iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 11 **Issue:** XI **Month of publication:** November 2023

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2023.57185

www.ijraset.com

Call: 08813907089 | E-mail ID: ijraset@gmail.com

International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 11 Issue XI Nov 2023- Available at www.ijraset.com

In an Antique Land: Locating the Dislocated

Neelam Thapa
Assistant Professor, GCW, Gandhi Nagar

Abstract: ***Amitav Ghosh's most significant historical novel In An Antique Land (1992) deals with three major themes, as a student of anthropology the novelist's search for the life of Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia, and his Indian slave Bomma, a native of Tulunad; his deep and penetrating insight into the cultural and social development of Egypt from the Crusades to operation Desert Storm; the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of historical and political changes on their lives. To deal with these themes the novelist has selected the form of a traveller's tale, but this form is only a part of the entire design. Actually, the novelist desires to study the effect of history on mankind through this form. He arranges all the three themes brilliantly and systematically and successfully creates a unified story.***
Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, In an Antique Land, Individual histories, peripheral people, historical and political changes etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an Antique Land is a story about Egypt, told by a man who himself comes from another antique land i.e. India. Both lands were violated by intruders who entered and set up colonies. This novel studies the effect of time or history on ordinary man's life in their own individual way. Ghosh's story wades through places which are comprehensively described and closely knit into a novel through impeccable characterization.

The four different sections called 'Lataifa', 'Nashawy', 'Mangalore', 'Goingback' and the 'Prologue' and 'Epilogue' complete the entire circle of the novel. The first two sections, Lataifa', 'Nashawy' deal with the social and cultural history of Egypt and the third section, 'Mangalore' deals with Ben Yiju's stay in India for seventeen years. The last section 'Going Back' is a summing up of the novelist's search for Ben Yiju's life and through him his search for cultural, political and historical changes. In almost all the four parts, the narrative shifts from personal to historical and from historical to personal.

The story of the Egyptian merchant Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma is inter-wined with the narrator's own story of his stay in the two villages of Egypt while doing research on the merchant. Ghosh is himself given permission by Oxford to use the Geniza library:

..the study of Egyptian antiquities passed from being an esoteric and quasi-mystical pursuit into a freshly-charted field of scholarly enterprise, and in the service of the new science several travellers undertook journeys of discovery into Egypt. (In an Antique Land 81)

This is clearly a comment on the fact that historical research was activated by the oriental school after the discovery of the colonial other. Though the Geniza library contains every written document of the past, 'historical' documentation of Ben Yiju and his slave is inadequate. Amitav finds it imperative to make connections between the letters exchanged by the merchant with his slave, and the customs followed by the people in the villages of Egypt as well as in Mangalore in India, to arrive at authentic facts about the lives of the two men. These attempts at research reveal certain truths hitherto unknown to him.

Nizari Pandit observes that it clearly refers to the fact that canonical history is imperialist in nature. It has created stereotypes about the Orient and these are stacked in books as objective records of truth. What history has to offer is not a general and overall, but selective picture of the past. Amitav's attempt at scholarly research on the lives of Ben Yiju and Bomma is also an attempt at questioning Orientalist History. He does not make any statements about the merchant or his slave; he makes references to historical anecdotes to justify his research. Nevertheless, in the end, story of the merchant comes across as important, not as objective, coherent truth but as an event which has connections with various events of present times, though it happened centuries ago. Ghosh, therefore, seems to parody History's claims to objective factuality in order to highlight the personal and individual. While referring to Ben Yiju's reasons for marrying a girl outside his faith, he says: "If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof" (AL 230). A parody of the notion of recorded history as truth is evident in the use of words like 'proof' and 'documents'.

Mondal in his essay "Alegories of Identity: 'Postmodern' Anxiety and 'Postcolonial' ambivalence in Amitav Ghosh's In An Antique Land and The Shadow Lines" says that Ghosh also explores the vulnerabilities of secularism in India in In An Antique Land. By playing out his anxieties over the vulnerability of Indian secularism in Egypt, Ghosh inverts his own communal position so that he (as a Hindu) is in the minority, the fellah representing the Muslim majority.

