



## IDENTIFY CRISIS IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

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### ABSTRACT :

*In An Antique Land, Amitav Ghosh shows how history can be enriched by imaginative reconstruction without damage being done to historical fact. The narrative deals mainly with Bomma, a low-class Indian, bought by a Jewish merchant who comes to India in 1130 AD and lives in Mangalore for seventeen years, before returning to Egypt. This turns into a travelogue when Ghosh recounts how he came across a reference to Bomma, when he goes to England to do research in social anthropology. He actually goes to Egypt to investigate the matter, and he records his encounter with Egyptians, which generate much humour, arising mainly out of cultural misunderstanding. The narrative moves back and forth from India to Egypt and from twelfth to the twentieth century. It is much more than a historical novel. Syam S. Agarwalla deals in detail with Ghosh's art of characterization in the book In An Antique Land. Towards the end of his article, he traces incidents of compassionate humour in the Article.*

**KEYWORDS :** *Antique Land, Ghosh's art of characterization, cultural misunderstanding.*

### INTRODUCTION :

Ghosh's fiction erases artificial boundaries, man-made shadow lines as if in celebration of the famous Sanskrit saying *VasudhiakaKutumbam*(all the people on the earth are one family). His works bears testimony to the intellectual de compartmentalization that blurs the barriers between disciplines of thought and divisions of human knowledge. Ghosh set the tempo from the interviewing of history fiction with *The Circle of Reasons*, which he continued through *In an Antique Land* to the recent *The Glass Place*. His characters cross the boundary lines quite easily, travel across continents comfortably while the author jubilantly celebrates the connections in civilizations, similarities in beliefs and customs. As the author enthusiastically crosses geographical distances transforming it into fictional account, authorial vision shuns distinctions between literary genres, academic disciplines and even the critical tolls of appreciation as a result, a multi-generic novel manifests that defies artificial frontiers exhibition an overarching humanism of the author. His fiction, therefore, even transcends the categorizations of the postmodern and post-colonial while being so at the same time. In an antique land the work is part ethnography, part anthropology, fictional account, documentation, autobiography, a travelogue and a subversion of history which the author is able to combine into an engrossing work of art.

*In an Antique Land* is a marvellously crafted, astonishingly exciting work. On its publication it received rare reviews and glowing tributes from scholar-critics. James Clifford perceives the work as a type of "New" cultural retrieval in weaving together his modern and medieval histories, Ghosh crosses the borders of ethnographic writing, particularly those shared with the novel and travel literature (James Clifford 27).

Ghosh, as researcher occupies centre stage in the novel and from his viewpoint the proceedings of the narrative unfold. In fact, there are 3 parallel narratives in the book. The core action of the novel revolves around Ghosh's own experiences as an anthropologist working for a D.Phil. at Oxford. This narrative is interrupted by and intertwined with Ghosh's stay in Egypt studying the lives of the fellahs of Latafia and Nashway. These two narratives are further intercepted by the protagonist's attempts to establish the identity of an Indian Slave catalogued as "Number MSH 6" in the university Library at Jerusalem. The retrieval of the identity of the slave reads like a gripping mystery drama, with the author finally succeeding in figuring out his identity through many historical evidences and connecting clues. If the retrieval of the name of a forgotten entity of a marginalized slave is an instance of the postcolonial, the many interesting narratives crisscrossing past and present geographical boundaries offers one instance of the postmodern in the subversive agenda of the author. In fact, the work is a subversion of postmodernity itself what with its superimposition on the medieval world he portrays. Amitav Ghosh attempts to recreate "a world of accommodations" which he believes "in some tiny measure, still retrievable" (Gosh 237). He considers colonial intervention as a kind of rupture to humanist continuity. "Indeed, if one looks carefully at Ghosh's medieval construction one can see that this medieval pre-modernity". Syncretism, non-territoriality, multi-lingualism, hybridity, difference. Ghosh's restoration of this ruptured human continuity thus enacts a kind of historical detour which by passes modernity completely, in effectively wiping in out of history" (Anushuman A Mondal 31).

Ghosh's humanism is the axis on which these disparate, multiple vantage points balance themselves. Humanism and secularism are products of modernity, largely western constructs, but Ghosh in his novel, presents a medieval society which celebrated the ideal in practice the very concepts sound eloquent in the modern context, more in theory than in practice. A telling juxtaposition in the novel sums up the chief concern, of the author. When his Egyptian friend, Zaghoul, wonders whether he can reach Amitav's country by donkey, an image of visas, obstacles and the war that stretched from Iraq to Afghanistan flashes across his mind. But in the twelfth century, the novel depicts, how a Jewish trader Abraham Ben Yiju started his journey from Tunisia, reached mangalore coast, settled there from many years acquiring a Nair wife, Ashu and the counter pointing of journey motif set in different time frames reveals that human relationships were cordial and harmonious in the twelfth century and the shadow. Lines have only grown murkier in the twentieth century. What is significant to note is the ease with which the narrator protagonist moves between these time frames "in splendid disregard for the conventions of academic history where the time is above all, continuous" (Ramachandra Guha 451). Ghosh's vision scrupulously avoids the regimentation of western concepts and offers a position that is all inclusive which could be tracked back to ancient Indian thought and south Asian Cultural moves. His humanism and secularism do not proffer exclusions as in the western context, but is all embracing as is depicted in the medieval society of India and Egypt in these narratives.

