understand the narrative on his own. In *River of Smoke*, both the modes of narration ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ are used though much preference is given to ‘telling’ by Ghosh. The author recourses to ‘telling’ in a remarkable way as he wishes to impart and share maximum information of the period with the readers about British power politics and life in Canton.

Following the practice of many historical novelists, Ghosh constructs all types of characters, the characters of his own creation, the imaginary characters like Bahram Modi and Zadig—the traders, Paulette—a botanist, Neel—an exiled Raja and later a munshi, Ah Fatt—an opium addict and Bahram’s estranged son and Robin Chinnery—a painter and the real life characters like the American merchant Charles King, the British merchants like Jardin, Dent, Matheson, Mr. Innings, the Chief Superintendent of British trade Captain Elliott and other British and American traders and officials to reveal the broad sweep of history. There is also Commissioner Lin, the most important real life figure and a formidable and strict bureaucrat known for his remarkable competency, honesty and high moral standards. He is sent to Guangdong on the position of High Imperial Commissioner and as the most powerful representative of Chinese Emperor in late 1838 to ban and eradicate opium-smoking and its smuggling. The novel comprises such personas in the narrative, which are either affected by or may affect directly or indirectly the history itself. Some of them are those whose destinies are written by others and some are those who write the destinies of others as Mr. King appeals to Mr. Bahram Modi:

I refer of course to you, Mr Moddie, Amongst all of us it is you who bears the greatest responsibility, for you must answer not only to your own
homeland but also to its neighbours . . . our successors will not have to live with the outcome of today’s decision in the same way that yours will. It is your children and grandchildren who will be called into account for what transpires here today. (470)

Commissioner Lin commands Captain Elliott and asks him “that he should give clear commands to all the foreigners to obey the order, requiring them to speedily deliver up all the opium that is on board their store-ships. Thenceforward all the foreigners will conduct a legitimate trade. . . .” (513).

Another important aspect of narratology is focalization. Time and again Bahram Modi recalls his past and remote past – his life with his mother before his marriage, his marriage with Shireenbai, his business in past, his relations with his son Ah Fatt, his mistress Chi-mei and his life in Canton. The omnipresent narrator narrates Bahram’s feelings but the focalizer is Bahram when he shares an incident with his friend Zadig Bey about his first meeting with Chi-mei: “Her name was Chi-mei, he told Zadig . . . She was scrubbing clothes in the flat stern of her boat. . . . Her face was pert and lively, with glinting black eyes and cheeks that glowed like polished apples.” (67)

The narrative, which is presented here, mainly through the omnipresent narrator, shows Bahram Modi both as the character narrator; the middle aged Modi as well as the character focalizer; Modi as young man. Ah Fatt too remembers his past when he tells Neel:

You can think how strange for me all this. When I small, we live in boat like this one; we also poor people, like these. Just poor boat-people, sometime no food, we eat wind. Then one day I hear my father hou-gwai, rich man, rich White-Hat Devil. Now I think I know why my mother beat me—I not real China-yan, I her secret shame, but still she need me, because of money Father give. (90)
Here the omnipresent narrator recedes back as Ah Fatt appears both as character narrator and the child focalizer. Later the implied author takes omniscience over him and ‘tells’ his feelings. The implied author affirms the reader that on recalling his past Ah Fatt feels broken at heart and gets disappointed. The narrative voice ‘tells’ about the whole scenario: “Looking up, Neel saw that Ah Fatt’s face, which had shown very little emotions so far, had suddenly crumpled into stricken masks” (94). Here the implied author directs the reader how to respond to Ah Fatt’s feelings as he derives and therefore he ‘tells’ everything. Thus, the implied author ‘tells’ about Ah Fatt’s disappointment, hatred, guilt and loss. By telling the situation in such a way, the narrator rightly involves the reader also to understand Ah Fatt in the right perspective. There are so many examples of ‘showing’ also in the narrative which go simultaneously with ‘telling’ for example the omnipresent narrator presents the intimate talks between Neel and Ah Fatt:“‘listen, Ah Fatt’, he said, ‘Whatever may have happened between you and your father is in the past. May be he’s changed: don’t you think you should find out if he is on board the ship?’” (94). Ghosh relates past with the present through these lines. He uses the basic tools of memory and recall that links the present to past. The disturbed psyche of the people could only be depicted through the zig-zag pattern of the narrative. Mainly the first part of the novel follows this pattern.

There is the use of third-person narrator along with first person character narrator which has special effects on the narration of the story that couldn’t have been narrated otherwise. While the first person character narrator narrates the inner psyche of the characters, being the one, who is among them in the narrative or due to some proximity with other characters, the third person narrator on the other hand, tells the story from outside by having a panoramic view of the whole as omnipresent narrator. He is the one, who is busy in giving all details of the actions of others by using the expressions like ‘he
said’, ‘they think’, ‘he felt’, ‘she observed’, ‘he notices’ etc. Ghosh presents both the narrators creating an intensely inter-textual relationship that highlights how essential their narration is for each other’s narrative. It is Ghosh’s primary concern to present the story from each angle and perspective of the opium trade and other historical events.

