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A Traveller's Tale of Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*

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Abstract:

In An Antique Land is the story of Amitav Ghosh's decade of intimacy with the village community. Mixing conversation and research, imagination and scholarship, it is also a charged, eccentric history of the special relationship between two countries, Egypt and India through nearly ten centuries of parochialism and sympathy, narrow – mindedness and affection. It is the technical novelty as well as the unique art construction that makes the book a distinctive work. The major source of the book's distinction lies, perhaps in its inherent theme, and the origin of the theme can be traced to the deeper layers of history and civilization. The author's perception of the basic character of man and his elemental feelings and emotion has added an extra dimension to the book.

Keywords: parochialism, technical, elemental, Amitav Ghosh, 'In An Antique Land'

In An Antique Land is partly a detective story, the tale of how the novelists Amitav Ghosh went in search of this ghostly figure, his name, his birth place, the vanished world in which he and his master lived. Among its typically cosmopolitan citizens was a 12th century merchant called Abraham Ben Yiju, Jewish by religion, mostly Arabic by culture, but travelling trading and at various times living everywhere from Sicily to South India. Ben Yiju, had a 'slave' from India, in reality more like a senior, trusted and apparently even beloved company executive. *In An Antique Land* is an archaeology of a great mercantile civilization that, from about the tenth century to the sixteenth century.

Ghosh's novel *In An Antique Land* is the story of two Indians in Egypt and Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia who came to India around A.D.1130. Ghosh's novel *In An Antique Land* deals with three major themes. First 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 Tulund, second his deep and penetrating insight into the culture and social development of Egypt from the crusades to operation desert storm and third the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of political and historical changes on their lives. To deal with these themes the novelists has selected the form of a traveler's tale, but this form is only a part of the entire design. It is in the Egyptian remote place that Amitav Ghosh sought to retrieve the antique civilization.

Actually the novelist desires to study the effect of history of mankind through this form. Brilliantly and systematically he arranges all the three themes and successfully creates a unified story. The first two sections of the novel Lataifa and Nashawy deal with the social and cultural history of Egypt and third section Mangalore deals with Ben Yiju's stay in India for seventeen years. The last section 'Goving Bact' is a summing up of the novelist's search for Ben Yiju's life and through him his search for cultural and political changes. So the four different sections of the novel and the Prologue and Epilogue, complete the entire circle of the novel. The novel begins with the Prologue and in the Prologue itself the novelist describes the entire framework of the novel.

In An Antique Land Ghosh describes his historical research. This book contains lively narrative of his travels between Egypt and India. The significance of these two countries here, is that both can be considered postcolonial and although they might be considered 'third world' today, they are both 'antique lands' so they have been home to very advanced civilizations in their long histories. In this journey, Ghosh retraces ancient trade routes between India and the Middle East and calls to mind European history of travel.

Ghosh does not occupy a privileged position. As an Indian, both Egyptians and Indians respond to him as one who might share a similar cultural background and whose countries have built up historical allegiances. The image of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh has portrayed in his travelers tale *In An Antique Land* is truly insightful. When Amitav Ghosh revisits the villages

after seven years he is astonished by the changes that had overtaken them. There was no electricity at Lataifa in 1980. Someone had brought the diesel water pump from a nearby town. The whole village had gathered on the courtyard of the owner, waiting specially for Amitav Ghosh who had been invited to give his expert opinion, examined the machine.

In 1988 he finds refrigerator in every others house, new brick building in place of adobe houses, calculators, TV sets, cassette players and even food processor. The people have prospered on gulf money. Most of the young man of the villages has left Egypt by that time to find job in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. The gleaning from the distant war had worked a silent economic revolution in rural Egypt and changed the life of fellaheen. People have been sending their children to schools and colleges and often they talk about their development. Today the Egyptians have become modern but the main thing that made a transition from old to modern in the western culture.

Then after a research the history of the old Egypt came out. The present people of Egypt have discovered about their past through this history. Through not as engaging as the contemporary story, the historical one offers a look at a time when global trade brought different cultures and religions together in India and the middle East and what is striking about era Ghosh researches is that harmony existed among Muslims, Jews and Hindus. Through the historical story Ghosh demonstrates that the cultural and religious mixing prompted by globalization.

