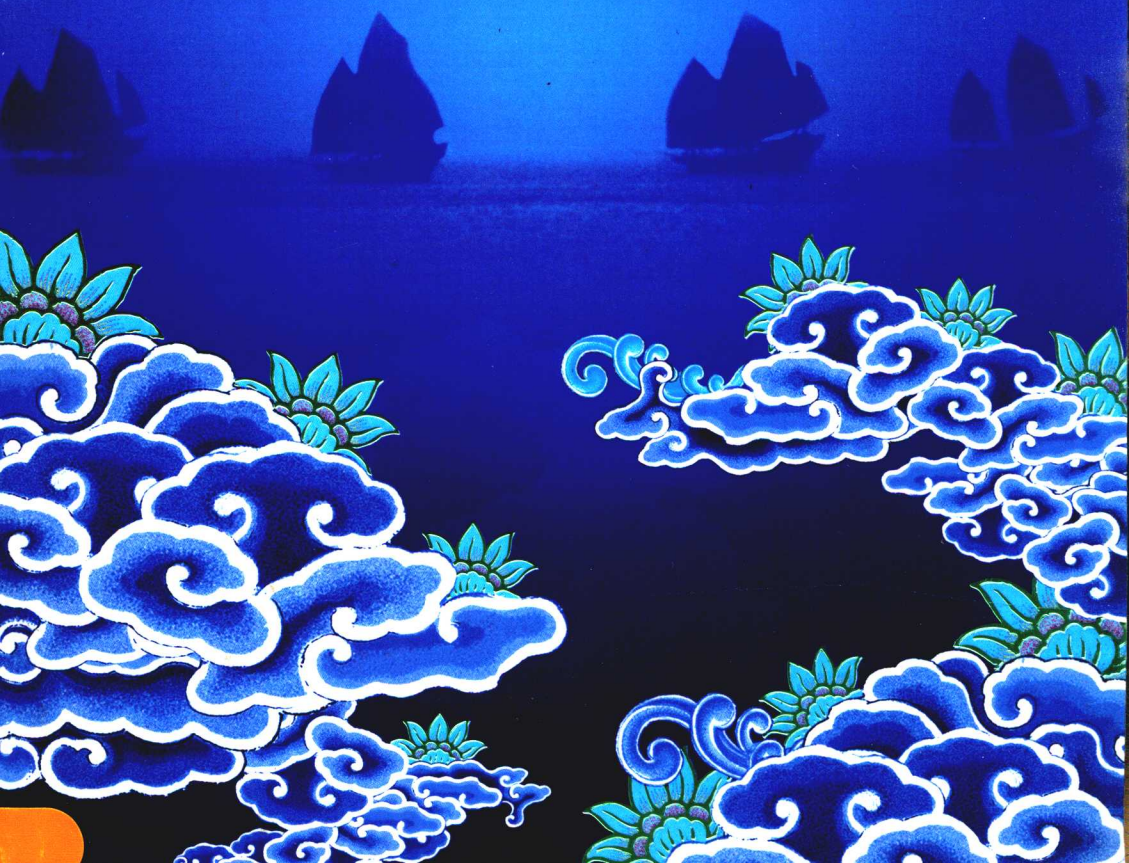


Amitav Ghosh River of Smoke

*From the bestselling author of
Sea of Poppies*



River of Smoke

Amitav Ghosh



JOHN MURRAY

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River of Smoke

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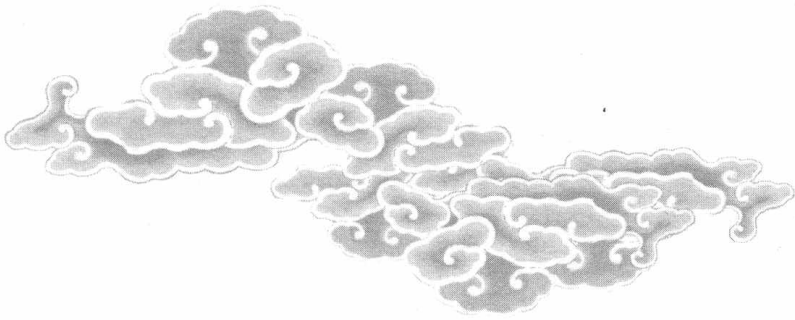
Incendiary Circumstances

Sea of Poppies

*For my mother
On her eightieth*

Part I

Islands



One



Deeti's shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius, where the island's eastern and southern shorelines collide to form the wind-whipped dome of the Morne Brabant. The site was a geological anomaly – a cave within a spur of limestone, hollowed out by wind and 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.