©IJRASET: All Rights are Reserved

The fellah cannot comprehend his difference and so immediately conceive of him as an 'other'. It should be made clear that 'Otherness' is distinct from 'difference' that it involves a lack, that is it is merely a negative of the self and possesses no value. An awareness of difference, however, recognizes a fundamental value in that which is not the self. Amitav stays in Nashawy for his research but over a period of just a few years, he sees the village getting engulfed in storm of 'development'. Like modern India, modern Egypt too loses its local identity and enters the age of machine-guns and technology offered by the West.

A further example of Ghosh not occupying the privilege of the Western traveller is in his defensive responses to the Imam's charges of backwardness in Ghosh's Hindu culture. The Imam attacks Ghosh for being one of those people who burn their dead and worship cows. Ghosh and the Imam end up arguing about whether India or Egypt is more advanced using the measure of what destructive power each side's military could muster. Here are these two postcolonial characters caught in an old colonialist vying for power through violence - "... the Imam and I: delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence" (AL 236). Ghosh goes on to say that they belong to east and yet both are travelling in the west. Furthermore, Ghosh then pulls the 'Westerner' card on the Imam. He (Ghosh) had actually been to the West and knew more about it than the Imam- like the colonial writer, in the end, he claims prior knowledge of the west and the implication, of the world. Amitav is able to discover a number of common traits between Ben Yiju and his slave who crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages, and the people he has met in Egypt and in India. But he feels sad to realize that these people are not prepared to understand the similarities among themselves. They are all carried away by the notion of 'development' and 'progress' created by west.

The story of Ben Yiju reveals to him how Mangolore "came to lose virtually every trace of its extraordinary past" (AL 245) with the advent of the colonial power. The hybridity which he finds in local faiths in India is also prevalent among the villagers of Egypt. Imam Ibrahim is knowledgeable about traditional kinds of medicine and there are festivals such as mowlids in honour of saints who are not a part of mainstream Islam. But colonization had led to the destruction of all these local histories and cultures and given rise to mainstream canonical history and religion:

..He has read many of the classical texts and he's very knowledgeable about plants and herbs and things like that...Those leaves and powders don't work anymore,' he said. ' Nowadays everyone goes to the clinic and gets an injection, and that's the end of it.' (AL 142)

The colonial power colludes with the dominating power of the colonized country. Therefore mainstream history is a product of the collusion between various dominating Indians and forces (colonial and colonized).

Indian and Egyptians have both shared similar religious practices, attitudes and life styles which do not fit into the frame work of modern western notions of progress and development. The narrator laments the fact that in present times they hate each other not on the basis of personal experiences but stereotypes created by History which is written in Western Orientalist academies. As history was written by the colonizers, it hardly took note of the achievements of the subject - colonized people. He finds it miraculous that parts of Bomma's story have survived in spite that I had never known of History, a small remnant of Bomma's world had survived, not far from where I had been living" (AL 342).

The author explains how these divisions, these walls 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 science and tanks and guns and bombs" (AL 236). The author's post-colonial perspective is also evident in the way he portrays the pre-colonial times when there were no barriers between Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma. The main characters in the pre-colonial world are Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who came to India via Egypt and Aden, and his slave Bomma who is from Tulunad of ancient India. Through these characters Ghosh portrays a world where man lives in harmony with man, where the gulf existing between people of different races and different cultures became meaningless as they met over the draw bridge of humanity. The pages devoted to that world spill over with light and colour - ordinary people bustle around laughing, talking and doing the most ordinary things. The main characters easily relate to this environment. It is a world with no racial conflict, no feeling of alienation or hopelessness. This world was soon to come to an end. With the landing of Vasco da Gama in 1498.

The second section describes two contrasted characters- Nabeel and Ismail. These characters of the contemporary world are people whom the research scholar meets during his pursuit of Bomma. Nabeel's ambition, his urge for making money, takes him to Iraq. He makes good money under degrading conditions adding to his family's material comforts. But when the Iraqis return from the Iran-Iraq War Operation Desert Storm looming large on the horizon, Nabeel's fate is sealed. Nabeel vanishes as unknown or unnamed person in the history written by the Western Powers. Nabeel's childhood like Ghosh's is full of pains and hardships, childhood is nothing but a 'forgotten boredom'. The history of both Nabeel and Ghosh remains the same. Both are victims of political and social unrest. Both shared the same emotional phenomena.

ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 11 Issue XI Nov 2023- Available at www.ijraset.com

The 1964 riots have been described in *In an Antique Land* from other side of the border. The scholar-protagonist's realization does not differ much from the sum-total of that of different characters in the other book. If we remember the unusual provocation for the recounting of riot memories we will at once understand how man's responses to certain things and situations are conditioned by his own history and culture and how tall claims and high hopes borne out by intellectual discourse are belied when the occasions most demand them. In the total Muslim culture of rural Egypt people can hardly conceive of men not circumcised in childhood. For them it is almost as natural as breathing, eating or drinking. So long as people remain outside the purview of the historical process of major cross-cultural conflict and assimilation; so long as they are exempt from undergoing the agony of such a process, physical peculiarities are not symbols. But for a six-year old who had seen the brutality of riots, the state of foreskin is more than a physical peculiarity sanctioned in a particular culture. It has ever-widening circles of association, completely independent of it, capable of producing an intensely emotional response even as a student of social anthropology.

The parody of historical facts is narrator relates to 'document' and 'proof whenever Yiju or Bomma and yet calls it a 'story' ["Bomma's story ends in Philadelphia" (AL 348)]. He refers to his stay and experiences in Nashawy and Lataifa as 'story'. All the facts he encounters are referred to as 'story' ["I sometimes wished I had told Nabeel a story" (AL 204)]. This story is about the communal riots of 1964 in Dhaka which Ghosh had witnessed as a child. Another incident of communal and provincial violence in Egypt and Algeria triggered off by a football match, is a fact in Ismail's life, also referred to as 'story" ["later Ismail told me a story"(AL. 352)]. He even refers to the riots of 1964 as a story. 'History' and 'story' are etymologically related. Journalists also call their news reports 'stories'. Therefore 'story' is not necessarily the equivalent of 'fiction' or 'lies'. Ghosh by using the word 'story' for the act of writing an autobiographical novel blurs both 'history' and 'fiction' (novel) into 'story' (narrative). This clearly shows that his aim in recreating the given history is not to make a new set of truth claims. The narrative of version of truth, because history in the form of fiction is itself subversive in nature, since it gives a new vision to the point of view to the existing past and historicizes it.

History which is monolithic does not recognize the local or individual. It defines nations, cultures and people only in terms of totalities; creating homogenous modes of 'nationalism' or 'freedom'; 'Hinduism' or India as discussed in the novel *In An Antique Land.* Slemon says in this regard that "History mediated through allegorical fiction thus ceases to be a fixed monument and comes across as the creation of a discursive practice, which therefore possibility of transformation" (Slemon 157-67)

Ghosh has used a lens through which one sees various paradigms of ideology and their constructs. The narrator is, therefore, a historian and a character at the same time, i.e. subject as well as object simultaneously. The ultimate irony is that the narrator speaks 'objectively' about their situations; they have no power to either control or alter them. Their history remains a version which the writer reappropriates through use of allegory.

In an Antique Land also tries to address the Iran-Iraq war and the Operation Desert Storm in terms of a global, including pre-colonial and post- colonial history. The book also does what fiction is supremely good at: it provides a special means of access to this history, reducing us by its narrative design into identifying with the individual experience of living through history. The design has a peculiar significance as it involves Egypt of twelfth century retrieving a specific forgotten or adopting the unique viewpoint of a researcher in anthropology living in postcolonial Egypt and setting up a contrast between the pre-colonial and the postcolonial Egypt of the 1980s. He, a personal engagement with history by ignored episode in history; that of Abraham Ben Yiju who comes to India around 1130 AD and his slave Bomma, "the toddy loving fisherman from Tulunad" (AL 349).

The first two sections of the novel deals with the cultural and social changes in Egypt but the entire third section called 'Mangalore' deals with Ben Yiju's seventeen years stay in India. His marriage with a nair woman Ashu, his fatherhood, the story of his misfortunes (the death of his first son) and his return to Egypt, with his Indian slave Bomma are the main events of this section. Like earlier sections, this section too, is remarkable for Ghosh's deep insight into history (e.g. his search for the etymological history of the word 'Bomma' and his discussion with professor Viveka Rai in Chap-III). The novelist's search for Bomma's history and its origin beautifully describes the socio-political and historical conditions of medieval India.

