



Implicit Elements of Existentialism in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *River of Smoke*

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Abstract : Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), the second book of the Ibis Trilogy, explores the socio-economic and political dynamics surrounding the opium trade in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world. Although not explicitly a philosophical novel, it is deeply embedded with implicit existentialist themes. The narrative interrogates the tensions between economic determinism and individual agency, the struggle for selfhood amid cultural displacement, and the search for meaning in systems defined by coercion and global capitalism. Characters such as Bahram Modi, Neel Rattan Halder, Paulette Lambert, and Fitcher Penrose confront "the absurd" a condition in which the world appears indifferent to human values, identity, and suffering. Their journeys illustrate existential anxieties related to freedom, choice, moral responsibility, alienation, and the unstable quest for belonging in a fragmented multicultural environment. By depicting characters who must shape identity and purpose in contexts marked by colonial violence, commodification, and uprootedness, *River of Smoke* demonstrates that existential meaning is not bestowed by social institutions whether family, nation, race, or religion but must be negotiated by individuals through deliberate action and ethical accountability. This article examines the implicit elements of existentialism in *River of Smoke*, arguing that Ghosh's historical narrative ultimately doubles as a philosophical reflection on the human condition under imperial modernity.

IndexTerms - Existentialism, Absurdity, Freedom, Identity, Displacement, Alienation, Capitalism, Colonialism, Choice, Human Condition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* extends the historical trajectory initiated in *Sea of Poppies*, tracing the intensification of the opium trade in Canton on the eve of the First Opium War. Yet beyond the novel's historical, cultural, and geopolitical texture lies a deeper inquiry into the philosophical crisis of human meaning. The narrative presents a world in which traditional systems of value, nation, religion, class, commerce, and kinship prove inadequate to provide moral or existential grounding. This crisis aligns the novel with the concerns of existentialist thought, particularly as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Soren Kierkegaard. While the novel does not explicitly invoke existentialism as a label or doctrine, its characters are repeatedly confronted with alienation, moral choice, uncertainty, and the responsibility of self-definition in an indifferent world.

Existentialist literature often asks: How do humans construct identity and meaning in a world devoid of inherent order? In *River of Smoke*, this question resonates through the experiences of individuals caught in transoceanic circuits of migration, trade, and cultural encounter. Beneath the historical narrative lies a philosophical meditation on how individuals reconcile the search for meaning with the realities of power, economy, and global exploitation.

Existentialism is grounded in the recognition that human beings often confront an absurd world, a universe that does not guarantee meaning, morality, or justice. In *River of Smoke*, the absurd manifests not as metaphysical crisis but as material and historical reality. Canton both physical setting and symbol represents a cosmopolitan world where laws, cultures, and moral systems collide, producing disorder rather than clarity.

For migrants, lascars, traffickers, botanists, and sailors, there is no stable anchor to identity. The brutal unpredictability of colonial commerce reinforces the existential notion that human beings are thrown into situations beyond their control. They cannot rely on social order to provide direction; instead, meaning must be constructed internally. Even those aligned with power, like Bahram Modi, discover the fragility and indifference of capitalist structures. The opium trade promises wealth and legacy yet simultaneously threatens the individual's autonomy and moral clarity. In *River of Smoke*, characters repeatedly learn that the world does not uphold fairness, purpose, or truth, a fundamental condition of the existential absurd.

Bahram Modi's psychological and ethical collapse is the most pronounced existential arc in the novel. A self-made Parsi merchant who staked his fortunes on opium, Bahram oscillates between capitalist ambition and moral guilt. His dilemma reflects existentialism's central condition: freedom is unavoidable, and every choice entails responsibility.

Bahram recognizes the human suffering caused by opium and acknowledges the political danger of continuing the trade, yet he cannot disengage. His choice ultimately becomes a confrontation with the self rather than external forces. Sartre emphasizes that individuals are condemned to be free, that they must create meaning through choice, even in systems they do not control. Bahram

embodies this paradox. He is neither a hero nor a villain; he is a human being forced to choose meaning in a world where no external authority, nation, religion, or commerce relieves him of responsibility.

As the conflict between British merchants and Chinese Commissioner Lin intensifies, Bahram experiences existential anxiety: a psychological state that arises when individuals realize that their worldview and identity are self-constructed rather than fixed. His hallucinations of Burnham and his late wife become metaphors for the divided self torn between ambition and ethical truth. In the end, Bahram's tragedy lies not only in financial ruin but in the realization that he shaped a life that no longer aligns with his moral self.

