

In An Antique Land: A Critique

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Abstract

We are fully aware of the fact that Amitav Ghosh is an anthropologist. It is his anthropological study which took him to Alexandria University and consequently to the villages of Egypt. He admits that his campus life and travels within and without the country contributed to his development as a creative writer.

"In 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 writers, his canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expression to new ideas and themes. (Dhawan, p,24)

Keywords: Antique Land, Amitav Ghosh's.

Introduction

The anthropologist Ghosh is at his best in weaving a complex pattern of fact and fiction. It was in 1978 while going through manuscript in Oxford library that Amitav Ghosh read about Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant, who came to India via Egypt around 1130 A.D. and Ben Yiju's slave is from Tululand of ancient India.

Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* is one, among many books in English, in which the novelist dives deep into books, archives, manuscripts, in quest of the past and its connection with the present. *In An Antique Land* is an archaeology of a great mercantile civilization that, from about the tenth century to the sixteenth century, extended from Fez and Saville in the West, through Cairo and Aden around the Red sea, across the Indian Ocean to Calicut and the Malabar Coast. (Dixon, pp.15-16)

Those who have read his first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, will realize Amitav Ghosh's close Knowledge of and intimate relation with the Middle East and the Arab world. In "*In An Antique Land*" Ghosh is in quest of the basic traits of humanity in the two oldest civilizations of the world, those of Egypt and India, in the 'medieval' and the 'modern' periods of the world history. Ghosh uses the mini-narrative of the stories of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant, who travelled between the Middle East and India during the twelfth century, and of his Indian slave, Bomma. The material used by Ghosh for this is the so-called Geniza collation. Javed Majeed explicates on it. He charts the history of this body of archival material from its inception in the Geniza (or storehouse) of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo to its formation as the Taylor-Schechter collection at Cambridge University. It is on the basis of the fragmentary remains of Ben Yiju's letters and their references to Bomma that the author pieces together the personal narratives of two of the main characters of the text.

The removal of this manuscript material from the Middle East to Europe and later to the US becomes a paradigm of methods of European Orientalist scholarship in the colonial and post- colonial period.....

Migration in the text is mainly about uprooting of bodies of archival material, which becomes measure of the disruptive effects of Europeans colonial expansion. As a result, the text conveys a strong sense of the archival. There are also references to the quality of paper, and the author points out that one of the major commodities of trade in the medieval world between the Middle East and India was paper....

For Ghosh, then, cultural declined and the imposition of what he calls 'the map of the modern knowledge' (341-42) brought into being by Europeans colonial expansion is to the dispersion of manuscript material. (Majeed, pp.45-46)

Dixon goes further in this direction:

Ghosh's point of entry into this space is a fleeting reference to an Indian slave in a collection of letters written in Egypt in the eleventh century. The slave, whose name was "Bomma" belonged to the Jewish merchant



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Abraham Ben Yiju. Bomma's first appearance in print was in a letter to Ben Yiju from another merchant, Khalaf ibn Ishaq, written in Aden in 1148. (Dixon, p.16)

A "sense of entitlement" led Ghosh to go to Egypt and the USA, following trails left by a Hebrew journal, *Zion, Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, translated and edited by professor S.D. Goitein of Princeton University. Ben Yiju's "origins lay in a reason that was known as Ifriqiya in the Arabic-speaking world of the Middle Ages- an area centered around what is now Tunisia" (IAAL, p.38) Following the migration of traders to Egypt, Ben Yiju also migrated to Egypt, joined the "Synagogue of the Palestians", the building designed to last until a good seven hundred years after Ben Yiju's lifetime. "A man of accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and poet", (IAAL, p.8) Ben Yiju, a born trader, migrated from Egypt to Aden, sat astride the most important sea - routes connecting the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. His paper shows that his acquaintance with a wealthy and powerful trader Madmun ibn ai-Hasan ibn Bundar proves to be a turning point in his life. It is possible that Ben Yiju was introduced to Madmun, by letters of introduction by his friends and relatives.

Dixon goes one step further and says..

