

# AMITAV GHOSH'S *IN AN ANTIQUE LAND*: A REVIEW

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“If there is a distinctive genre known as Indian Writing in English, then Amitav Ghosh is perhaps its most scholarly practitioner. Ghosh is a traveler in the physical as well as the metaphysical, a writer of formidable learning and intelligence” -*Indian Express*

“His third book bears testimony to his interaction with at least four languages and cultures spread over three continents and across several countries. Indeed, the book, like the earlier ones clearly defies the “shadow lines” of language, religion and culture, and it attempts to explore, at a deeper level, some basic traits of human character and some fundamental human feelings and attitudes that persist through the ages despite socio-political upheavals and geographical changes.”

(Kumar **The Novels of Amitav Ghosh** 151)

**In an Antique Land** is an enthralling chronicle of historical detection and anthropological research; by an Indian novelist, Amitav Ghosh, a wonderful writer with great sensitivity and power to portray situations with a video graphic effect. In his endeavour to find out details of a slave, Bomma, he subtly integrates the picture of village life in modern Egypt. Enrolled as a cultural-anthropology graduate student at the University of Alexandria, Ghosh settled in 1980 into the Egyptian farming village of Lataifa. Two years earlier, he had become interested in ancient manuscripts found in a storeroom of a tenth-century Cairo synagogue; included in the cache were letters from a Jewish trader, who mentioned his Indian slave. Intrigued, Ghosh pursued the identity of his 12th-century countryman.

Amitav Ghosh chanced upon a letter between Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant living in Mangalore, India, and Khalaf ibn Ishaq from Egypt, written in 1132AD. Part of this narrative focuses on Ghosh's search for more documents relating to Ben Yiju and part of the narrative tries to imagine the world that Ben Yiju lived in. The other narrative in the book, covers Ghosh's stay in rural Egypt (Nashawy and Lataifa) and it was this section that I found infinitely more interesting and hence hope to pick up his book of essays **The Imam and the Indian** which promise to shed more light on this phase of his life. The description of rural Egypt created is realistic.

It is in this second narrative that Amitav's gift of story telling is showcased, while in the first narrative it feels stilted, focussed on facts and doesn't flow as naturally. While Ben Yiju did spend time in Egypt and his letters were written to people living there and most of the surviving documentation came from the Geniza Documents cache from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in the Coptic Cairo area of modern day Cairo and Fustat of Ancient Cairo, this is the only point at which the two narratives seem to meet. For the rest of the book, they just continue parallel to each other.

In the final chapters, when Ghosh heads out towards the tomb of a Jewish Saint in rural Egypt venerated by Muslims and Jews alike, I hoped it would bring about a meeting of the parallel stories, but unfortunately it didn't. Both narratives on their own are great and very illuminating, I just didn't see the point of putting them together. Its a great read for someone visiting the Fustat area or interested in observations/revelations from the Geniza Cache or

life in rural Egypt. Ghosh employs a narrative mode that helps him juxtapose the two worlds of India and Egypt and the two centuries, the contemporary and the 12<sup>th</sup> century:

The narrative mode that Amitav Ghosh employs results in the novel moving between the present and the past and we have an extraordinary insight into the interface between two civilizations. In the course of the narrative, the worlds of Egypt – be it Cairo, Lataifa and Nashawy and India through the Southern Coast of Malabar, notably Mangalore, Jamesian “solidity of specification” made possible by Ghosh’s prodigious scholarship in anthropology, history, philology and other allied branches of knowledge” (K.C.Belliappa 17)

The novel begins with the slave’s appearance in modern history. This show the relevance of history in this novel by Ghosh . Ghosh has, like a historian and a chronicler, travelled centuries behind to trace the history of the slave. Still “(Ghosh ) He did not sacrifice historical authenticity to the claims of fiction” (Tapan Kumar, **The Novels of Amitav Ghosh** 156-7).

