
The Anthropological and Indefatigable Research of Amitav Ghosh's Novel "In an Antique Land"-A Critical Testimony

Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu, M.A., M.Phil, PhD

*Head, Dept of English, Principal FAC in V.V. &M Govt Aided Degree College, Ongole, Prakasam D.T, A.P
India*

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh as the graduate of anthropology student seems to yearn for a type of syncretism-if not of religions, surely, his writing tries to read the past in the present. Through book *In an Antique Land* (1998:103-33) who is very much appreciates what Ghosh is trying to do, writing that "the author, presenting himself as a traveller in the intercultural border zones, interstitially between the west and the non-west but also in-between modernity and other times, compels us to rethink diaspora, cultural mixture or cultural intercourse. However, for my article presentation I have chosen the title called "The anthropological and indefatigable research of Amitav Ghosh's novel *In an Antique Land* -A critical testimony" in which Ghosh explored the anthropological and historical survey by conveying his testimony as an Oxford University student by advocating himself in the region *In an Antique Land*: "no matter how Ghosh writes by appealing his humanist call for dissolving barriers between nations, peoples, and communities on the grounds that world civilizations were syncretised long before the divisions introduced by the territorial boundaries of nation-states.

Keywords: Anthropology, antique Land, historical, Indefatigable, Narrative, Diaspora, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique land is an unusually constructed book that deals with themes of historical and cultural displacement, alienation, something we might call "subaltern Cosmopolitanism," and the complexities of imagining another person's view of reality. The book is not recognizable as a novel, nor is it simply an historical investigation: it is a new genre, something that blends an anthropological record with a travelogue, a diary, and perhaps some imagined sections. The effect that this has on the reader is to force us to question whether particular events and characters are literally factual.

In an Antique Land shows that he is not a mere fictionist but an indefatigable researcher, a social anthropologist and a keen traveller as well. It bears testimony to Ghosh's interaction with at least four languages and cultures spread over three continents and across several countries unlike some of the other contemporary writer's his canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expressions to new ideas and themes. In an interview, Ghosh talks about the book's theme and form: No this time I am not writing a novel. Not even sociology, history or Belles letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as any one of these. It's a strange sort of work within the parameters of history. "I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer I have ventured on a technical innovation" (Dhawan, 1999; 24).

Further complicating the categorization is the fact that the narrative is set in two time periods; the first is roughly the present, and the second is the twelfth century. The book is based on the investigative work, which Amitav Ghosh conducted during his studies at Oxford University, in the course of which he lived in northern Egypt and tracked down the history of Abraham Ben Yiju, a mid-tweleth century trader, and his slave, to whom a few letters from the time refer. The first of these letters were written in 1148A.D. in Aden, by one Khalaf ibn Ishaq. It is also addressed to Ben Yiju in Mangalore in South-western India. 1148A.D was the same year that a large Crusader army had assembled outside Damascus, so this was a time of heightened political tensions. The letter came to scholarly attention in

**Address for correspondence:*

Yvghosh.yvghosh@gmail.com

1942, when E. Strauss wrote about it. The slave is next mentioned in another of Khalaf ibn Ishaq’s Aden letters, actually a letter written nine years earlier but not written about until thirty-one years after Strauss’s first article. In both articles, there seems little concern about the serious political conflicts of the age, and all attention is instead focused on commerce. Ben Yiju is a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who had become wealthy through commerce with India, and who had died in Egypt. His various papers were discovered centuries later in a synagogue in Cairo. His slave is simply described in the letter as Ben Yiju’s Indian “slave and business agent, a respected member of his household” (18).

As it happens with many graduate students who are hunting for a topic for their thesis or dissertation, Ghosh chanced upon these letters in a library at Oxford in 1978 when he was working on social anthropology. As he describes them, they are “tiny threads, woven into the borders of a gigantic tapestry” (95). I think it is according to their suggestion Amitav Ghosh might have decided this name for this Novel as *In an Antique Land*; a demonstration of the manner in which the strands of the past connect to the present day. The threads become all consuming to the graduate student, though, offering themselves as a possible Rosetta Stone that will be a key to the unravelling of the “weave” of particular culture. Before he knew it, Ghosh had left the ivied walls of Oxford and was off to Tunisia for learning Arabic. Then he was off to Lataifa, an Egyptian village a couple of hours south-east of Alexandria-little knowing at the time that this book, published some twelve years later.