The last section, as the title indicates 'Going Back' completes the novelist's search at two levels - his search for Bomma's life at one level and his search for the cultural and social conditions of Egypt and India, at another level. This section describes the condition of Egypt in 1988- after the Gulf war. The scientific inventions have brought a complete change in all walks of life. The younger generation has migrated from Egypt for job opportunities. Nabeel and Ismail who dreamt of settling in Egypt have also gone to Iraq. Nabeel, who always wanted a job where he couldn't have to get his hands dirty, has migrated from his own country. Except Shaikh Musa's house all the houses have a refrigerator and a television set.

The story of Egypt's development begins with the descriptions of 'the mud walls' at Abu-Ali's house and ends with the introduction of all sorts of comforts and luxuries.

©IJRASET: All Rights are Reserved

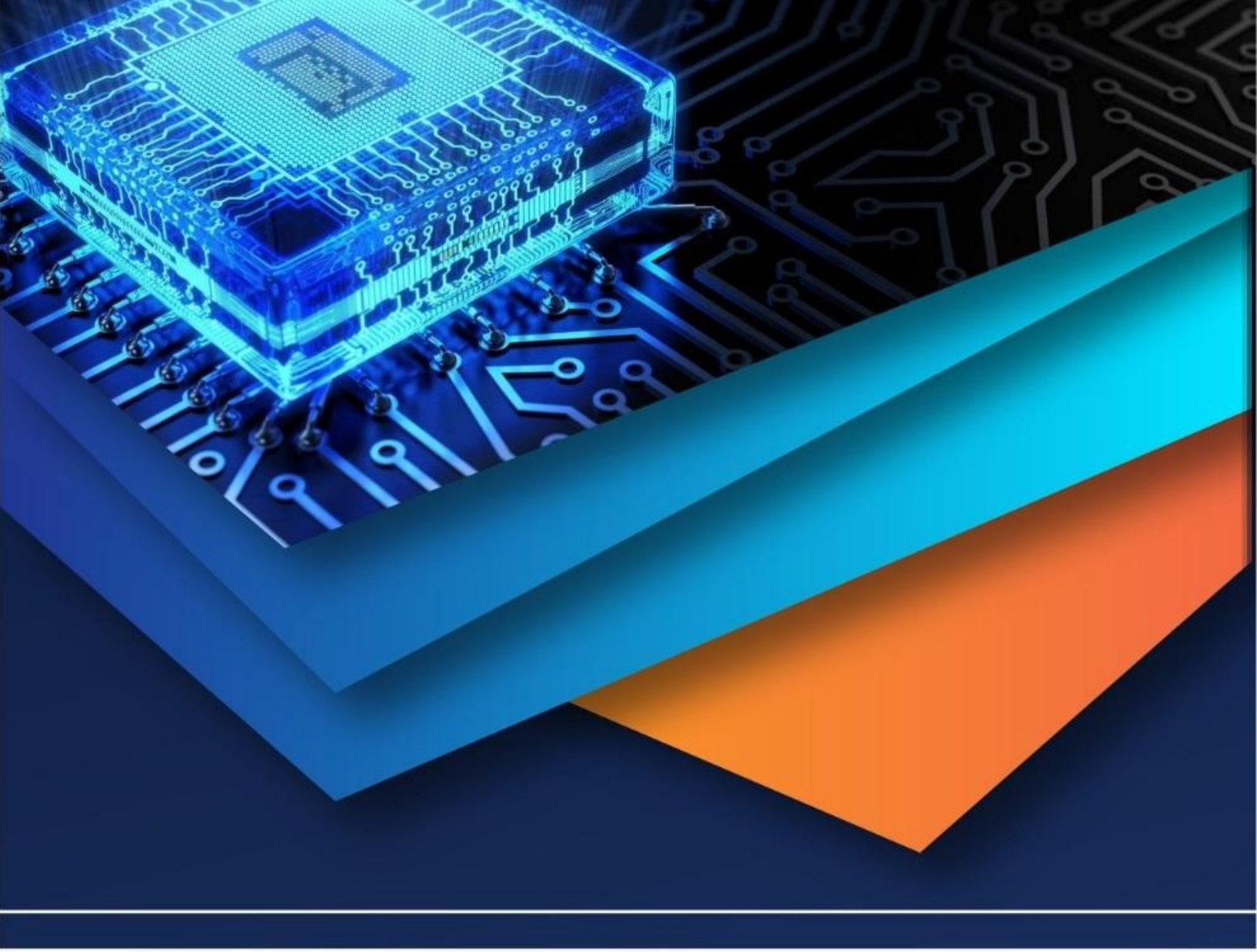
The 'mud wall houses' are now turned into luxurious three storeyed buildings. Nabeel, Ismail, Mabrouk had a dream to remove the pains and hardships of their families. This is the picture of Iraq war at the time of crisis, but soon after the Gulf war, the entire situation changes. Life is not easy there. The Iraqis become cruel to Egyptians. Because of the Gulf-war and the possibilities of jobs in Iraq, the young of Egypt have changed the entire external map of Egypt. Now homes are full of T.V. sets, a food processor, calculators, a transistor radio and a couple of cassette players and so on. True, they have fulfilled their dream of removing poverty from their family. But at Epilogue' of the novel depicts Nabeel's tragedy: "We were crowded around the T.V set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History" (AL 353). Nabeel has gone to Iraq to earn money with a dream to provide comforts and happiness to his family. But he has to pay a great price for this noble cause. His dream is fulfilled; but he has to sacrifice his life - an innocent young man's sacrifice.