It is not easy to weave history into the narrative of a novel. Ghosh authenticates his historical details with an annexure of historical references and notes at the end of the novel. There are many historical details pertaining to the various wars fought during different ages. The documents of Geniza are quite a new fact to many of us. His details about the Synagogue and the smuggling of the one and only store house of historical data are portrayed by Ghosh so realistically. It is amazing to know that the last data to be stored in the Synagogue is a divorce that took place in Bombay. In spite of the all pervading sense of history in the novel, **In an Antique Land** does not seem to be too boring. It entertains the readers because there is a parallel story running along with history that keeps the readers both informed and entertained. Tapan Kumar Ghosh comments on the craftsmanship of Ghosh in weaving history into his narrative:

The historical narrative of **In an Antique Land** centres round Abraham Ben Yiju and his Indian slave named Bomma. It is not easy to present facts of history in a narrative vein. But, like a master craftsman, Amitav Ghosh has interwoven history and narrative with a rare dexterity in the story of Ben Yiju. The task was stupendous: arranging the varied materials in historical sequence and building up the complete account of the twelfth century out of fragmentary documents. (**The Novels of Amitav Ghosh** 156)

The novel is an honest and clear picturisation of the problems of immigrants who have settled in other countries for various reasons. The author confesses that he is no exception to it. But he gradually overcomes it and goes through a process of assimilation of the culture, environment and habits of his new surroundings. His findings about the daily activities of slave and master make fascinating reading (e.g., that the slave represented his master in financial dealings), and alternating with this historical data are chapters detailing Ghosh's gradual assimilation into the life of Lataifa. His affectionate portraits of the villagers and of their often colorful idiosyncracies (for example, the complicated relationship between the Imam and his estranged first wife) attest to his perceptivity as a sympathetic observer of a rapidly changing society. In a particularly effective passage, he recounts his feelings when, after persistent questioning about his Hindu beliefs, he discovered in himself what he calls “Indians’ terror of symbols.” And Ghosh is equally astute in detailing the changes wrought by young villagers' departures for jobs in wartime Iraq. While new homes, refrigerators, TVs, and electric generators proliferate, he says, the weakening of family and civic ties proves a high price to pay. Throughout, Ghosh writes with enormous lucidity and flashes of gentle humor, conveying in small and telling details the underlying suspiciousness and insecurity that pervade Egyptian society.

Ghosh’s portrayal of characters is so lively that we feel that we have known the characters, spoken with them and shared experiences. Combining shrewd observations with painstaking historical research, Ghosh serves up skeptics and holy men, merchants and sorcerers. Some of these figures are real, some only imagined, but all emerge as vividly as the characters in a great novel. **In an Antique Land** is an inspired work that transcends genres as deftly as it does eras, weaving an entrancing and intoxicating spell. Just as he is good at story telling, so are his characters. He uses story telling as a technique to blend past with the present. The passing of time is shown in many ways like the growth of characters in the society, economically, widening of intellectual horizon. For instance, the slave in the first letter is just mentioned in the footnote. Later in the second and the third he enters the main body of the letter, with “plentiful greetings”. The changes that the Egyptian society undergoes between his first and second visits show the immense change in technology that take place in the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy.

Ghosh's crosses not only territorial borders, but also borders of time, religion, ethnicity race, language etc. The borders based on these spatial and conceptual factors have been nullified by the author in his book. Apart from such borders, Ghosh also crosses the borders set by the literary theories on fact and fiction. In an interview with John. C. Hawley, Ghosh shares his views on borders which form a major theme in almost all his novels:

What interested me first about borders is their arbitrariness, their constructedness – the ways in which they are 'naturalised' by modern political myth-making. I think this interest arose because of some kind of inborn distrust of anything that appears to be 'given' or 'taken' for granted. This is why I distrust also the lines that people draw between fiction and non-fiction. I think these lines are drawn in order to manipulate our ways of thought: that is why they must be disregarded. (9 **Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Amitav Ghosh - An Introduction**)