Those who have undertaken a similar academic “journey” will quickly identify with the structure of this book, which begins with the actual journey to Egypt and an account of the author’s response to his immediate surroundings, and then soon plunges into libraries, books, documents, and the imagined voyage back in time to the interlocking worlds of twelfth-century trade between Egypt and India. Much information in this book has to be speculation that raises as many questions as it answers. Ghosh’s conclusion, like those of any researcher has to look into antiquities, remain tentative, but unlike many such researchers, his conclusions are richly imagined and engagingly described. Here one must understand how a graduate student might devote so much energy to two obscure individuals. I think in the course of human progress, after all, Ben Yiju and his slave are nobodies. Something about the process of their discovery, though, prompts Ghosh had brought his findings before a much larger audience than his dissertation committee.

This may involve the new sense of self that Ghosh develops as he experiences himself as an outsider. Like most immigrants, he felt alienated when he went to Britain for his studies, but I think that was nothing compared to the alienation that besets him in the Egyptian village of Nashawy. At one point, for example, Abu-Ali offers him some money to tide him over, but Ghosh is suspicious of the motivations;

I stared at the wallet, mesmerized, wondering whether custom demanded that I touch it or make some other symbolic gesture of acceptance obeisance, like falling at his feet. I saw myself shrinking, dwindling away into one of those tiny, terrified foreigners whom Pharaohs hold up by their hair in New Kingdom bas-reliefs. (30)

He imagines himself from outside and sees himself “shrinking, dwindling away”, and this certainly rings true for anyone who is traveling in another country and has to negotiate another language and set of customs; it can be infantilizing. That may explain his further statement, in which he projects onto his hosts the image of a mean-spirited Pharaoh. Ghosh as the student, in other words, seems as capable of Western tourist might be, finding the occasion to enact his learned images of ancient times in his encounters with present day Egyptians. In such a projected scenario, the people of Nashawy are not simply insensitive to his different customs I think. In such circumstances, he experiences himself as someone almost without a voice, someone who cannot adequately represent himself in the greater society of the powerful “Pharaohs.”

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL TESTIMONY ACCORDING TO GHOSH’S RESEARCH

In Nashawy, Ghosh had “soon discovered that salaried people like Mustapha, rural mowazzafeen, were almost without exception absorbed in a concern which, despite its plural appearance, was actually single and individual religion and politics-so that the mention of the one always led to the

other”(50). At one point, Mustapha goes so far as to apologise for some of his relatives who were working in a vegetable patch: ‘They are fellaheen,’ he said apologetically. ‘They don’t have much interest in religion or anything important’ (51). Ghosh concludes that there is a kind of caste system in this regard: based upon Mustapha’s comments, at any rate, the poor are less interested in blending religion and politics than are the bourgeoisie Muslims. Thus, the anthropologist in Ghosh begins to distinguish between the interests of upper and lower castes in the Egyptian community-and seems to align himself with the lower caste that does not seek to oppress him with their religious beliefs.

As a “non-Muslim”, he becomes increasingly aware of and uncomfortable about the “exclusion” he feels. This is, of course, especially the case during Ramadan, when he is not called upon to fast, as are the others around him. He realizes that Muslims all over the world are undergoing the same ritual, and he is struck by the attraction of that global community. “A phenomenon on that scale was beyond my imagining,” he admits, “but the exercise helped me understand why so many people in the hamlet had told me not to fast: to belong to that immense community was a privilege they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries” (76).

On his return visit to Nashawy in 1988, Ghosh is again struck by the sense of exclusion that quickly overtakes him, prompted by questions about the customs of Indians: did they bury their dead, or cremate them? Was he circumcised? Did they worship cows? Is there military service for all in India, as there is in Egypt? How can you not purify your women? He tries his best to patiently answer the repeated questions. Typical of the responses to his answers is that from one female acquaintance, who tells him “you must put an end to this burning business...when you go back you should tell them about our ways and how we do these things” (169).

