In An Antique Land - the Antique and the Present a Study
(A Review of a famous story of Amitav Ghosh)

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In An Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh is a story about Egypt, the antique land referred and narrated by a man who himself belonged to another antique land, India. The similarity deals even in the conquests made by the intruders who set up colonies in the parts which they made their own. It has three major aspects—first, as a student of Anthropology the novelist’s search for the life of Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his Indian slave Bomma. Secondly, his deep insight into the cultural and social development of Egypt from the religious crusades to Operation Desert Storm and thirdly, the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of political and historical changes in their lives.

Ghosh was studying for a degree in Social Anthropology at Oxford when he came across a book of translations titled ‘Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders’ by Professor S.D.Goitein. The letters came from a chamber known as the Geniza, attached to an ancient shrine in Cairo. A letter catalogued MS H.6, written in 1146 AD by a merchant Khalaf ibn Ishaq to a trader named Abraham.

Ben Yiju who was living in Mangalore on the south-western coast of India became the centre of interest. The letter mentions a certain slave and sends him “plentiful Greetings”. Ghosh was mesmerised by the history and soon found himself in Tunisia learning Arabic—specifically Judaeo-Arabic, a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, written language. In 1980 he travelled to Egypt, to a small village Lataifa where he began to observe and learn about the Egyptian people and their lifestyle. From there, Ghosh travelled to another Egyptian village, Nashawy and then on to Mangalore, India living with the people in the towns and villages. He was doing this mainly to track the travels of Ben Yiju and of his slave a man whom Ghosh began to think of as Bomma. Here, Ghosh found ‘a colorful’ cast of characters. These characters were coquetted in a complicated web of kinship relations of which Ghosh was curious. The perceptions of these people regarding India, is ancient and construed as for them, Hindus remained uncircumcised, burnt their dead, consumed spicy food and worshipped cows. He was interrogated about his culture. In An Antique Land is the narrator’s research of the times of Abraham Ben Yiju hinged on a providential discovery of a crucial historical document. It was the quest of the identity of this slave that led Ghosh to Egypt and eventually to the writing of In An Antique Land. The novel skilfully presents the enormous similarity of beliefs and of myths and legends, of the cultural approach of the two antique lands till foreign imperialism erected barriers destroying the unity of the respective countries. Ghosh is struck by the parallel images used by the Vachanakara saint-poets of South India and the Sufi mystics.
of Egypt. The idea of bondage to God was one of the most important and central metaphors of religious life for both the Indians and Egyptians. Ghosh is taken to a Bhuta temple which reminded him of Sidi Abu Kanaka’s grave in Egypt.

The Prologue strikes the keynote to the novel as the narrator historian introduces the elusive object of his research – the identity of a mediaeval Indian slave to a Tunisian Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju. The slave of MS H.6, stepped upon the modern history in 1942 and Ghosh makes him his second self. The narrator – historian embarks on a project to affirm the existence of the Indians love of antiquity. Jews are a community not born to privilege, entitlement, aristocracy, soldiers or scholastics – they are regarded as Histories unrecognised. Heroes and Geniza went on to become a storehouse for medieval documents. Ghosh chronicles his attempt as a young student to figure out what the past has to do with the present. In An Antique Land is an interesting combination of history, sociology and memoir that reaches back into the twelfth century and connects it to our own time.

Amitav Ghosh firmly believes that “History is never more compelling than when it gives us insights into oneself and the ways in which one’s own experience is constituted. What relates history to the novelist is that history gives us particular predicaments which are unique predicaments not repeatable in time and action”. Subaltern studies with its attention to the small voice of history is corrective to both colonist and bourgeois-nationalist historiography.

Ghosh’s story discusses Iran-Iraq war, Operation Desert Storm in terms of a global, including pre- and post-colonial history. In-fact it provides an access to history and identifies the individual experience of living through history. Ghosh, a Researcher in Anthropology adopts the viewpoint of a researcher in Anthropology living in post-colonial Egypt and setting up a contrast between the pre-colonial Egypt of 12th century and the post-colonial Egypt of the 1980s. Ghosh makes a personal commitment with history about Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant and his slave Bomma, the toddy-loving fisherman from Tuluand.

Ghosh is a post-colonial observer of history and gives his own reading/understanding of the characters of both the periods – those of 12th century who were separated by huge stretches of water, mountains yet brought together by the common thread of humanity and the modern world which has been reduced to a global village has been broken up by ‘narrow domestic walls’ erected by the imperialists. In An Antique Land has two set of characters, the one belonging to history and the other to the present world whom he encounters in his fictional world. His ability also lies in the fact that he has the ability to extract the real events, a set of characters whose fictional identity is hidden by the interaction with their environment and the ability to appeal the readers. The main characters in the pre-colonial world are Abraham Ben Yiju, and his slave, Bomma. These characters portray a world where man lived in harmony with man where the gulf existing between people of different races and different cultures became meaningless as they met over the threshold of humanity.

