



THE MEDIEVAL SYMPHONY IN IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

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Abstract:

*The present paper explores medieval history through one of most brilliant novels of Amitav Ghosh *In an Antique Land*. It discusses Ghosh's visits to the two Egyptian villages Nashawy and Lataifa, and his experiences there during his field work for his doctorate degree. What Ghosh discovered there was the vast differences and feelings of hostility between the people of the two Eastern countries – India and the Middle East. During the course of his doctorate, he chanced upon the name of Bomma, in the written correspondence between the two merchants Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq, a Jewish merchant in Aden and his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju of Fustat, living in Manglore in India. Bomma was a slave. The greetings that Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq sends to the Indian slave of Ben Yiju stimulated Ghosh's research and helped him retrieve the history of the medieval era. He found it striking that a slave's name is mentioned at all in a document of historical importance. Ghosh comments on colonial historiography, the role of Europeans in destroying the peaceful relations between the two Eastern countries- India and the Middle East. He also traces the socio-political crises of the current times which include the Gulf war and its effects on the Middle Eastern countries and its people who became its innocent victims.*

Keywords: *Medieval History, Jewish Merchants, Colonial Historiography, Gulf War, etc.*

In an Antique Land spans over nearly 800 years of history and places as far flung as India, Egypt, Iraq and the US. The novel resonates with the writer's sharp historical insight into cultures and civilisations. It portrays the medieval world in all its folklore charm, its adventures, travels and its enduring cosmopolitanism. Ghosh recreates the fantastic world of trade, relations, languages, and cultural exchange and evokes a beautiful metaphor of the past for the present that is fraught with chaos, conflicts, hatred and politics.

Ghosh takes up the role of historical researcher pursuing his doctorate in social anthropology. Ghosh went to Egypt to do fieldwork in a village called Lataifa after he won a scholarship for research in 1980. Hence the novel is autobiographical in spirit. And as history is of major concern to Ghosh, his stay in Egypt and his acute historical insight led him on a compelling journey into the medieval era. Ghosh's focus in the novel is to bring to light the entire history of the medieval era. His interest sprung from his reading of S. D. Goitein's 1973 edition and translation of "Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders." Bomma's name figures in the written correspondence between Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq, a Jewish merchant in Aden to his friend, Abraham Ben Yiju of Fustat, living in Manglore in India. The greetings that Khalaf-ibn-Ishaq sends to the Indian slave of Ben Yiju stimulated Ghosh's research and helped him retrieve the history of the medieval



era. He found it striking that a slave's name is mentioned at all in a document of historical importance. The document was a part of the rich storehouse of Greeks called the Geniza. The reference to Bomma, the Indian slave of Ben Yiju in the letter led Ghosh to uncover an entire epoch of history that had vanished in the vast impasse of history.

The novel is divided into six parts. It begins with the Prologue. The other parts like Lataifa, Nashawy, Manglore and Going back are subdivided into chapters. The novel ends with the Epilogue. The fleeting entry of the slave in the letter and the fact that Ghosh devotes the entire novel to his search, his relations with his master, with his times and with history brings up the crucial issue of the silence of history on matters pertaining to the lives of ordinary individuals. E. H. Carr writes: "History has been called an enormous jig saw with a lot of missing parts" (Carr, 13). Ghosh refers to the objective documentation of History in the Prologue itself. He expresses his sense of surprise at the survival of Bomma's name. Bomma does not belong to the category of "The Wazirs and the Sultans, the chroniclers and the priests"—the important personages accorded prominence in History. "But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all (Ghosh, 17).

Ghosh resurrects the life of Bomma from the fragmented history of the Jews represented by the Geniza, the storehouse of knowledge of the Jews that was systematically destroyed by the Europeans in the 19th century. A congregation of traders who had poured into Masr (Egypt) from Tunisia were mostly Jews. These traders carried out a flourishing trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. They deposited all their writings in the synagogue and its chambers were called 'Geniza' – which became the hallmark of the rich, ancient Jewish culture and history.

Ghosh discusses the important period in European history, which began with the Enlightenment. It launched Europe on to the path of progress and prosperity and instilled an insatiable thirst for knowledge, discovery, power, learning, conquest and superiority. This marked the beginning of Western imperialism in world history. The Europeans directed their desire of accumulation of wealth, knowledge and establishment of markets towards the rich Eastern countries. In Egypt, the Geniza seized the attention of European scholars for its rich treasure house of legal, historical and religious documents. "Soon enough, events began to unfold quietly around it, in a sly allegory on the intercourse between power and the writing of history" (Ghosh, 17).

This refers to the sinister activities of the Europeans of usurping knowledge, power and learning under the guise of scholarship or civilisation. Very soon the invaluable treasure house of knowledge found its way into the libraries of European centres of learning. The Jewish civilisation was emptied of its essence of syncretism, mutual trust, faith, communitarian values and the history of ordinary individuals like Ben yiju and Bomma, which was contained in the Geniza.

And it is the recovery of the voice of the subaltern that led to Ghosh's search for Bomma and to revive the entire history of the trade relations between the traders of India and Egypt, which was pushed into oblivion by Western history. Fiction becomes a medium for Ghosh for recovering the individual history that has been overlooked by the Western narratives and mainstream history. Speaking about the difference between history written by a historian and that written by the writer of fiction, Ghosh points out, "It's about finding the human predicament it's about finding what happens to individuals, characters. I mean that's what fiction is ... exploring both dimensions, whereas history, the kind of history exploring causes, causality, is of no interest to me" (Bose, 18).