The narrator researcher protagonist's journey itself is significant in many ways with remarkable enthusiasm the researcher moves from the libraries of the Oxford to the Jewish Geniza, from the small dusty Egyptian villages where the narrator watches in wonderment the transformation that catapults innocent farmers, labourers into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the American libraries. In the process, the journey loses its physical contours and becomes a spiritual discovery. The process of fulfillment is embedded in the small connections, "Ironies of seemingly disparate cultures actually shaping and embodying the distant, rejected, unknown, element" (Anna Sujatha Mathai 32).

The sense of fulfillment is complete with the reconstruction of the identity of the forgotten slave reaching its logical conclusion. The narrator draws illuminating links that bind those different religions, places and cultures together. The concept of the slavery, in this part of the world, was also different from slavery as it came to be known "after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century" (Amitav Ghosh 359-60) Ghosh says:

In the lifetime of Bomma and Benyiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest. In the Middle East and northern India, for instance, slavery was the principal means recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up

through that route, "slavery" was thus often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government (Amitav Ghosh 260).

Among the Jewish merchants of medieval Cairo as well as with many tribes in Africa slaves were sometimes gradually incorporated into their master's households and came to be counted as members of their families. "Equally, in some vocations, the lines of demarcations between apprentice, disciple and bondsman were so thin as to be visible" (Gosh, 260). Ghosh goes on to find similar connections in medieval Indian mores. He discovers that the name of the slave, Bomma, is derived not from the Brahma of the Sanskrit pantheon, but from the much earlier Tulu deity, Berme of Bermeru, one of the Bhuta-spirits of Tuluva Pantheon, absorbed by the all-inclusive Sanskrit incarnations of the later period. At the highest level this bond between master and servant assumes a spiritual dimension. In south Indian, "amongst the pieties and fiercely egalitarian Vachanarara Saintpoets of Bomma's own life time, for example, slavery often used as an image to represent the devotee's quest for god" (Ghosh 260). In the poetry slavery became the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom. The connections do not stop here. Ghosh goes on to find similarities in other cultures such as Sufism and Judaism.

The History - fiction interface in Ghosh's work calls into question the record of historical knowledge. As one critic points out, Ghosh's "while calling into question the truth" of historical knowledge, links the production of knowledge of the expansion of European Colonialism, History, therefore, is revealed to be the history of appropriation." (Anushuman A Mondal 20). The book, in fact, begins with the crusades and ends with the Gulf War. Once colonization started its frenzied march, it was no longer possible to speak "of things that were right, or good, or willed by God". But thrive on "the ascending ladder of Development...." And a language of "Guns and Tanks and Bombs" (Ghosh 237). In addition the vandalism of the Geniza by the Europeans betrays the insensitivity of the imperialists to the values and treasures of the East. The Geniza was the archive of the synagogue which Benyiju attended in the early eleventh century and the letters referring to Bomma were lodged. The Geniza was used as a store house where writing containing the name of God were kept for fear of desecration. Ghosh's search for the identity of the subaltern brings him there and takes pride in the fact that he held the "greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered" (Ghosh 59). But inside there was only absence which has long since been moved. The dispersal of the Geniza material during the late 19th Century under the impact of the European Scholarship coincides with the age of high imperialism. By far the largest acquisition of the Geniza material was made by Solomon Schechter, a Reader in Cambridge University. It is no coincidence that of the many works mentioned in the 25 odd page notes appended at the end of the narrative there is not a single work by a European scholar that Ghosh acknowledges.

Ghosh's subversion of historical knowledge is also evident in his attempts at locating the tiny threads and positing them in a large framework. The author marvels at the similarity of beliefs, myths and customs of the two ancient civilizations of Egypt and India. The Egyptian legend Sidi Abu Kanaka's gravel is considered holy by their people. As it lay in the way of a canal being built the authorities try to remove it but in vain as all the modern machinery fails to dig it out when the narrator is taken round a Bhuta temple he is told how bulldozers failed to break through the Bhuta Shrine when engineers tried to build a road connecting Mangalore city to the port.

The similarity of the past and present in long distances of old civilizations is a kind of revelation of the workings of cultures far removed from one another. The author goes to Egypt again and pays a visit to the tomb of Sidi Abu Hasira at Damandhour. When asked about his identity by an officer the narrator says that he is neither Jewish nor Muslim nor Christian. The papers are in order but what raises their suspicion was why he was there in the first place near the tomb of Jewish saint in Egypt. The Narrator thinks of telling him the story of Bomma and Ben Viju but desists from it as he thinks there is nothing in his work that connects to his story. "The remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago" (Gosh 339). A telling comment on the divisive nature of our times which the narrative strives to set right by many pointers is in the direction of unity, connectedness and cultural amity that humanity could still thrive upon.

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