He becomes increasingly upset over the repeated onslaught of the same series of questions, and confines to the reader a personal memory that he wishes he had shared with his Egyptian friends. It was as follows: when Ghosh was six years old, his father was working in the Indian diplomatic mission in East Pakistan. His ancestral roots, in fact, were in this region, but recent ancestors had migrated westward and the Ghosh family now identified themselves as Indians. As time went by, he noticed there were occasionally groups of Indians that would gather within the high-walled compound of his family’s home. At this juncture, Ghosh remembered his childhood days as it has followed the history, which interfaces fiction by his own experiences. On one particular day in January of 1964-that momentous year –his father told him to stay upstairs with their cook, with the shutters closed and the door firmly shut. Then young Ghosh could see, beyond the walls, a swelling mob:

I can see the enraged mob and the dancing flames with a vivid, burning clarity, yet all of it happens in utter silence; my memory, in an act of begin protection, has excised every single sound.(208)

At one point, his father returns briefly and retrieves a revolver. Later, Ghosh learns that on this same night there had been riots in Calcutta; as well, but in that city the mob was of Hindus attacking Muslims. This scene around his house then left an indelible mark on young Ghosh’s memory:

The stories of those riots are always the same; tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols-of cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disembowelled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. But I was never able to explain very much of this to Nabeel or anyone else in Nashawy...theirs was a world that was far gentle, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine. I could not have expected them to understand an Indian’s terror of symbols. (210)

In this perspective, here one can understand why Ghosh might wish to keep quiet about this experience, especially if he knows that his hosts already think poorly of Indians. But Gauri Viswanathan (*Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge*. *Stanford Humanities Review*. (1995:19-34) offers an intriguing interpretation of his silence;

The interrogator is interrogated for the bizarre practices of his own culture, and the frustration of being unable to explain either himself or his culture causes the narrator to veer off into another project, another narrative, this

time of a twelfth-century Jewish merchant and his Indian slave. Onto this tale is displaced the impossibility of the ethnographic pursuit; tracing the genealogy of an anonymous slave restores the familiarity of an historical quest in which questions about origins, development, history, purpose, and teleology can be safely asked without the embarrassing dialectical intrusiveness of counter questions posed by the very people who are being studied by the anthropologist. (Viswanathan; 20-21)

Here from this point of view, Robert Dixon (*Travelling in the west: The writing of Amitav Ghosh ‘The journal of commonwealth Literature’*. (1996:3-24) raises a point that parallels Viswanathan’s concerns, but approaches it from the viewpoint of the ephemeral object of Ghosh’s anthropological investigation:

‘Bomma’ is the subaltern consciousness, writes Dixon, “Whose recovery justifies Ghosh’s allegorical reading of the destruction of a polyglot trading culture by western influence. Unlike some contributors to subaltern studies, Ghosh develops a style of writing that is sufficiently nuanced and elusive to sustain the ‘theoretical fiction’ of a recovery of presence without actually falling back into essentialism”. (Robert Dixon, 1996; 18)

Thus, since Bomma remains really very elusive and finally a pretty speculative figure, Ghosh can limit his outlines without over-interpreting his “content.” He is not only a subaltern who cannot speak, but also one that Ghosh uncovers/discovers and thereby owns. However, this provides, perhaps, a certain amount of comfort when one is surrounded by hostile Pharaohs! Notice, as well, the proliferation of names in the contemporary sections of the book.

However, in the gradual removal of the properties to Europe, Ghosh also sees a symbol of the actions of colonizers everywhere, whether for commercial, religious, or intellectual purposes: “a view of the world in which the interests of the powerful defined necessity, while the demands of the poor appeared as a greed” (94). Among many of the Egyptians whom Ghosh met, there was a long tradition of members of the family traveling “outside” and making money for the family. He was struck that they almost uniformly found this a marvelous adventure. But the longer he stays the more eccentric he is made to feel.

While in Mangalore, Ghosh learns a good deal about the history of the mercantile trade in the Indian Ocean before the Europeans arrived, and he finds that it had apparently been remarkably peaceful. But in 1509, the Portuguese changed all that. Thus, Ghosh concludes that “soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has regard ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf” (288).