The modern-day sections of *In An Antique Land* brim with conversations in which ethnographic subjects joke with the narrator, question him about his religion or culture practices, and in turn informs him about their own beliefs. Whatever his inspiration, the conversational form of *In An Antique Land* allows Ghosh gently to undermine his own narratorial authority. He chooses to include uncomfortable or even humiliating conversations, such as the row he has with the village's Imam about whether Egypt or India has the best armaments.

The heated conversation "Amitab" has with the Imam not only provides an example of the villagers answering back within the text, questioning and challenging Ghosh's project, but also foregrounds the issue of Ghosh's position as a third-world ethnographer. Ghosh is self conscious about the ambiguity of his standing amongst the villagers, acknowledging his

privileged position as an anthropologist from that centre of western academe, Oxford University, as well as his status as a Hindu in Egypt. His Indian nationality provokes particularly complex and often contradictory reaction from the community in which he lives, as he is at once seen as insider and outsider.

The villagers see technology as being at least as important a marker of civilization as religion or cultural practices. In a humorous scene the narrator gains respect, even awe, for the knowledge he is assumed to have about a diesel water pump that is manufactured in India. Yet if his country's technology occasionally causes him to be treated with difference, at other moments it is used against him as a supposed gauge of backwardness. To Ghosh's later chagrin, he ends up bitterly vying with the Imam over whose country has the better "guns and tanks and bombs". He soon realizes that both men are "travelling in the west", speaking the imperialist language that views the invention of violent technology as a measure of civilization.

In An Antique Land, a tour de force, is first book of its kind, written by an Indian- English writer. Ghosh makes a comparative study of the two oldest cultures and civilizations of the two most important continents-Asia and Africa, that of India and Egypt. Unlike other historians, he researches on an Indian slave Bomma and his master Abraham Ben Yiju, plying a flourishing overseas trade in Mangalore, in the twelfth century.

There was startlingly a similarity of certain words and turns of phrases in the Ben Yiju document with Lataifa and Nashawy. Ghosh cleverly and linguistically first brings the ancient Egypt closer to India, and then, the twelfth- century Egypt to the contemporary Egypt.

Ghosh seems to think that travel is man's primordial quest to expand his awareness into realization. Perhaps this is the reason he embarks upon tracing the history (journey into the time) of a Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju from Egypt who spent two decades in Mangalore (a trade centre on Malabar coast in India) and his relationship with Indian slave Bomma, who worked him for as a business representative in Aden. Ghosh recedes into twelfth century in order to develop his story.

As a social anthropologist he introduces his readers not only to the twelfth century Aden and Mangalore but he also points out that Egypt and India unquestionably belong to a socio-

cultural tradition based on the religion of hospitality. This remains a constantly operative factor in the novel, as it could be seen and felt during Ben Yiju's stay in Mangalore and Bomma's stay in Aden seven hundred years ago.

Ghosh does not try to authenticate just the trade relations of the "antique lands" but also inaugurates the fact that in the medieval world, "slaves were sometimes gradually incorporated into their master's households and came to be counted as members of their families.

In An Antique Land does not display the author's intellectual capability or epic sweep. What one discovers is a very minute and shrewd observation of human nature. Therefore, he deals with a unit small enough to manage a microcosm, whether be it at Lataifa or Nashawy or Mangalore. The book has unadulterated, straight-forward impression of the people the writer came in contact with and the circumstances of the lives of the people during the course of his research.

Ghosh sustains reader interest by displaying rich and varied kinds of men and manners. The writer is absorbed by the variety of human types. It seems to him 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 in visiting Egypt. With a convex lens in his hand he tries to penetrate into the people of antiquity. Their lives have dramatic situation and their dialogues have dramatic intensity. Each section of the book and each chapter add to the reader's clarity to understand the plot.

In An Antique Land 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 facts. He is "a traveller's tale". Apart from his perfectly pitched prose for vivid images, Ghosh has the travel writer's infallible eye for the quirk that lays bare the soul of a people.

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