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Ghosh's concerns, as is evident in the novel, also coincide with the Subaltern studies group. In fact Ghosh's article, "The Slave of M.S.H.6," which was later developed into the present novel, was first published in *Subaltern Studies* VII (1992). Some of the prominent members of the group like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakravorty are friends of the writer. The group critiques Indian elite-nationalist historiography and is devoted to the task of recovering the multiple stories or histories of the subalterns or the non-elite whose contribution was equally significant in the development of nationalist history. The group fiercely denounces colonial historiography and deals with the history of the subaltern class. Bomma represents the voice of the subaltern class. Discovered as a footnote, Ghosh accords Bomma a central place in history. He recreates history as he retrieves the traces of his quotidian existence from the Geniza documents. Padmini Mongia says: "To retrieve him from his status as a footnote and make him one of the primary subjects of the historical narrative is an affirmation of his life and an acknowledgement of the many histories erased by official narratives" (Mongia, 23).

The Geniza then becomes a metaphor for parallel intertwining histories subsumed by the Enlightenment Western History. Ironically it is through the Geniza documents Ghosh discovers the rich and vibrant past of both India and Egypt, of their close historical and cultural links that had bound the people of these two alien historical civilisations through centuries.

The narrative follows a broken trail as it traverses smoothly between two worlds of the medieval and present times divided by space, time and history. The close cultural and historical links and the cosmopolitanism of the past are juxtaposed with Ghosh's experiences as a young anthropologist in Egypt.

Ghosh's deep sense of consciousness of the long-forgotten links and cosmopolitanism between the peoples of the two civilisations owes to the onslaught of colonialism in the East. Ghosh points out: "...the intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim had been partitioned long ago" (Ghosh, 339).

Ghosh brings out the inadequacy of history to include significant details that give a broader and clear picture of humanity, of its touching grace and tenderness, of ties that transcend all boundaries of caste, race and religion as an example to posterity. Ben Yiju's vast network of peaceful trade relations in India shows the high regard among traders for fair business ethics and peaceful coexistence. "The names that are sprinkled through his papers speak of a startlingly diverse network of associations: entered into a file, the list would yield nothing to the Rolodex of an international businessman today (Ghosh, 227).

The concept of slavery too had altogether different connotations in the medieval context. It was completely different from the way it is practiced in the modern times. While hard labour and exploitation convey the sense of the master slave relationship in the modern world, in the past slavery was a means of entering new careers and attaining positions in the government. "The lines of demarcation between apprentice, disciple and bondsman were so thin as to be invisible..." (Ghosh, 260).

The advent of colonialism, their military might and political ideologies put an end to an entire era of peace and communal harmony that prevailed between the two countries of the East. The voyage of the Portuguese traveller Vasco-da-Gama to the new land of India marked a death knell for trade between India and Egypt as Europe came to rule the seas. The European traders who reached the shores of India brought along with them the baggage of their past, their conflicts and hatred: "Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of

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their paths would seem so unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human memory” (Ghosh, 286).

The Portuguese navigators in India compelled the Indian Hindu ruler, Samudra Raja of Calicut, to expel all the Muslim traders on the grounds that they were the enemies of Holy faith. Clearly, the Raja neither knew holy nor faith in the Christian sense but he succumbed before the military might of the Europeans. The Arab traders had to leave. The retreat of the Arabs from India sealed the fates of two Eastern countries and the consequent enmity and hostility between these two civilisations is history. Padmini Mongia suggests that: “The grand idea that fed the civilisation mission of the Europeans (as constructed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and inherited by us in the twentieth) is unmasked in In an Antique Land as naked greed” (Mongia, 84).

Amitav’s dialogue with the Imam and their heated discussion in under scoring each other’s countries in comparison to the West reveal the conditioning of the Eastern psyche with Western narratives of progress and development. vThe centuries old history of mutual trust, love, faith and friendship, the values of personal and cultural links, the histories that the people of the East had so long cherished had been subsumed by the Western history. What remained were hostility and the lust for progress and modernisation and an obsession for Western standards of material achievements. The people of both the Eastern countries, like the rest of the world had succumbed to the ideas of progress that the West had constructed. The world of Bomma and Ben yiju had long been lost in the throes of imperialism: “I felt myself a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led me to Nashawy; a witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that I had believed to be still alive, and in some tiny measure, still retrievable” (Ghosh, 237).

Ghosh revisits Egypt after eight years. The historical, cultural and political changes now are entirely different. Ghosh sketches the picture of India as well as Egypt in the 20th century to highlight the politically charged atmosphere of unrest, fundamentalism and the Gulf War. The Egypt that he returns to has fallen to the emerging forces of urbanisation. His friends in Egypt, the two young men Nabeel and Ismail, had left for Iraq for better prospects. The Gulf war in Iraq offered ready employment opportunities to people like Nabeel and Ismail. Most of the young men had left their village to secure comforts for their families, toiling hard in foreign lands, especially Iraq. All these young men battling with adversity at home and exploitation in the new countries are victims of historical factors. Nirzari Pandit opines, “History, which is monolithic, does not recognise the local or individual. It defines nations, cultures and people only in terms of totalities” (Pandit, 140).

The novel ends with people of Nashawy an Egyptian village, watching television and trying to trace Nabeel in the jostling crowd after the war is over. But, as Ghosh puts it, “there was nothing to be seen (on the television) except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History” (Ghosh, 353).

Like thousands of ordinary individuals, whose history is subsumed by canonical history, Nabeel too had vanished without stirring the ‘leaves of grand historical records.’ Like Bomma his status too deserves to stand at least as a footnote, a haunting presence, insignificant but narrating the woeful tale of the powerful forces of 20th century.



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