It is precisely such a 'dialogic' relation between past and present that Ghosh achieves in *An Antique Land*. Its very title is ambiguous, suggesting that although he is researching the history of medieval Egypt, the historian at every turn discovers continuities between past and present. (Dixon, pp.18-19)

After Ben Yiju settled as a trader in the Malabar before 1132, there was a continuous exchange of letters between Madmun, Yusuf ibn Abraham and Khalaf ibn Ishaq from Aden and Ben Yiju from India. What is more interesting is the fact that, unlike other traders cum travellers, Abu said Halfon and Abu Zikri Sijlmasi, Yiju "Does not seem to have travelled back to Aden or Egypt even once in the nineteen or twenty years that he was in India" (IAAL, p.128).

Once he had settled in Manglore, according to a document available, he married Ashu, a slave girl. She is not anywhere in the entire corpus of Ben Yiju's except in a set of accounts scribbled on the back of one of Madmun's letters. "It links her to the matrilineal community of Nairs, who still form a substantial section of the population of the southern part of the Malabar Coast." (IAAL, p.188) The document reveals that in India "concubinage is permitted between everyone, so long as it is not with married women." (IAAL, p.186)

Amitav Ghosh's main aim in journeying was to see human behaviour closely. 'In an Antique Land', says Pradeep Trikha,

Thus is a travel book for it records people and their manners. Ghosh has an artist's eye, his perceptions are sensitive and observations are acute.....Ghosh sets out to quench his quest for more interesting fact. His is a "travellers' tale".....Ghosh has the travel writer's infallible eye

for the quirk that lays bare the soul of a people. (Trikha, pp.190-91)

What Amitav Ghosh observes is the fluidity of the medieval world and the inflexibility of modern boundaries. The cultures and style of medieval accommodation form a contrast with the rigid "ladder of Development" (IAAL, p.163) on which nations are linked. This contrast is also evident in the imperceptible merging of folk beliefs with high classical religion in the medieval world as opposed to rigid hierarchies of belief emerging from both Hindu and Muslim Militancy in the modern world.

Amitav Ghosh, a perceptive and intelligent anthropologist and critic, laments the loss of the fluidity of the medieval world, be it Egypt or India. The trade and commerce between India and Egypt as well as Aden and other countries brought immense wealth to India. Probably this might have made the Europeans, especially Portuguese, resort to the use of military force to take control over trade in the Indian Ocean.

All the trade and cultural exchange came to a tragic end at the hands of the Portuguese in the 1530s. Pearson provides details about the disappearance of such a fine cultural exchange: "Diu was constantly harassed, and finally the Portuguese were able to build a fort there in 1535. Five years earlier, along with other Gujrati ports, Rander had been thoroughly sacked" (Pearson, p.129)

Ghosh believes that travel in "In An Antique Land" is an experience for liberty, "perfect liberty to think, feel, do just as one pleases" (Seth, p.33). Ghosh's Columbus like spirit incessantly "ploughed" through the "footnotes of history" to retrace the story of the merchant and his Indian slave. He carries out his research in the heat and dust of a Synagogue of Ben Ezra near Cairo: "it was here in the forlorn corner of Mass that memories of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave lay preserved for more than seven hundred years (IAAL, p.72)

It seems to Ghosh that "in Egypt and India the most impressive and the most awe-inspiring monument of antiquity is neither the Citadels, nor the Pyramids, nor the Nile but the man himself. To see Human beings closely is Ghosh's chief aim is visiting Egypt....In An Antique Land is thus a travel book for it records people and their manners" (Trikha, p.190).

Javed Majeed says that in *In An Antique Land*

.....there is a strong sense of both the ethnographer-historian and his interlocutors being firmly anchored within modern national identities. Ostensibly the text tries to recapture the flexibility of the medieval world, but in the process of doing so it reinforces the exclusive identities of modernity..... In a way, the text colludes with the modern while it reconstructs the medieval (Majeed, p.53).

Aim of the Study

Through this articles I try to show how Amitav Ghosh in "An Antique Land" present to narratives. The first and anthropological narrative and the second narrative presented the history of a jewish merchant Abraham band Yiju and his slaves Ashu and Bamma.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's journey into Egypt and the archives of medieval period not only enriches our knowledge of the people and culture of Egypt, but also throws light on the extortion and rapacity of colonialists, who ruptured the age old cultural exchanges between India and some Middle East countries. Since then, the colonialist's reflection fell on the Indian history. It created a wedge between two cultures. Ghosh's quest ends on a note of regret and anger.

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