The Colver farm was across the bay and towards the end of Deeti's life, when her knees were stiff with arthritis, the climb up to the shrine was too much for her to undertake on her own: she wasn't able to make the trip unless she was carried up in her special pus-pus – a contraption that was part palki and part sedan chair. This meant that visits to the shrine had to be full-scale expeditions, requiring the attendance of a good number of the Colver menfolk, especially the younger and sturdier ones.

To assemble the whole clan – La Fami Colver, as they said in Kreol – was never easy since its members were widely scattered, within the island and abroad. But the one time of year when everyone could be counted on to make a special effort was in mid-summer, during the Gran Vakans that preceded the New Year. The Fami would begin mobilizing in mid-December, and by the start of the holidays the whole clan would be on the march; accompanied by paltans of bonoys, belsers, bowjis, salas, sakubays and other in-laws, the Colver phalanxes would converge on the farm in a giant pincer movement: some would come overland on ox-carts, from Curepipe and Quatre Borne, through the misted uplands; some would travel by boat, from Port Louis and Mahébourg,

hugging the coast till they were in sight of the mist-veiled nipple of the Morne.

Much depended on the weather, for a trek up the wind-swept mountain could not be undertaken except on a fine day. When the conditions seemed propitious, the bandobast would start the night before. The feast that followed the puja was always the most eagerly awaited part of the pilgrimage and the preparations for it occasioned much excitement and anticipation: the tin-roofed bungalow would ring to the sound of choppers and chakkis, mortars and rolling-pins, as masalas were ground, chutneys tempered, and heaps of vegetables transformed into stuffings for parathas and daal-puris. After everything had been packed in tiffin-boxes and gardmanzés, everyone would be bundled off for an early night.

When daybreak came, Deeti would take it on herself to ensure that everyone was scrubbed and bathed, and that not a morsel of food passed anyone's lips – for as with all pilgrimages, this too had to be undertaken with a body that was undefiled, within and without. Always the first to rise, she would go tap-tapping around the wood-floored bungalow, cane in hand, trumpeting a reveille in the strange mixture of Bhojpuri and Kreol that had become her personal idiom of expression: Revey-té! É Banwari; é Mukhpyari! Revey-té na! Haglé ba?

By the time the whole tribe was up and on their feet, the sun would have set alight the clouds that veiled the peak of the Morne. Deeti would take her place in the lead, in a horse-drawn carriage, and the procession would go rumbling out of the farm, through the gates and down the hill, to the isthmus that connected the mountain to the rest of the island. This was as far as any vehicle could go, so here the party would descend. Deeti would take her seat in the pus-pus, and with the younger males taking turns at the poles, her chair would lead the way up, through the thick greenery that cloaked the mountain's lower slopes.

Just before the last and steepest stretch of the climb there was a convenient clearing where everyone would stop, not just to catch their breath, but also to exclaim over the manifik view of jungle and mountain, contained between two sand-fringed, scalloped lines of coast.

Deeti alone was less than enchanted by this spectacular vista. Within a few minutes she'd be snapping at everyone: *Levé té!* We're not here to goggle at the zoli-vi and spend the day doing patati-patata. Paditu! Chal!

To complain that your legs were fatigé or your head was gidigidi was no use; all you'd get in return was a ferocious: *Bus to fana!* Get on your feet!

It wouldn't take much to rouse the party; having come this far on empty stomachs, they would now be impatient for the post-puja meal, the children especially. Once again, Deeti's pus-pus, with the sturdiest of the menfolk holding the poles, would take the lead: with a rattling of pebbles they would go up a steep pathway and circle around a ridge. And then all of a sudden, the other face of the mountain would come into view, dropping precipitously into the sea. Abruptly, the sound of pounding surf would well up from the edge of the cliff, ringing in their ears, and their faces would be whipped by the wind. This was the most hazardous leg of the journey, where the winds and updraughts were fiercest. No lingering was permitted here, no pause to take in the spectacle of the encircling horizon, spinning between sea and sky like a twirling hoop. Procrastinators would feel the sting of Deeti's cane: *Garatwa!* Keep moving . . .