Though there is a debate going on over the genre of **In an Antique Land**, it is clear that the novel has all the elements of a novel. Borders of any kind are ephemeral, temporal and man-made shadow lines that are meant to be crossed. Nature is wild and borderless. Man, as a mark of his civilization constructs borders and hold people in circles, to form the "insiderness" and "outsiderness", thereby leading to violence and insecurity. Ghosh advocates doing away with all such concepts in his *In an Antique Land*. He also crosses the limits set by the literary genre and blends fact with fiction. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh in his article, "Beyond the 'Shadow Lines' Amitav Ghosh's quest for the Remains of an Antique Civilization." explains:

It is not easy to categorize **In an Antique Land**, for the book has a certain *je ne sais quoi*.... It is, in brief, a work that easily diminishes, sometimes even wipes out, the bounds of the time-honoured division of literary forms. When at the fag end of the twentieth century, fiction writing ceases to conform to any fixed norms, **In an Antique Land** can be described as an experimental milestone in contemporary Indian writing in English. There is in every layer of the book, memory, real life experience, history and imagination, indivisibly and inextricably linked. (152)

Some critics categorize it under non-fiction. But the book has all the features of a novel. Ramachandra Guha rightly observes:

I recalled Geertz's essay on the blurring of scholarly genres when I read an early review of Amitav Ghosh's **In an Antique Land**, which complained that the book had a 'little too much of everything': history, anthropology, poetry, development studies and rural sociology. In fact, at every step Ghosh's career has mocked the Linnean categories used by intellectuals to demarcate and defend disciplinary boundaries.... **In an Antique Land** is a marvellous exemplification of the creative trespassing across scholarly boundaries and across the line between what is ostensibly 'fact' and what merely 'fiction'. (**Economic and Political Weekly** Vol. 28, No. 11. 451)

But the novel can be easily grouped under the genre of 'novel' for its theme and style in spite of the critical wrangling and debate over its genre. Ghosh's novels are a blend of history, fiction, autobiographical records and memories. *In an Antique Land* shows Ghosh's historical sense not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence and its relevance to future. Many instances in the novels of Ghosh show his profound interest in the concept of 'time'. To quote from his interview for **World Literature Today**:

Time interests me very much. I think it's the central element in narrative. All narratives are really the unfolding of events in time . . . .In each of my books you'll see that time as a problem is approached very differently. . . . In **In An Antique Land** the structure is really that of a double helix, where you have a moment in the twelfth century and a moment in the twentieth century being pulled together solely by a single narrative that has no interactions. (Frederick Luis Aldama 90)

Ghosh shows memory as a unifying thread in the novel and through this he fastens the two centuries together. Memory is personified and given spatial relevance. In fact the whole novel is based on the diary of Ghosh during his stay in Egypt—the novel is constructed on the basis of his own memories.

'Ana,'I said stupidly, my legs oddly unsteady, and that very instant Shaikh Musa's voice began to roar – 'Amitab, ya Amitab, ya doktor, where have you been?'- and for all the time it took his wife to undo the latch he kept repeating: 'Amitab, ya Amitab, where have you been?' ...and so it was not until months afterwards that it occurred to me to wonder how he had recognized my voice when all I had said in answer to his wife's question was 'It's me.'" (114)

Vinay Lal in his article, "A Meditation on History" emphasizes the importance of Ghosh's treatment of a slaves life as a major theme of the novel: "...from this class of subalterns, there arises an individual, albeit a slave, we must pause to reflect on the dignity of a vision that thinks of no individual as not worthy of a history" (90). To obtain such records of ordinary people is difficult because for people like the ordinary slave are not "wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests – the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time" (IAAL 17).

"...their arrangement that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood." (IAAL 259). Those were terrible times, he said, before Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir and the Revolution of 1952, when the Pashas, the King and their 'kindly uncles', the British army, had had their way in all things and the fellaheen had been forced to labor at their orders, like flies, working without proper recompense. (IAAL 194)

Whatever theme is dealt with in the novel, be it time, be it space, the underlying thread Ghosh connects with all his themes is his encompassing humanism that is bestowed on each other crossing all boundaries of nation, ethnicity, religion, language and culture. The novel is a treasure house of such ideas that is the need of the hour today.

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