In the third person narrative, the narrator is not there in the story, but he is an outsider. He uses third person to describe the characters in the novel using the pronouns ‘she’, ‘he’ or ‘they’ for them. Among the third person narrators there may be reliable or unreliable narrators. It is one of the characteristic of unreliable narrator that he narrates things about him-self as well as other characters rather comically, non-seriously with his/her tongue-in-cheek, seldom means what he/she says.

The narrator in *River of Smoke* may be called to be the reliable one due to the presence of a historian and an anthropologist author who is deeply steeped in history to give details and thus depicting the vivid account of historical events. The authorial presence is evident here and there, from beginning to the end of the novel. The chance of unreliability minimizes with the dominance of the presence of the author in the novel. To make his novel more reliable the author presents the events interspersing the omnipresent narrator and the first person character focalizer and by using the narrative devices ‘mimesis’ and ‘diegesis’ i.e. ‘telling’ and ‘showing’. Neel’s voice is also among such voices who in the end of the novel laments at the destruction of Canton. His voice merges with that of the author who voices for those nations who lost their identity, having no marks on the earth’s surface in present:

> It was burnt to the ground. One night during the wars, Canton was bombarded by British and French gunship. The townspeople saw that the foreign factories were the only part of the city that was unharmed and they were enraged. A mob set fire to the factories; they were razed and never rebuilt. (552)
In *River of Smoke*, while using third person narrative technique, the author prefers ‘telling’ most of the time rather than ‘showing’. This gives more freedom to the narrator to make comments on characters and events. He even enjoys the liberty of imposing his own viewpoint on the reader. The point of view from which the story is told keeps on changing throughout in the narrative. There is no straightforward story in the conventional sense as in the stream of consciousness novels. Bahram Modi, the main protagonist recalls his own past as how he started business in opium. His personal memories exist in this universe merely as shreds of historical memory, then, by extension, the individual process of re-memory can be procreated on a historical level. In fact, Ghosh uses memory as a metaphor of personal history on one side and public history of opium trade and life in Canton on the other side. The character focalizer Mr. Slade also refers to the instances of past “where the seizure of property belonging to British subjects has provided the grounds for a declaration of war” (515). He informs that all that happened in 1622 and gives the example of British politics with Dutch and Spain. He emphasizes:

‘I have looked into the matter,’ continued Mr. Slade, ‘and even a brief inquiry reveals several instances where the seizure of property belonging to British subjects has provided the grounds for a declaration of war . . . . I cite these examples only as precedents, because the history of commerce does not exhibit any instance of so extensive a robbery as is being contemplated now by Commissioner Lin—and that too on the specious plea of morality.’ (515)

This reflects the intense politics and seriousness of opium trade era in Canton. In the beginning of the chapter one finds Deeti, the main protagonist of first part of the *Ibis*
trilogy *Sea of Poppies*. The omnipresent narrator starts the novel with the following opening lines:

Deeti’s Shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius . . . .

The site was a good geological anomaly—a cave within a spur of limestone, hollowed out by wind or water—and there was nothing like it anywhere else on the mountain. Later Deeti would insist that it wasn’t chance but destiny that led her to it—for the very existence of the place was unimaginable until you had actually stepped inside it.

(03)

The omnipresent narrator narrates Deeti’s past life which was there in the memory of “Every child” in “Fami” who “knew the story of how Deeti had learnt to paint” (08). Here the omnipresent narrator narrates but the focalizer is Deeti—a small child or “a chutki of a child” (08), who as an adult character narrator might have described her childhood period in an embedded story to her clan in past while narrating her personal family history.

The use of shifting narrating point of view by Ghosh makes the story of Deeti and Kalua’s clan more reliable as Deeti is a link between the first and second part of the *Ibis* trilogy whom the reader finds to be the most reliable character in the first part of the *Ibis* trilogy and again in the second sequel she thinks her to be the only informer giving true account of all the happenings after the *Ibis*’s encounter with storm. Deeti also becomes character focalizer in the beginning of the first chapter who thinks that she was the only witness of the whole incident and saw everything ‘through the eye of a storm’:

It was so dark nothing was vizib except when the lightning flashed
And—tuletan the rain, coming down like hail, and the thunder, dhamak-dhamak- dhamakaoing as if to deafen you. My job was only to cut your granper down from the mast, where they had tied him, but what with rain and wind, you can’t imagine how difisil it was . . . (16)
Though Deeti is the most reliable character in the previous sequel but the narrative device of mystery and magic realism used in “The Parting” scene in *River of Smoke* makes Deeti unreliable as the omnipresent narrator asks the question: “Was it possible that she had imagined all this in retrospection?” (19) In the very beginning of the narrative Deeti is shown to be quite sure that she witnessed the whole scene of ‘The Parting’:

No one who heard Deeti on this subject could doubt that in her own mind she was certain that the winds had lofted her to a height from which she could look down and observe all that was happening below . . . . It was as if the tufaan has chosen her to be its confidente, freezing the passage of time, and lending her the vision of its own eye; for the duration of that moment, she had been able to see everything that fell within the whirling circle of wind: she had seen the *Ibis*, directly below, and four figures . . . herself being one of them; . . . (16)

In Chapter ‘two’ Neel appears to be on Deeti’s side supporting her vision of an ‘eye’ of the storm when he questions:

How was it possible then that Deeti, an illiterate, frightened young woman had been granted this insight? And that too at a time when only a handful of the world’s most advanced scientists knew of it?