A few more steps and they'd reach the sheltered ledge of rock that formed the shrine's threshold. This curious natural formation was known to the family as the Chowkey, and it could not have been better designed had it been planned by an architect: its floor was broad and almost flat, and it was sheltered by a rocky overhang that served as a ceiling. It had something of the feel of a shaded veranda, and as if to complete the illusion, there was even a balustrade of sorts, formed by the gnarled greenery that clung to the edges of the ledge. But to look over the side, at the surf churning at the foot of the cliff, took a strong stomach and a steady head: the breakers below had travelled all the way up from Antarctica and even on a calm, clear day the water seemed to surge as though it were impatient to sweep away the insolent speck of land that had interrupted its northward flow.

Yet such was the miracle of the Chowkey's accidental design

that visitors had only to sit down for the waves to disappear from view – for the same gnarled greenery that protected the shelf served also to hide the ocean from those who were seated on the floor. This rocky veranda was, in other words, the perfect place to foregather, and cousins visiting from abroad were often misled into thinking that it was this quality that had earned the Chowkey its name – for was it not a bit of a chowk, where people could assemble? And wasn't it something of a chokey too, with its enclosing sides? But only a Hindi-speaking etranzer would think in that vein: any islander would know that in Kreol the word 'chowkey' refers also to the flat disc on which rotis are rolled (the thing that is known Back There as a 'chakki'). And there it was, Deeti's Chowkey, right in the middle of the rock shelf, crafted not by human hands but by the wind and the earth: it was nothing but a huge boulder that had been worn and weathered into a flat-topped toadstool of stone. Within moments of the party's arrival, the women would be hard at work on it, rolling out tissue-thin daal-puris and parathas and stuffing them with the delectable fillings that had been prepared the night before: finely ground mixes of the island's most toothsome vegetables – purple arwi and green mouroungue, cambaré-beti and wilted songe.

Several photographs from this period of Deeti's life have survived, including a couple of beautiful silver-gelatin daguerrotypes. In one of them, taken in the Chowkey, Deeti is in the foreground, still seated in her pus-pus, the feet of which are resting on the floor. She is wearing a sari, but unlike the other women in the frame, she has allowed the ghungta to drop from her head, baring her hair, which is a startling shade of white. Her sari's anchal hangs over her shoulder, weighted with a massive bunch of keys, the symbol of her continuing mastery of the Fami's affairs. Her face is dark and round, lined with deep cracks: the daguerrotype is detailed enough to give the viewer the illusion of being able to feel the texture of her skin, which is that of crumpled, tough, weatherworn leather. Her hands are folded calmly in her lap, but there is nothing reposeful about the tilt of her body: her lips are pursed tightly together and she is squinting fiercely at the camera. One of her eyes, dimmed by cataracts, reflects the light blankly back to the lens, but the gaze of

the other is sharp and piercing, the colour of the pupil a distinctive grey.

The entrance to the shrine's inner chambers can be seen over her shoulder: it is no more than a tilted fissure in the cliffside, so narrow that it seems impossible that a cavern could lie hidden behind it. In the background, a paunchy man in a dhoti can be seen, trying to chivvy a brood of children into forming a line so that they can follow Deeti inside.

This too was an inviolable part of the ritual: it always fell to Deeti to make sure that the youngest were the first to perform the puja, so they could eat before the rest. With a cane in one hand and a branch of candles in another, she would usher all the young Colvers – chutkas and chutkis, laikas and laikis – straight through the hall-like cavern that led to the inner sanctum. The famished youngsters would hurry after her, scarcely glancing at the painted walls of the cave's outer chamber, with its drawings and graffiti. They would run to the part of the shrine that Deeti called her 'puja-room': a small hollow in the rock, hidden away at the back. If the shrine had been an ordinary temple, this would have been its heart – a sanctum with an array of divinities that was centred upon one of the lesser-known deities of the Hindu pantheon: Marut, god of the wind and father of Hanuman. Here, by the light of a flickering lamp, they would perform a quick puja, mumbling their mantras and whispering their prayers. Then, after offering up handfuls of arati flowers and swallowing mouthfuls of tooth-tingling prasada, the children would scamper back to the Chowkey, to be met with cries of: *Átab! Átab!* – even though there was never a table to eat off, but only banana leaves, no chairs to sit on, but only sheets and mats.