Neel Rattan Halder, once a Bengali zamindar, undergoes radical transformation after his arrest, enslavement, and displacement across the ocean. His experience embodies what Kierkegaard calls "the dizziness of freedom", the overwhelming realization of infinite possibility after familiar identities collapse. Once grounded in status, caste, and privilege, Neel is forced to reconstruct meaning in a world beyond traditional social markers. Stripped of titles, wealth, and homeland, he refuses to surrender to victimhood. Instead, exile becomes a site of philosophical reformulation, where Neel discovers identity not as inherited but as consciously chosen.

Alienation, one of existentialism's key experiences, becomes a productive state for Neel. His multilingual and transcultural interactions in Canton translating, negotiating, and learning illustrate how meaning emerges not from belonging but from participation in a world of change. Exile does not destroy him; it becomes the condition for existential rebirth.

Paulette Lambert, caught between cultures and continents, illustrates the existential quest for belonging in a world where identities are fluid rather than stable. Raised in India but racially European, resourceful yet unanchored socially, Paulette experiences existential homelessness not in geography but in the self. Her involvement in botanical research with Fitcher Penrose symbolizes the search for meaning through curiosity and intellectual purpose. Yet her romantic and emotional isolation persists, emphasizing that existential crisis is not solely an ethical or economic struggle it is also deeply affective.

Paulette's experiences demonstrate that belonging cannot be inherited or granted; it must be constructed. In a world where colonial categories determine value, she becomes a figure who refuses classification as an existential choice to exist authentically rather than according to imposed roles.

The Canton setting creates a multicultural space where languages, religions, ethnicities, and trades intersect. While critics often read this cosmopolitanism as celebration, *River of Smoke* reveals a darker truth: hybrid worlds can magnify rather than resolve existential anxiety.

Migrants and sailors lack roots; expatriate merchants live alien lives; and coastal settlements operate outside national and ethical boundaries. The trading enclave resembles Sartre's "No Exit", a physical and psychological space where freedom exists without grounding, producing volatile competition rather than community. Characters are free to reinvent themselves, yet this freedom comes without direction. The result is existential tension: choice without certainty, identity without origin, and ambition without meaning.

The opium trade represents not merely economic coercion, but the existential danger of substituting material acquisition for meaning. Bahram Modi, Burnham, and other traders pursue profit as the ultimate goal of life, revealing capitalism as an existential framework rather than only an economic system.

The market replaces morality, turning human beings into commodities and reducing cultural relationships to transactions. When Commissioner Lin warns merchants that opium corrupts the moral fabric of society, the warning echoes Kierkegaard's concern that modern materialism suppresses ethical responsibility. Characters who root identity in market success eventually face existential collapse. Bahram's panic and despair intensify precisely because he equates meaning with profit so when profit dissolves, meaning dissolves with it.

Existentialism rejects the idea that morality is externally imposed. Individuals must choose ethical identity through conscious action. Across the novel, characters encounter opportunities to recognize complicity and to redetermine their moral position. Neel chooses solidarity with the oppressed. Paulette chooses authenticity over assimilation. Bahram almost achieves ethical clarity, although his failure emphasizes not cynicism but the difficulty of existential responsibility in a coercive world.

River of Smoke does not promise redemption through transcendence; instead, it finds redemption in self-awareness, compassion, and ethical engagement, the existential affirmation that meaning is a product of responsibility.

II. CONCLUSION

Although *River of Smoke* is anchored in the historical context of the Opium War and global capitalism, its philosophical implications extend beyond socio-economic critique. The novel constructs a world where individuals must confront displacement, absurdity, and the failure of inherited systems of meaning. Through Bahram, Neel, Paulette, Penrose, and others, Ghosh explores existential anxieties, identity undoing, choice burden, the need for authenticity, and the search for meaning in morally ambiguous conditions.

The novel suggests that existential meaning cannot be entrusted to empire, commerce, nation, or religion. It must emerge through individual responsibility, ethical self-definition, and active engagement with the human condition. In this sense, *River of Smoke* is not only a narrative about colonial capitalism but a philosophical inquiry into how human beings negotiate meaning in a fractured, unstable world.

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