As a cosmopolitan Indian studying at Oxford, he must have experienced a certain sense of agency and control over his life, but after his studies and his conversation with Imam Ibrahim and others, he appears to have identified more closely with the “delegates of two superseded civilization.” In a sense, he has come to identify himself in this border historic and geographic context as a member of this vast “subaltern” class.

Critical response to this unusual book has been generally positive, though probing questions have been raised by some readers. On the one hand, as we have seen, Gauri Viswanathan can read it in a negative manner, suggesting that

...the mercurial connotations of syncretism encode a set of relativised, partial, and often conflicting perspectives: what Hindus would call syncretic coexistence of religious faith when they refer to “the Hindu way of life” might be termed “forced assimilation” by Muslims...Thus, the use of the word syncretism effaces not only the aspect of domination but also the specific position from which certain interests are advanced, presumably in the name of a larger comity of universal brotherhood. (31)

But others can read the same text and make a completely different judgement. Samir Dayal, for some times, praises it as “a tale about the connections among non-western Cultures,” that can leap over Eurocentric notions of identity; the book, in Dayal’s words:

...a pretext for an approach to understanding subject formation in regions specifically, Egypt and India whose ‘antique’ cultures seem to disappear under the powerful spotlight of ‘postcolonial’ and even ‘colonial’ studies, as if these ancient cultures began to have an ontology only when Europeans discovered them.(104)

But this does bring us back to the genre question. Here we have an Oxford-trained anthropologist writing about two individuals who lived hundreds of years ago, and about whom there is little public record. Why does he do so and, having made the decision, how can do so? We have reason to believe. In this perspective, I think that Ghosh has decided to read the present through the past, and vice versa- he comes to understand Bomma by coming to understand the people with whom he is living in Nashawy. But how, otherwise, is Bomma or for all that matter, all the villagers of Nashawy to speak to Ghosh’s typical readers? Pointing to the author’s strikingly un-scientific speculation about Ben Yiju’s sexual interest in Ashu, and speculation of her possible conversion, etc., However, Samir Dayal notes that “this almost polemical and subversive unravelling of scientific methodology is one of the remarkable features of Ghosh’s genre-bending text.” Dayal goes so far as to suggest that it is this very inability of science to find a way for the subaltern to speak that has led Ghosh to give up anthropology in favour of fiction: “I think it is one of the reasons, one surmises, that for Ghosh’s having undertaking to construct such a hybrid artefact, suggesting that the author is somewhat disillusioned with the capacity of a scientifically pure social anthropology to capture the full –lived truth about the slave” (Samir Dayal: 130).

It is the technical novelty as well as the unique art of construction that marks the book as a distinctive work. There are three parallel stories in *In an Antique Land*. First, the story of a Jewish Merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred Years ago, with his Indian slave called Bomma. He married a slave girl named Ashu, who belonged to the matrilineal community of Nairs, and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Ghosh first did an outstanding indefatigable narrative research in conveying more about in an antique land. Second, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates from first-hand experience in two Egyptian Villages. The third story is about Amitav Ghosh’s search for a story, i.e., his search for the antique world of Ben Yiju and his Slave and the story he builds up from the disconnected and fragmentary medieval documents including the letters exchanged between Ben yiju and his friends and correspondents in the twelfth century.

The book is divided into four sections, “Lataifa”, “Nashawy”, “Mangalore,” and “Going back,” beginning with a prologue and rounded off with an Epilogue. To a large extent, the narrative is based on history. Thus, the historical dimension of the book excels all the others. All the characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. Here Amitav Ghosh has unveiled the multiple strata of the interrelationships between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic Cultures and their histories.

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AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu, awarded his PhD degree in (2012) in the contemporary Indian fiction at **the Acharya Nagarjuna University, GUNTUR, Andhra Pradesh, India**, his M.A., M.Phil, also happened in the English literature. He is now teaching English Literature and Phonetics in **V.V. &M. Degree College ONGOLE**. He became the youngest Principal FAC by virtue of awarded PhD and seniority among existing staff since 2009. His teaching is on main research interests including teaching of *Phonetic Science as well as communication skills*. He has recently published two books.

The first entitled “***The Fictional World of Amitav Ghosh***” with ISBN 9789382186397; and published several other articles in reputed international journals. He has participated National and International seminars/conferences.