Those meals were always vegetarian and perforce very plain, for they had to be cooked on open fires, with the rudest of utensils: the staples were parathas and daal-puris, and they were eaten with bajjis of pipengay and chou-chou, ourougails of tomato and peanut, chutneys of tamarind and combara fruit, and perhaps an achar or two of lime or bilimbi, and maybe even a hot mazavaroo of chilis and lime – and, of course, dahi and ghee, made from the milk of the Colvers' cows. They were the simplest of feasts, but afterwards

when all the food was gone, everyone would lean helplessly against the stony walls and complain about how they'd banbosé too much and how their innards were growling and how bad it was to eat so much, manzé zisk'arazé . . .

Years later, when that escarpment crumbled under the onslaught of a cyclone, and the shrine was swept into the sea by an avalanche, this was the part that the children who had been on those pilgrimages would remember best: the parathas and daal-puris, the ourougails and mazavaroos, the dahi and ghee.

*

It was not till the feast had been digested and gas lamps lit, that the children would begin to drift back to the shrine's outer chamber, to stare in wonder at the painted walls of the cavern that was known as Deetiji's 'Memory-Temple' – *Deetiji-ka-smriti-mandir*.

Every child in the Fami knew the story of how Deeti had learnt to paint: she had been taught by her grandmother when she was a chutki of a child, Back There, in Inn dustan, in the gaon where she was born. The village was called Nayanpur and it was in northern Bihar, overlooking the confluence of two great rivers, the Ganga and the Karamnasa. The houses there were nothing like you'd find on the island – no tin roofs, and hardly any metal or wood anywhere to be seen. They lived in mud huts Back There, thatched with straw and plastered with cow-dung.

Most people in Nayanpur left their walls blank, but Deeti's family was different: as a young man her grandfather had worked as a silahdar in Darbhanga, some sixty miles to the east. While in service there he had married into a Rajput family from a nearby village, and his wife had come back with him when he returned to Nayanpur to settle.

Back There, even more than in Mauritius, each town and village had its points of pride: some were famous for their pottery, some for the flavour of their khoobi-ki-lai; some for the unusual idiocy of their inhabitants, and some for the exceptional qualities of their rice. Madhubani, Deeti's grandmother's village, was renowned for its gorgeously decorated houses and beautifully painted walls. When she moved to Nayanpur she brought the secrets and traditions of Madhubani with her: she taught her daughters and

granddaughters how to whiten their walls with rice flour, and how to create vibrant colours from fruits, flowers and tinted soils.

Every girl in Deeti's family had a speciality and hers was that of depicting the ordinary mortals who frolicked around the feet of the devas, devis and demons. The little figures who sprang from her hand often had the features of the people around her: they were a private pantheon of those she most loved and feared. She liked to draw them in outline, usually in profile, supplying each with some distinctive mark of identity: thus, her oldest brother, Kesri Singh, who was a sepoy in the army of the East India Company, was always identified by a symbol of soldiering, usually a smoking bundook.

When she married and left her village, Deeti discovered that the art she had learnt from her grandmother was unwelcome in her husband's home, the walls of which had never been brightened by a stroke of paint or a lick of colour. But even her in-laws could not keep her from drawing on leaves and rags, and nor could they deny her the right to adorn her puja-room as she chose: this small prayer-niche became the repository of her dreams and visions. During the nine long years of that marriage, drawing was not just a consolation, but also her principal means of remembrance: being unlettered, it was the only way she could keep track of her memories.

The practices of that time stayed with her when she escaped that other life with the help of the man who would become her second husband, Kalua. It was only after they had embarked on their journey to Mauritius that she discovered herself to be pregnant with Kalua's child – and the story went that it was this boy, her son Girin, who led her to the site of her shrine.