It was mystery, there was no doubt of that in Neel’s mind . . . . he began to feel that Deeti’s voice was carrying him back into the eye.

(20-21)

The reliability of a narrator has been one of the fundamental questions of narratology since Wayne C. Booth who first raised and introduced the concept of unreliable narration in 1961 in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. The reliability of
narrator may be put to doubt in several ways and thus the truthfulness of any narration in fiction as such has also been questioned many times. The unreliability of narrator is linked with mental illness and instability in the voice of broken mind. Bahram as character focalizer becomes totally unreliable whenever he inhales opium and is gripped under its intoxicating effect. With every dose of opium, he thinks himself to be in the company of Chi-Mei and finally, in the state of tipsiness, he submerges into the water. The whole scene makes the reader awestruck as nowhere the omnipresent narrator draws any dividing line between reality and Bahram’s opium fuelled dreams. Here, it is truly remarkable of Ghosh, as the reader is awestruck and may ask the questions like—where the reality ends? Where the imagination begins? The curiosity among the reader is aroused and he almost gets alarmed when the narrative has the clues like the “dangling rope ladder caught Paulette’s attention” or “the ladder caught her eye”, “the dangling ladder” and “a ladder hanging from window. . . ” (546), indicating that something wrong might have happened with Bahram. Later, Neel reveals Paulette who again appears all of sudden in the narrative, that the dead man is Ah Fatt’s father “Seth Bahram Modi” (548). There are many such scenes when there is no demarcation between Bahram’s opium infested vision / dreams and reality. These instances show that in River of Smoke, unreliability occurs when the author uses the narrative devices like magic realism and mystery in relation to mainly Deeti and Bahram Modi.

Ghosh has linked the thread of mysticism from the previous novel Sea of Poppies to the second sequel of the Ibis trilogy too. He creates the atmosphere of mystery and suspense through visions, dreams, superstitions, visitations and even premonitions. The mysticism which Ghosh introduces with Deeti’s prescient sketches of the Ibis goes through this novel also though in different spheres and contexts. In relation to Deeti, the mystery is associated with her unswerving faith in a supreme power but as
for Bahram Modi’s supernatural visions and visitations, his reactions are identified in
fear, guilt, repentance, pain and pathos. Bahram touches his ‘kasti’ whenever there is
inner-conflict in his mind and he is confronted with problems of insecurities and feeling
of utter fear.

At the end of the novel again the elements of mystery and suspense are used as a
narrative strategy very deftly by Ghosh to present the history of war period when Neel
finds in Chinnery’s painting, the picture of “Fanqui-town in flames” (552). There are
questions in Deeti’s mind about the paintings that the narrator shows through mimesis
when she shares her feelings with Neel. The element of mystery, presented on page 552,
arouses suspense and curiosity among the reader too who is bound to think—what will
happen next?

Ghosh adopts the technique of combination of third person narration with first
person narration. The technique of first person character narrator, different character
focalizers, executed with omniscient and implied narrator is used by Ghosh for the
purpose of presenting the truth of individual’s lives in the vast sweep of historical
movements. Ghosh’s main focus is to depict how colonizers use the very weapon of
‘freedom’ in the armory of free trade to devastate the lives of Chinese to keep them
merely puppets to their laws and policies. It also highlights Commissioner Lin’s efforts
to make China opium free and bring China back to normalcy and right track.

The implied author appears to question through King Charles and Commissioner
Lin as why one and the same thing is prohibited in England but not in China? Lin
comments: “So long as you do not take it upon yourselves to forbid the opium but
continue to make it and tempt the people of China to buy it, you will be showing
yourselves careful of your own lives, but careless of the lives of other people, indifferent
in your greed for gain to the harm you do to others. Such conduct is repugnant to human
feelings and at variance with the Way of Heaven” (543-44).
Charles stirs Bahram’s conscience by asking questions: “‘Who will you choose, Mr. Moddie? Will you choose the light or the darkness, Ahura Mazda or Ahriman?’” (470). Through such scenes and the heated conversations between real historical figures like King Charles, Mr. Slade, Captain Elliott, Mr. Jardin and Commissioner Lin the novel shows British officers, traders and colonizers always negotiating with Chinese authorities only for their own benefits.

Different characters have endured a furious past and have unknown time ahead. Their present and future are determined by outside forces—the forces of nature, fate, chance, destiny, laws and policies of the colonizers, the emperor’s edict and the interventions of Queen of England. Bahram Modi has lost his mistress Chi-mei. His son, Ah Fatt is now estranged to him and dislikes and avoids him. Modi has lost not only many chests of opium in a storm but his family too. Ah Fatt has lost his mother and father’s company and support and finally becomes an opium addict and a murderer. Raja Neel Rattan, whose property is already confiscated by the British, lives an unknown life, away from his family in Canton as a Munshi to Bahram Modi. Robin Chinnery has lost both his mother and father and the same is with Paulette. All of them remember their past; however they struggle continuously to make a meaningful present only to live a better future. The omnipresent narrator narrates the stories of these characters to show how difficult it is to live in such an appalling and disturbed atmosphere of Canton when there were confrontations between the opium traders and the British officials on one side and Chinese Emperor on the other.

