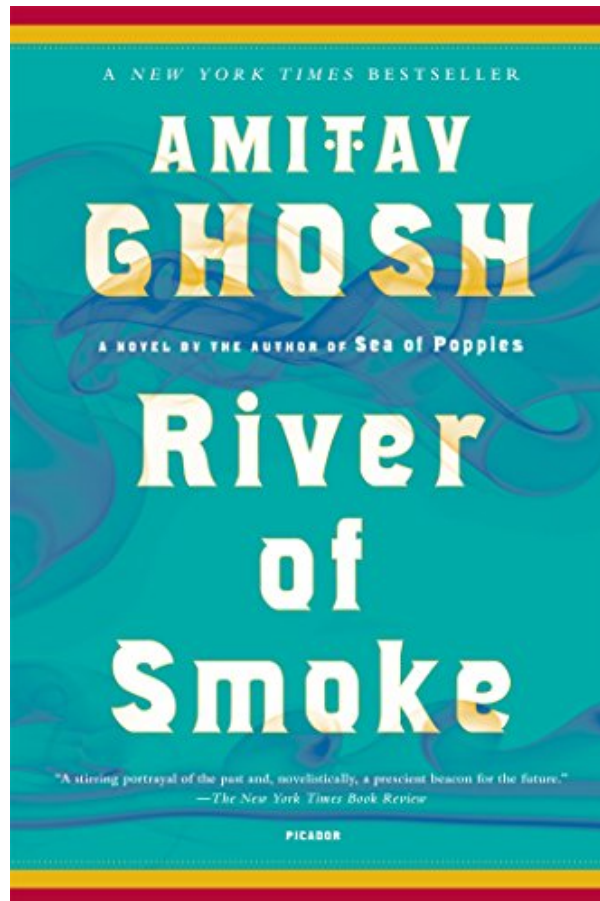
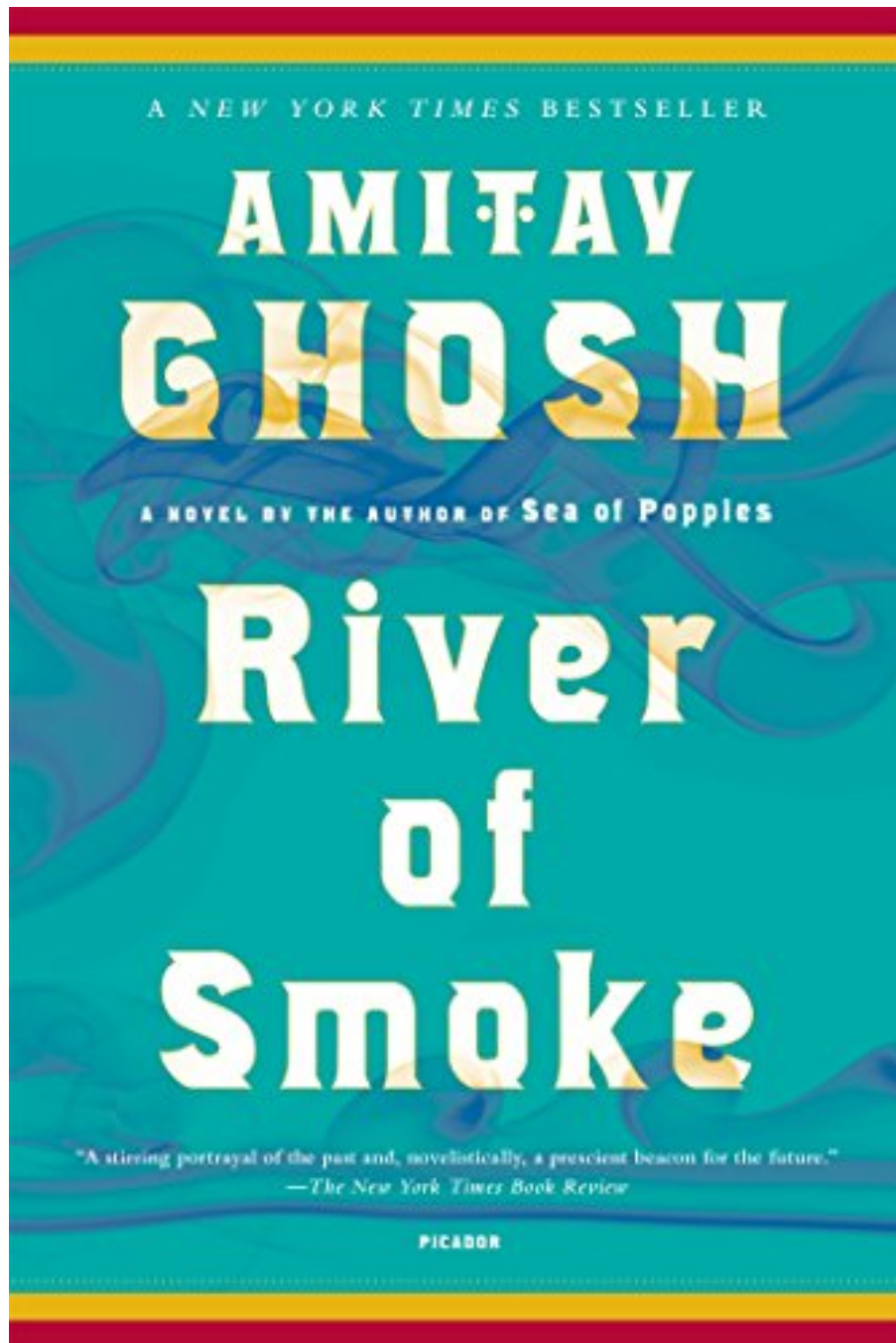