Back in those days, Deeti was a coolie, working on a newly cleared plantation on the other side of the Baie du Morne. Her master was a Frenchman, a former soldier who had been wounded in the Napoleonic Wars and was ill both in mind and body: it was he who had brought Deeti and eight of her shipmates from the *Ibis*, to this far corner of the island to serve out their indenture.

This district was then the remotest and least populated part of Mauritius so land here was exceptionally cheap: since the region

was almost inaccessible by road, supplies had to be brought in by boat and it sometimes happened that food ran so short that the coolies had to forage in the jungle in order to fill their bellies. Nowhere was the forest richer than on the Morne, but rarely, if ever, did anyone venture to climb those slopes – for the mountain was a place of sinister reputation, where hundreds, perhaps thousands of people were known to have died. Back in the days of slavery the Morne's inaccessibility had made it an attractive place of refuge for escaped slaves, who had settled there in considerable numbers. This community of fugitives – or marrons as they were known in Kreol – had lasted until shortly after 1834, when slavery was outlawed in Mauritius. Unaware of the change, the marrons had continued to live their accustomed lives on the Morne – until the day when a column of troops appeared on the horizon and was seen to be marching towards them. That the soldiers might be messengers of freedom was beyond imagining – mistaking them for a raiding party, the marrons had flung themselves off the cliffs, plunging to their deaths on the rocks below.

The tragedy had occurred only a few years before Deeti and her ship-siblings from the *Ibis* were brought to the plantation across the bay, and its memory still saturated the landscape. In the coolie lines, when the wind was heard to howl upon the mountain, the sound was said to be the keening of the dead, and such was the fear it evoked that no one would willingly set foot upon those slopes.

Deeti was no less fearful of the mountain than any of the others, but unlike them, she had a one-year-old to wean, and when rice was scarce, the only thing he would eat was mashed bananas. Since these grew in abundance in the forests of the Morne, Deeti would occasionally screw up her courage and venture across the isthmus, with her son tied to her back. This was how it happened one day, that a fast-rising storm trapped her on the mountain. By the time she became aware of the change in the weather, the tide had already surged, cutting off the isthmus; there was no other way to return to the plantation so Deeti decided to follow what seemed to be an old path, in the hope that it would lead her to shelter. It was this overgrown trail, carved out by the marrons, that had shown her

the way up the slope and around the ridge, to the rock shelf that would later become the Fami's Chowkey.

To Deeti, at the moment when she stumbled upon it, the outer ledge had seemed as sheltered a spot as she was ever likely to find: this was where she would have waited out the storm, unaware that the shelf was merely the threshold of a refuge that was yet more secure. According to family legend, it was Girin who found the fissure that became the entrance to the shrine: Deeti had put him down, so she could look for a place to store the bananas she had collected earlier. She took her eyes off him for only a minute, but Girin was an energetic crawler and when she looked around he was gone.

She let out a shriek, thinking that he had tumbled over the ledge, on to the rocks below – but then she heard his gurgling voice, resonating out of the rocks. She looked around, and seeing no sign of him, went up to the fissure and ran her fingers along its edges before thrusting in her hand. It was cool inside, and there seemed to be space a-plenty, so she stepped through the gap and almost immediately tripped over her child.

As soon as her eyes grew accustomed to the light she knew she had entered a space that had once been inhabited: there were piles of firewood stacked along the walls, and she could see flints scattered on the floor. The ground beneath was littered with husks and she almost cut her feet on the shards of a cracked calabash. In one corner there was even a scattering of ossified human dung, rendered odourless by age: it was strange that something that would have excited disgust elsewhere, was here a token of reassurance, proof that this cavern had once sheltered real human beings, not ghosts or pishaches or demons.

Later, when the storm broke and the winds began to shriek, she piled up some wood and lit a fire with the flints: that was when she discovered that some parts of the chalky walls had been drawn upon with bits of charcoal; some of the marks looked like stick figures, made by children. When the raging of the wind made Girin howl in fear, it was these older images that gave Deeti the idea of drawing upon the wall.

Look, she said to her son: dekh – he is here, with us, your father. There is nothing to fear; he is by our side . . .