The ‘Maidan’ in River of Smoke, has been used as metaphor which has its own role in the narrative. It is a place that becomes a mirror in the hands of all kinds of narrators—omnipresent narrator, first person character narrator Robin Chinnery and different character focalizers. The images of whole Canton life are mirrored through the
Maidan, used as a forceful instrument possessed by the writer. It becomes the running motif in the second and third parts of the text. Just like any of the characters, it has its own characteristics in the novel and becomes the evidence or the testimony to all the major happenings in Canton. Chinnery calls it to be the “heart and hearth” (104) of Fanqui-town.

The ‘window’ is also a metaphor used as camcorder or a binoculars possessed by different narrators and character focalizers through which they could see the activities in the Maidan. It has been considered as one of the luxuries in the accommodations of the Canton. Robin Chinnery writes to Paulette:

Since then I have been installed in the American Hong, in a room twice as large and far more luxurious than the one I had before: and nor am I deprived of the view that I had at Markwick’s, for here too I have a window that looks out on the Maidan! I have indeed been singularly fortunate . . . . (529)

Ghosh takes advantage of the metaphors ‘Maidan’ and ‘windows’ in narrating the setting of the place by using them as the medium to project life in Canton. At the same time ‘Maidan’ is projected to be the unifier of all sorts of persons from different strata of society and their activities.

In River of Smoke, Ghosh presents history not only through the perspectives of the colonized, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the sufferers, the marginals and the like but also from the perspective of the colonizers. The single issue of surrender of opium cargoes is perceived through many character focalizers. Burnham reacts:

‘An open threat has been issued against us; our lives, our property, our liberty are in jeopardy. Yet the only offence cited against us is that we have obeyed the laws of Free Trade—and it is no more possible for us to
be heedless of these laws than to disregard the forces of nature, or disobey God’s commandments.’ (435)

The reader comes to know about different views through the serious discussions and debates of the traders and the frequent devious and indirect remarks of even Hindustanis. Burnham who never liked to speak in public in English objected with a cry:

‘You cannot give in, Captain Elliott!’ Cried Burnham. . . . If you give in now, this man will win—this commissioner. He will win without harming a hair on our heads without touching a weapon. He will win just by writing these things’ . . . ‘he will win by writing these, what do you call them? Hookums? Chitties? Letters? (518)

To present the vivid account of the period, the narrator also takes the help of translators like Mr. Fearon who are arranged and summoned by British officers and traders to translate the real and original edicts and proclamations issued by Chinese officials (including Commissioner Lin). Ghosh writes in the acknowledgement of River of Smoke:

Quotations the from edicts and proclamations issued by Chinese officials (including Commissioner Lin) are generally adapted from translations published contemporaneously in Chinese Repository, the Canton Register, Portfolio Chinensis and Correspondence Relating to China.

In rendering passages of Neel’s Bengali version of Commissioner Lin’s letter to Queen Victoria, I have relied partly on W. C. Hunter’s translation; but mostly I have adapted it from Arthur Waley’s beautiful translation in The Opium War through Chinese Eyes (Stanford University Press, 1968). (556-57)
Mr. Morrison, the translator assures that he will try ‘to render’ Commissioner Lin’s ‘own words’, to the best of his ability:

“'I, High Commissioner Lin, find that foreigners have, in their commercial intercourse with this country, long enjoyed gratifying advantages. Yet they have brought opium—that pervading poison—to this land, thus profiting themselves to the injury of others. . . . (511-513)

In spite of all opposition, Lin Tse-hsu makes every effort for peaceful surrender of opium. He gets success in forcing the British opium traders to forfeit their opium stock. Ghosh presents the graphic details of the stern action taken by Lin to destroy the opium in present tense to depict the vividness of the whole scenario through Chinnery’s letter:

A field has been marked out, and trenches have been dug; the crates are stacked nearby as they arrive. The Commissioner is determined to prevent pilferage so the perimeter is guarded day and night and everyone who works there is searched, before they enter and when they leave. . . . (534)

But there it is, this great haul of opium, and the day comes for Commissioner Lin to set in motion the process of its destruction. And on the eve of the ceremony, what does the commissioner elect to do? Why, he sits down to write a poem—it is a prayer addressed to the God of the Sea as asking that all the animals of the water be protected from the poison that will be soon be pouring in. (534)

But Commissioner Lin’s victory and achievements are only temporary. The British win the first Opium war primarily because the Chinese do not press their advantage and take captive Charles Elliott, the chief superintendent of British trade,
when they had the opportunity to do so. Julia Lovell, the historian may be quoted here again who observes that one of the reasons of China’s defeat was internal:

Cantonese involved in the fighting of late May 1841 would never forget that while the peasant militants gathered hungry for a second day of the battle with the British on the hills and rice fields outside the city, it was a representative of their own government (the prefect of Canton, Yu Baochun) who came to the rescue of the British. (161)

The novel even includes an imagined and fictionalized coincidental meeting of Bahram and Zadig with deported Napoleon, exiled in St. Helena, as a part of narrative strategy used by the narrator for narrative purpose. The conversation in mimesis mode of narration with the former emperor serves to present authenticated voice from history to illuminate the trade period of other Asian countries with China in remote past as well.