Ben Yiju settles down in Mangalore in India and marries a girl from the matrilineal community of Nairs. Ashu was his love and three years later Yiju becomes the father of a son.
His mentor Madmun sends a coral for the baby from Egypt acknowledging the birth of his first baby. Twenty years later he returns to Egypt with a proposal of his daughter to marry his nephew which was accepted for which he set off to Egypt. Bomma his slave of MSH 6, flits in and out in the narrative. The elusive Bomma went to Aden as an emissary of Ben Yiju who was sent partly on business trip and partly on a shopping jaunt. Bomma is an example of the kind of slavery as understood in the Middle ages. Some slaves were akin to apprentices, some were fictive ties of unrelated kinship, some shared the bond between master and slave which acquired a religious and spiritual dimensions. The Vachanakara saint poets of Bomma’s community often used slavery as an image to represent the devotee’s quest for God. It is certain that Bomma was very close to Ben Yiju his master and was more a companion and partner to him than a slave. It was Bomma who kept Yiju company during his last years.

In An Antique Land has plot, theme, and characterization, a complex fiction engaged with a specific history uninteresting and offering critical interpretation of that history today. In the main plot, is the journey of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave while in the sub-plot is in the opposite direction i.e, towards guns, bombs and tanks of the Western Imperialists’ Powers which caused destruction of the world when Egyptians were stranded in Iraq during the Operation Desert Storm. The colonizers who built the man-made barriers and introduced the deep scars between the Hindus and the Muslims based on customs like burning of the dead, absence of circumcision in boys and clitoridictomy in girls. This was the ushering of modern age where brother betrays brother for money, cherished codes of ethics are compromised and commitments to larger causes are drowned under waves of cupidity. He writes about cunningness, egotism and betrayal. The characters of the contemporary world are people whom the research scholar meets during his pursuit of Bomma. These characters have been brought to life by a few deft strokes of the brush and almost each character reveals the havoc wrought by the post-colonial malady of distrust and selfishness. Abu Ali personifies cupidity, Imam Ibrahim symbolises bigotry and narrow-mindedness, Sheikh Musa symbolises humane and tolerance, while Zaghloul remains the same. Jabeer grows from a quiet boy to self-critical and Nabeel is found to be ambitious. His post-colonial attitude is clear in his description of the vandalism of the Geniza by the Western powers. Ghosh lashes out at Western Imperialism. He points out the utter callousness of the colonizers towards their subjects and the demoralization of the colonized. Geniza symbolises the intellectual superiority of the East which prostitutes to Western imperialism in the exchange of power at high level and a few dinars as bakshish amongst the custodians of the shrine/synagogue. They were ready to part with Geniza, as the balance of power lay with England. Geniza vandalism highlighted the contemptuous indifference of the imperialists of the ancient treasures and the values of the East but aptly defines Ghosh’s attitude to the two worlds he created – the historical (ancient) and the fictional (present). The modern-day sections in the novel brim with conversations in which ethnographic subjects converse with the narrator, question him about his religion or culture practices and in turn informs him about their own beliefs.

The communal riots in Dhaka are neatly crafted out by the narrator’s profiles into the explosive barriers of symbols embedded in the post-colonial situation, of cities going up in flames because of a cow found in temples and pigs found thrown in mosques. Ghosh does elaborate on the divisions created by wall between man and man were the result of a new cult that was introduced by the power-hungry imperialists in the wake of colonization – the cult of
a science and tanks, guns and bombs. As a result, the suspicion was replaced by the idea of what is right or wrong or done by the will of God.

Ghosh’s post-colonial perspective can be deciphered in the pre-colonial times when there were no barriers between Abraham Ben Yiju, the Jewish merchant from who settled in India for twenty years along with his Indian slave Bomma. The novel has two worlds which occupy opposite ends of a long history of globalization, beginning with the discovery and passing through mercantilism and imperialism to modern capitalism. Its 12th century commercial networks evoke a historical vision in which Europe in not the necessary centre of a dynamic ‘World system. In An Antique Land juxtaposes possibilities without concluding. Ghosh’s attitude to historicity which is laced with metaphors and flashes of humour. It is our duty to learn the understatement and the lyrical aspect.

Ghosh’s intention was not writing historical novel because he was an ethnographic student when he conceived the text. One can presume In An Antique Land as a meditation on history. Here, Ghosh straddles time and presents the societies of two centuries separated from one another by eight hundred years. The flavour of timelessness can be perceived in the shift from the twelfth-century merchant Ben Yiju to the twentieth-century research scholar of anthropology, the author himself. Ghosh does see the novel from the point of history though undoubtedly, he is the post-colonial narrator. Ghosh combines fiction, history, travel and anthropology to create single seamless work of imagination, he makes us think about the political boundaries that divide the world and the generic boundaries that divide the narratives. In An Antique Land actually makes us take a world view and realize the similarities amongst different societies of various countries which in the past had shared many similar myths and legends and cultural activities which went on to establish many trade relations with these countries ushering in a new beginning.

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