RIVER OF SMOKE: A NOVEL (THE IBIS TRILOGY) BY AMITAV GHOSH



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Review

“Brilliantly done...A monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalization...There will be more, undoubtedly, when the final installment of the Ibis trilogy arrives. I can hardly bear to wait.” ?The Washington Post

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“Ghosh continues to amaze. Few authors since Melville and Joyce have excelled at both rambunctious, rangy linguistic play and deeply and lovingly observed human insight like this.” ?Minneapolis Star Tribune

“Masterful...River of Smoke is a wonderful mixture of people, places, and story that captures a moment in history like an insect snared in amber.” ?Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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River of Smoke

Part II IslandsOne

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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 divinitie...

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A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice

A Washington Post Notable Fiction Book of Year

A NPR Best Book of the Year

In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, the *Ibis* began its treacherous journey across the Indian Ocean, bound for the cane fields of Mauritius with a cargo of indentured servants. Now, in *River of Smoke*, the former slave ship flounders in the Bay of Bengal, caught in the midst of a deadly cyclone. The storm also threatens the clipper ship *Anahita*, groaning with the largest consignment of opium ever to leave India for Canton. Meanwhile, the *Redruth*, a nursery ship, carries horticulturists determined to track down the priceless botanical treasures of China. All will converge in Canton's Fanqui-town, or Foreign Enclave, a powder keg awaiting a spark to ignite the Opium Wars. A spectacular adventure, but also a bold indictment of global avarice, *River of Smoke* is a consuming historical novel with powerful contemporary resonance.

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- Binding: Paperback
- 521 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

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Continues to amaze and entertain!

By Bobby D.

One of the benefits of a summer trip to London is to discover that a much anticipated new book is available there before its United States publication date. So much to my surprise I was able to purchase Amitar Ghosh's new book, the second of his Ibis trilogy, RIVER OF SMOKE. The first book being the outstanding SEA OF POPPIES which I read in 2009. Ghosh continues to amaze with his newest volume as both an excellent writer and story teller. I can not wait for the concluding volume in a few years.

The trilogy is told against the backdrop of the Opium wars of the early 1800s. The first book took many characters to tell the story of how the Opium was produced by the East India Company in India. These characters all found their way to becoming passengers on the ship "Ibis" and the book ends with a great storm and its various character plot lines are cast off without clean endings. So I for one expected that the second book would continue with this same group of characters and their individual stories. Hoping I guess that they all would continue to star in Ghosh's epic production. This was not to be as Ghosh opens SMOKE with what I found to be an extremely muddled opening chapter or two. But then things get going and we also discover that Ghosh has something larger in mind. The story he intends to tell is that of the Opium trade itself. His characters and their stories provide an entertaining window on a world dominated by Opium and its impact on lives and history. The research in this book is astounding. You can feel, see, and smell every part of Canton, China where the setting has now moved from India. This is not a story told in hindsight... it is told in real time with what one recognizes must be real people's reactions to real time events. The book reaches an incredibly high benchmark for historical fiction writing.

As book two begins we are introduced to two other ships who are riding out the storm (with the Ibis?). One has as a passenger, Paulette who is brought forward from the first book and wants to re-discover a rare flower China is rumored to have that is said to cure almost anything. The other ship has the book's new main character Bahram Modi, an Indian, the father of Ah Fatt who is also one of the carry over characters from POPPIES. Bahram invests everything in one big gamble... taking a huge shipment of Opium from India to China. We are introduced to him and his cargo as they sail through a huge storm as he fights against the real possibility of his losing his cargo and investment. When he arrives in Canton, China he finds that the Emperor of China has decided to now close Chinese ports to the Opium trade. A trade that has all along been illegal in China. The British profited greatly by trading opium in exchange for Tea and other Chinese goods. This they did in the name of "free trade" and the rule of "markets" with no concern what Opium's impact on China was. It does not take much for the reader to recognize that Ghosh has found an historical parallel for today's globalization. He focuses on the clash of culture, empire, ambition, profiteering, art, language and love.

I liked these lines found near the end of the book, "Am I wrong to think that it was you who said that the involvement of a government representative would be a perversion of the laws of free trade? This is no longer a matter of trade...it now concerns our persons, our safety. Oh I see!...The government is to you what God is to agnostics - only to be invoked when your own well-being is at stake!" And another line that demonstrates the larger ambition of the narrative, "And what was it all for..... Was it just for this: so that these fellows could speak English, and wear hats and trousers, and play cricket?"