On reaching Hainan in China, Bahram is reminded of the journey to an island he visited in 1816, twenty two years before, when they (Bahram and Zadig) departed from Cape Town in a cargo ship Cuffnells. The last chapter of section one focalizes the opium war from the perspective of the real historical figure Napolean. He indulges in lengthy interrogation with Bahram through the mediator Zadig—the master of many languages. Three of them discuss about the most important business community of the period—the Parsees, their identity, costumes, customs, rituals, religion, language etc. They also talk about the business language ‘patois’, the atmosphere in Canton and trade between England and Asian countries including China in past. There are also discussion on Canton factories, history of Chinese tea business with England and the reasons behind trading opium from India to China. The whole conversation is presented both through mimesis and diegesis modes of narration. Zadig Bey informs the General about the
commencement of opium trade in China. He represents authentic authorial voice when he informs:

Since the middle years of the last century, the demand for Chinese tea has grown at such a pace in Britain and America that it is now the principal source of profit for East India Company. The taxes on it account for fully one-tenth of Britain’s revenues. . . . it becomes clear that the European demand for Chinese tea is insatiable. In China, on the other hand, there is little interest in European exports—the Chinese are a people who believe that their own products, . . . are superior to all others. In years past this presented a great problem for the British, for the flow of trade was so unequal that there was an immense outpouring of silver from Britain. This indeed was why they started to export Indian opium to China. (173)

Zadig becomes the mouthpiece of the writer focalizing the historical past through the legendry, increasingly bizarre, outlandish, original stories. The General puts many queries that lurk in reader’s mind also. The questions which Napoleon asks ironically, stirs Bahram’s conscience who feels “at a loss for words” when he clears (Bahram) his situation:

Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him—his friends, his family, his servants—by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by. (175)

Napoleon with “piercing gaze at Bahram” remarks: “But a man may die, may he not, because he sails upon the wind?” (175).
In its temporal setting, section one ‘Island’ ends in remote past incident experienced by Bahram and Zadig in 1816—a chance meeting with Napoleon Bonaparte who was deported to a small island in the Atlantic but section two ‘Canton’ begins in present of the main story line with Robin Chinnery’s letter written to Paulette. The omnipresent narrator uses here an epistolary form of narration. Robin Chinnery very frequently writes letters to his childhood friend Paulette and the first letter is written on Nov. 7, 1838 from Markwick’s Hotel Canton. The voice of first person character narrator or dramatized narrator Robin Chinnery dominates the plot in the second part of the novel as one of the main narrative voices. The first person epistolary form of narration in present tense, without any interference of omnipresent narrator along with third person narration of main plot by omnipresent narrator, is used alternatively in braided manner throughout the second and third part of the novel.

The ending of each section in the narrative is mostly in complete coherence with the beginning of the successive section, irrespective the typology of the narrators. The flow of the novel is not disrupted with the shift in narrators / focalizers. For example, in part two ‘Canton’, the first sub-part of seventh chapter ends with the description of the word ‘Achha Hong’ by Chinnery and the following part begins with Neel’s day spent in ‘Achha Hong’ maintaining the cohesiveness and continuity of the narrative. Chinnery as the first person dramatized narrator gives the view of Canton in his letter to Paulette: “There is even a factory that is spoken of as the ‘Achha Hong’—of course it has no flag of its own” (185). Further the omnipresent narrator starts the next section by narrating Neel’s life in Achha Hong in Canton: “Neel’s days began early in Achha Hong. Bahram was a man of settled habits . . .” (186). The same pattern of narrative coherence is followed throughout the narrative.

Chinnery’s letters become the camcorder, recording not only the views, the atlas, the landscape and the geography of Canton but also capture the mood of the town that changes with the change in political and historical scenario. The same Canton is
projected through different pictures with change in political scenario as Chinnery’s letter focalizes the same place in the end of the novel in different tone. The pictures of Canton are projected through Chinnery’s letter in a mysterious manner as he sees it in his vision when he closes his eyes and thinks himself “to be back in Canton” (550):

> From the top I looked down and saw a line of flames leaping above
> the river; the factories were on fire and they burnt through the night. . . .
> I saw that the Fanqui-town had been reduced to ashes; it was gone
> everything had disappeared . . . in the Maidan. They had all been wiped
> away and in their place here were only ashes . . . (550-51)

Maidan in Canton is the hub of all activities but it also transports the characters through their memory of past to another time and space. Chinnery is reminded of Calcutta as he watches the Maidan in Canton. The same is with opium, paintings and plants in the novel that become the connecting thread, transporting the narrator from one train of thought to another. Used as motifs in the novel the Maidan, the window, the opium, the plants and the paintings occupy a lot of space, involving the characters and helping the narrator in presenting the life in Canton throughout the narrative. The omnipresent narrator’s comments on window are noteworthy:

> And then there was the window which was, a perennial source of
> disruption in the daftar . . . there was always a rich medley of sound to
> cope with, wafting in from below: the barriking of barrowmen and the
> drunken bellowing of sailors on the dicky-run; the keening of moochers
> and the clattering of lapperdudgeons; the whistling of tame songbirds . . .
> (222)

Repetition is one of the important strategies used by the author to present the events more life-like and from all points of view. The omnipresent narrator speaks of the
author’s mind and his narrative strategies when he comments in the beginning of the novel:

Repetition is the method through which the miraculous becomes a part of everyday life: even though the outlines of the tale were well known to everyone, Deeti would always be confronted with the same questions when she led family expedition to the shrine (14).