Thus, the novel is a beautiful study of the effect of historical and socio-political changes on ordinary men's lives. The study of Ben Yiju and Bomma's life is only an apparent theme of the novel. On the contrary the novelist describes the history of any developing countries like Egypt or India. Nabeel is a representative of all youngman of`developing countries full of dreams who slips into oblivion with the passage of time. The novel ends with such questions: why wars? Have we learnt any lesson from History? What are we looking for war, peace, comfort or happiness?

REFERENCES

[1] Auradkar, Sarika Pradip Rao. Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Study. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2007.
[2] Bellipa, K.C. " Amitav Ghosh's 'In an Antique Land': An Excursion into Time Past and Time Present." The Postmodern Indian Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990s. Ed. Viney Kirpal. Bomboy: Allied Publishers, 1996. 59-66
[3] Barucha, Nilifer, and Nabar Vrinda, Eds. Mapping Cultural spaces. Postcolonial Indian Literature in English. Delhi: Visison books, 1998
[4] Bose, Brinda. Footnoting History: The Diasporic Imagination of Amitav Ghosh." Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Text. Ed. Makarand Paranjpe. New Delhi: Indialog Publishers, 2001. 235-45.
[5] Blake, Charistopher. "Can History be Objective?" The Philosophy of History. Ed. Patrick Gardeiner. London: OUP, 1974.
[6] Desai, Gaurav. "Old world Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the writing of Nostalgia." Representations 85(2004): 125-48.
[7] Friedrich, Nietzsche. "On the uses and disadvantages of History for life." Untimely Meditations. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
[8] Ghosh, Amitav. In an Antique Land. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1992.
[9] Ghosh, Amitav. The Shadow Lines. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
[10] Kamath, R. "Memory and Discourse: On Amitav Ghosh's 'In an Antique Land'." The Poetics of Memory. Ed. T. Wagenbaur. Tubingen (Germany): Stauffenburg, 1998. 205-13.
[11] Majeed, Javed. "Amitav Ghosh's 'In an Antique Land': The Ethnographer-Historian and the Limits of Irony." The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 30.2 (1995): 45-55.
[12] Slemon, Stephen. "Postcolonial Allegory and the Transformation of History." Journal of Commonwealth Literature XXIII. 1(1998): 157-67.
[13] Mandal, Anshuman A. "Allegories of Identity: Postmodern' Anxiety and 'Postcolonial' Ambivalence in Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land' and 'The Shadow Lines'." The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 38.3 (2003): 19-33.

©IJRASET: All Rights are Reserved | SJ Impact Factor 7.538 | ISRA Journal Impact Factor 7.894 |



10.22214/IJRASET

45.98

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.129

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.429

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Call : 08813907089 (24*7 Support on Whatsapp)