To paraphrase Ghosh, if he had not written such a splendid novel about Canton no one would believe that such a place had ever existed. This is the second part of an amazingly entertaining read. Don't miss out.

30 of 35 people found the following review helpful.

Prelude to an Opium War

By Martin Zook

The River of Smoke is the second installment of Amitav Ghosh's entertaining and informative Ibis trilogy. Is reading the first volume required? Technically, no.

But, the stories are linked in a clumsy fashion, and at least one of the main characters in River of Smoke cannot be fully appreciated in TRS without having read the first volume Sea of Poppies. And, Gosh is painting a broad canvas that includes the British poppy industry and its corrupting affect on Indian society. So, it helps to more fully appreciate Gosh's story to read both volumes.

The Sea of Poppies largely describes the Indian poppy growing and manufacturing industry in 1838. The passage describing an opium factory itself makes the book a worthwhile read. The River of Smoke (TRoS) places its characters in the historical events of 1838-39, when the Chinese succeeded briefly in expelling English opium traders from the international center of Canton.

Ghosh's narrative captures in detail the emergence of Chinese resistance to the growing opium trade. There is tremendously relevant back and forth between the traders and the Chinese (including arguments repeated today to justify various global trade policies). And, the characters in his story are pushed and pulled by material and ethical concerns that are still relevant today.

For those unfamiliar with Ghosh's writing, he is very much from the Dumas, Hugo, Dickens lineage in literature. His books are as comfortable and traditional as overstuffed furniture in front of a fire in the den on a wintry night.

I read both volumes of the trilogy back-to-back and would have read the third consecutively if it had been available.

The characters in TRoS are a little more complex than in SoP, but ambiguity is not a staple of these books. Good people are corrupted by the opium trade and its proliferation. It's an historical fact that the trade for the four years ending in 1839 expanded several times over and while not getting into numbers, Ghosh's story reflects this fact.

The English do not come off well in Ghosh's portrayal. And this is not to say that they should. But the fact that the Chinese emperors allowed the opium trade for as long as they did is given but lip service and that from one of the more repugnant characters in the book.

Some readers have expressed surprise that TRoS did not make the Booker Prize list this year. It shouldn't be too much of a surprise as the book does have its faults.

The linkage of the two books seems clunky on two accounts: 1) characters prominent in the first volume inexplicably fade to the background in the TRoS, after it seemed that the characters would assume major roles at the end of SoP; and 2) the roles assigned to some characters who are carried over seem superfluous. The character of Deeti, who assumed leadership of the Indian immigrants in SoP inexplicably is nearly a ghost in TRoS. What's that about?

Ghosh does increase interest in TRoS by exploring themes of a global economy. Economic historians frequently point out that the 19th century featured freer trade globally than we do in today's more regulated environment. Clearly Ghosh sees the harm in letting market forces, and those who invariably manipulate them, rule.

But Ghosh seems to be setting up a third volume which could explore to some degree the emergence of India and China as emerging economies, which of course is highly relevant to our global economy today.

Enjoy!

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

Not as good as Sea of Poppies; too didactic

By J. P. Craig

Sea of Poppies was a very good picaresque novel, with a sensibility for its characters somewhat like Dickens, a mixture of compassion and condemnation, though generally not unsympathetic toward those it condemned. This second novel in the series has many characters that only exist, seemingly, to parrot ideological positions. The "free trade" fanqui community is a particularly egregious collection of pasteboard cutouts. All this despite a beautiful, lyrical beginning to the novel. It sadly slides away from the stories of people to the broadest of cartoon sketches of the outset of the Opium War, as well as a (deserved) attack on neoliberalism.

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RIVER OF SMOKE: A NOVEL (THE IBIS TRILOGY) BY AMITAV GHOSH PDF

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Review

“Brilliantly done...A monumental tribute to the pain and glory of an earlier era of globalization...There will be more, undoubtedly, when the final installment of the Ibis trilogy arrives. I can hardly bear to wait.” ?The Washington Post

“Gripping...Ghosh has made humanely clear the cold cynicism of the Opium Wars.” ?Richard Eder, The Boston Globe

“Ghosh continues to amaze. Few authors since Melville and Joyce have excelled at both rambunctious, rangy linguistic play and deeply and lovingly observed human insight like this.” ?Minneapolis Star Tribune

“Masterful...River of Smoke is a wonderful mixture of people, places, and story that captures a moment in history like an insect snared in amber.” ?Seattle Post-Intelligencer

“Wonderful...[Gosh] is creating one of the best historical narratives in recent memory.” ?Time Out (New York)

About the Author

Amitav Ghosh is the internationally bestselling author of many works of fiction and nonfiction, including *The Glass Palace*, and is the recipient of numerous awards and prizes. Ghosh divides his time between Kolkata and Goa, India, and Brooklyn, New York.

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River of Smoke
Part II IslandsOne

Deeti's shrine was hidden in a cliff, in a far corner of Mauritius, where the island's western 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 midsummer, 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 stranger 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 divinitie...

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