All the three sections are connected mainly by two characters Bahram and Neel and one object, i.e. opium that has changed the fate of many characters in the novel. Ghosh has made an effective use of narrative techniques in his novel that helps him to communicate his observations and ideas and to project them very minutely and emphatically through different pictures and scenes of the period.

The exotic places of River of Smoke make great part of its charms. The main setting of River of Smoke is a place in China i.e. Canton, an island, that is only a part of history now and exists no more. There is Canton’s old foreign enclave known as the “Thirteen Factories” which Ghosh calls “Fanqui-town” in River of Smoke. This part of Guangzhou was convulsed by riots and finally abolished and tossed to grounds in 1856. In spite of new setting, characters and places Ghosh does not lose sight of his big themes. The languages, people, scenes, images and food proliferate as he shifts action from island to island. There are the references of clothe-market of Singapore, which appears geographically and in the novel chronologically between Mauritius and Canton.

Zadig, as character focalizer, further comments that Canton had not always kept outsiders at bay and that only happened when European traders began building forts on the outskirts:

‘Evidently, under the guise of setting up a hospital, the Dutchmen were busy building fort! And even after the deception was discovered the
Chinese did not attack or molest them. Instead they used the tactic... a boycott. They stopped people from sending supplies, so the Dutch ran out of provisions and had to abandon the island. From then on the Chinese knew that the European would stop at nothing to seize their land... When faced with problem they [Chinese] try to find a solution... Fanqui-town. It was built not because the Chinese wished to keep all aliens at bay but because the European gave them every reason for suspicion.’ (380)

Ghosh seems to suggest that forcing others ‘freedom’ in the name of trade is but an irony. Trade promotes great potential for cosmopolitanism. This potential reaches its highest position when the terms and conditions are mutual. On the other hand the legacy of imperialism also means that business carries the power to harm and alienate. Ghosh reminds us of this truth with Bahram’s appraisal of current lingua-franca of globalization: “Really, there was no language like English for turning lies into legalism” (349). The authorial presence dominates the narrative voice when Ghosh uses letters as documentary on history. There is the inclusion of original letters written to Queen Victoria by newly appointed Canton’s High Commissioner—the real life character lin Zexu. The farmans, hookums or authoritative proclamations send by him are also included as the actual historical documents by Ghosh. The novel is quite important with its typical background depicting how the trade in opium ignited British Empire’s dreams and aspirations.

Ghosh’s background as an anthropologist, historian and a journalist informs his works as he himself remarks in an interview with Michelle Caswell:

For me, the value of the novel, as a form, is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs, religion, family love, sexuality. As I see it the novel is a meta-form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe
other kinds of writing, rendering meaningless the usual workaday
distinction between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc.

(“An Interview with Amitav Ghosh”)

Ghosh uses another skillful structural device to present the personal history as well as particular atmosphere of Canton, i.e. the repetition of key words, use of phrases, idiomatic sentences, quotations, and Cantonian languages of the period – patois, pidgin and creole. The use of this technique of heteroglossia helps Ghosh to make the text polyphonic, presenting the internal and intense feelings of the characters in their mother-tongues. These characters use idioms, idiomatic sentences, sayings and even expletives or cuss words from different languages—Hindustani, French, English, pidgin and creole. There are quotations from Seneca too. For example, Mr. Slade points out: “But this is an instance when we would do well to recall the words fallaces sunt rerum species. We must pay heed to the immortal Seneca; we must look beyond appearances” (515). At one time in the narrative Mr. Salde comments on Charles King: ‘Ab ore maiori discit arare minor . . .” “From the older ox the younger learns to plough” (448). The other example is when Charles, in his answer to Chinnery, quotes a line of scripture “thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil” (459). Section one ends with Napoleon wishing good bye in his own language i.e., French: “Au revoir messieurs, bonne chance!” (175). In an interior monologue Bahram is reminded of his mother’s Gujarati sayings: “You know what people say about sons-in-law: kutra pos, bilara posperjemeina jeniyane varma khos—rear a dog, rear a cat, but shove the son-in-law and his offspring into the gutter . . .” (48). Bahram’s comments on Napoleon are also notable. The omnipresent narrator reveals the interior thoughts of Bahram who observes the General very closely: “His build reminded him of one of his mother’s Gujarati sayings: tukki gerden valo haramjada ni nisani—‘a short neck is a sure sign of haramzada’” (169). There are different elements of speech that are sometimes used in the novel. For example the
characters use informal language and even broken and incomplete sentences. The broken and incomplete sentences used by Ah Fatt are the testimony of his broken and deserted heart when he tells Neel about his past: “We both half Achha, but never see India. We talk about India, about her mother, my father. And then . . .” (93).

At times there are just few words that these characters use only to convey a general idea or impression and it is up to the reader to perceive and fill the gap. In the final meeting of opium traders Bahram silently and seriously thinks while responding to Captain Elliott:

    Time!
    . . . He was too proud to tell them that time was the one thing he
did not have; that a delay of two years would mean certain default;
that for him the results of Captain Elliott’s betrayal would be ruin,
bankruptcy and debtor’s prison.
    None of this could be said, not here, not now. Somehow Bahram
managed to summon a smile. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Of course. My investors
will wait.’ (519)

There is flashback when Deeti, as character focalizer, narrates the event of her escape with others on the stormy night – the fleeing of five fugitives in storm:

    Dey-kone, you can imazinn how this news affected us all and the gran
kankann that was caused, . . . and for Zikri Malum too, because he was
her hombo . . . I was the only one who wasn’t surprised, for it was as if
everything was coming to pass as I had seen, when the storm carried
me aba-laba and showed me what was happening below . . . (18)

The use of the words like Dey-kone, hombo, Tantinn, tu-vwa, aba-laba, etc. by the writer shows the language of the period—‘Creole’. The very first chapter causes difficulties even to an astute reader who cannot pick up the meaning of the words used
by Deeti. He is almost awe struck to confront such words and struggle hard to pick up the meanings though the writer provides the *Ibis Chrestomathy* to assist his readers. Here proper English is sometimes rejected and the characters express themselves in their own authentic voices, even at the cost of the possible expense of losing the reader.

*River of Smoke* is different in its treatment of language as Ghosh also includes the language of laskars and other different dialects. The language is used here as a narrative device in the novel to create the atmosphere of The Indian Ocean region, which was not only an incredibly multilingual area in the past but also in the present. Amitav Ghosh intends to present the readers the vivid account of this historical reality by using motley of English language in his novel as a narrative device. During his extensive research on laskari language Ghosh found it to be a wonderful nautical jargon. Further he became very interested in the trading language of Southern China—the ‘patois’ which was named as ‘pidgin’ that means business. Both the novels of the *Ibis* trilogy are seafaring novels and as much as Ghosh is subverting a form closely linked with imperial writers like Conard and Kipling; he is also paying homage to the worldliness of Moby Dick.

The ‘patois’ which abounds in *Sea of Poppies* is present in *River of Smoke* too, though it is more controlled and efficient in this novel. The different languages, dialect and distinct speaking style of characters serve to illumine the polyglot quality of narrative world and also personal backgrounds of the characters. The *sepoys, serangs, gomustas, munshis, lascars, shroffs* and more are brought to life only because of their particular dialects. In an interview with Michella Caswell, Ghosh speaks of language used in the novel:

> The Indian Ocean region is an incredibly multilingual area and I wanted to give the reader some idea of this by using different varieties of English. English has been a ‘globalized’ language for a long time, so it is very rich in dialects and registers and I don’t see any reason why these vast resources should not be put to use. . . . Similarly,
became very interested in the trading language of southern China—the patois which is known as ‘pidgin’. A lot of the south China patois has actually passed into English—e.g. 'Can do / no can do'; or 'Long time no see’ etc. A great deal of the Indo-Chinese patois is still preserved in Shanghai and Hong Kong. The word 'Bund' (which is now the name for Shanghai’s most famous street) comes from a Hindustani root (meaning 'to tie'); similarly 'nullah'; 'shroff’ etc. I am completely fascinated by these linguistic interchanges and mixtures . . .

Globalization of English language is not a recent phenomenon but it has its roots in past also. English language has been globalized for a long time so it is very rich in dialects and registers.

Ghosh further talks about the language of nautical fiction of the nineteenth century which influenced him a lot. He has also done extensive research as he has himself admitted in the interview with Michella Caswell. He went to Mauritius to search at the National Archives and some other libraries. He also visited Greenwich, England and found a marvellous collection of the National Maritime Museum. The sailors from all over the Indian Ocean were known as ‘lascar’—East Africans, South Asians, Filipinos, Chinese, and Malays. In the same interview Ghosh says:

It is really wonderful to see how things got along on a ship with such a cosmopolitan crew. It must have specially pressing issue on a sailing vessel for it is impossible to work a sail ship without clear commands – that’s why there’s such an extensive nautical jargon in English.

Here Ghosh further says:

“I found through a library catalogue a nineteenth-century dictionary of the ‘laskari’ language. I’d never seen any reference to this dictionary anywhere
And this lascar language proved to be a wonderful nautical jargon that mixed bits of Hindi, Urdu, English, Portuguese, Bengali, Arabic, Malay and many other languages. I found it fascinating for me personally because incorporated elements of many of the language I grew up with. (“An Interview with Amitav Ghosh”)

In the *Ibis* novels the Laskari pidgin language is “most interesting aspect of history of that period” as Ghosh further states. He comments in the same interview:

> The language was actually used on sail ships. Some words from this lascar language still survive and are used in merchant ships in India. But this language was just used to give order—a language of command not of conversation or a spoken language. There is uncommon language and expression mainly in the opening chapter of the novel to describe the scene better in this language. So when Fitcher is suddenly aware of a strange ‘bedoling’ in certain parts of his body, we can see him rocking in pain.

It is evident here that omnipresent narrator’s voice surpasses the demarcation between the verbal and visual and his characters’ speech is quite audibly heard. The reader may clearly hear Deeti’s Bhojpuri with a strange mixture of other tongues like Creole that has become her individual idiom and further of her clan as she recalls the eventful night on the *Ibis* when it faced the cyclone in a stormy night. Robin Chinnery’s conversation reminds the reader of Jane Austen’s England. The reader is delighted by the sing-song of pidgin as Bahram’s mistress Chi-meih sympathizes with him: “Oh? Mister Barry too muchi sad inside’” (69) and again when she shows her concern for Bahram: “Mister Barry trouble have got? Blongi sad inside?” (70).

In Ghosh’s endeavours to create the atmosphere of past and present and the detailed history of Canton, the novel *River of Smoke* is suffused and enriched with so
many languages and slangs. In spite of his extensive research in detailing the past Ghosh has also compiled the Chrestomathy as Tolkien has given detailed maps and histories of people in *The Lord of the Rings*. But the difference between the two places is that Tolkien’s was a fictional world, while Canton is a part of history in the years preceding the opium wars, and even if it is nearly lost. As far as pidgin is concerned, it is a medium of communication completely poetic, lyrical and straight and definitely more melodious than present day SMS and digital language. It reminds of the communication urgency as one of the greatest needs of the world where commercialism brings different cultures and worlds into contact with each other and unites them.

To understand history, one has to encounter pre-history. In the same way one has to travel through narrative to encounter a meaning that lies deeper than the story’s narrative surface. Although Ghosh has written *River of Smoke* as a historical novel but even in that period there were the issues which are still prevalent in present affecting the societies and people of different countries. By presenting the trade through silk route in the period of 1836, Ghosh appears to link it to the opium trade in China and then to the present world of globalization. He opens up the possibility of assuming an active role as a writer to focus on the contemporary problems of the globalized world of twenty first century. This scenario has its relevance in today’s world scenario. Almost a century and half later, in the present world, material gains still provokes the countries to assault and overpower the other ones. Ghosh here talks about the birth of capitalism and the horrible opium war that is still hovering over the world today. These similarities between past and present are implicitly present even in his other historical novels. There shouldn’t be any surprise that historical fiction might be an appropriate and important mode to understand issues of present day. The novel shows startling reversal of fortune and tender love stories. It also draws vivid pictures of blind thirst for money and importance of the drug
trade in the life of people in opium trade era and exposes the screening and concealing of base impulses behind the rhetoric of freedom of trade. There is convergence of nineteenth and twenty first centuries in River of Smoke, which results in an exhausting historical novel with strong contemporaneous vibrancy and resonance.

The first part of the novel River of Smoke is characterized by fragmented sequences whose irregular juxtaposition is combined result of ellipsis, digression and jumbled chronology. It is a text that uses polyvocal narrative. Ghosh creates a symphony of voices through the use of flashback, recall, memory, interior monologue, stream of consciousness and shifting narrative points of view. In some parts of the novel, he departs from the linearly furnished emancipatory narrative to challenge traditional historiographies narrating the historical events. Ghosh uses this strategy to reveal the life of people as he situates his narrative completely within the historical event of opium wars and opium trade. He develops the plot and tells his story through different narrative strategies finally making it an open-ended narrative. Ghosh also uses post modern novels’ techniques of the fragmentation, non-linearity of the plot and shifting narrative voice, to obligate the reader to draw an interpretive frame work actively.

Some narratological aspects need special consideration in the novel River of Smoke, for example, its multilayered beginning but unified ending to present all the important character focalizers present in the novel. Another important aspect is the presentation of the whole bouquet of varied stories narrated and focalized through varied characters, related or unrelated, projected and juxtaposed with the utmost care to echo a unified, single plot. And the third aspect is how the omnipresent narrator, even with the assistance of the first person character narrator and different character focalizers, feels handicapped and incompetent as to take the narrative to its denouement on his own. In leading the narrative to its final resolution he has to recede back by taking short leaves to give space to the real personas and documentation and these testimonies are given
considerably enough time so that different internal authentic voices from history may be
heard in the narrative.

Thus, the novel is a perfect example of Ghosh’s interest in history and his vision
on historiography. By using different narratological devices in a remarkable manner,
Ghosh presents a counter-narrative of China opium war in 1838, exposes historical
discourse and argues for projection of those historical events that are deleted from the
memory of the people with the passage of time. Ghosh’s omniscient narrator, as a story
teller, may cause confusion for his readers, but those who tolerate the strayed canvas
mainly in the first section of the narrative, ultimately carry off in finding the broken
montage that all the deviations have amassed into. In River of Smoke out of intricate web
of historical events, embedded stories, memories, images of past, different relationships
and variety of languages, Ghosh constructs a graphic and an intense narrative. Its main
focus is on migration, identity, human relations and the major one is opium trade and
avarice of British in the name of ‘free trade’. Ghosh relates to the past as a condition of
the present, as a possible recollection which leads to a better comprehension of the
present. It is a reflection not a massive net covering the audience. Ghosh’s narrative,
steadily oscillating between different time frames, subverts the importance of time in his
work as for him the events are rather more important as one he selects to recall. Amitav
Ghosh keeps all the channels open both for himself as well as for the audience. The
endeavour, instead of digging up old colonial corpses, digs up a new identity for us,
connected or unconnected to the past. For the readers options and avenues are always
open.