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"INAN ANTIQUE LAND": AN AMALGAMATION OF MYRIAD GENRES

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ABSTRACT

A blurring of genres, *In An Antique Land* can be read at several levels and understood at many levels; as an oriental tale and epistolary fiction on one hand and a contemporary novel with all the features of travel narrative and ethnography on the other hand. Through the plot of academic research, the book is the multiplication of stories and stories within the stories. It explores the relation between fact and fantasy, lies and truth and the modern notion of the postmodern self. In the postmodern and postcolonial era, Amitav Ghosh's travelogue is full of exciting details of the medieval India's trade relationship with Masr [Egypt]. Ghosh's narrative is a medley of myriad genres and eventually transforms into a travel narrative.

Key words: ethnography, history, genre, travel narrative.

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... take a book of geography, someone of a thousand and one compilations of natural history, a volume of sermons; hire a copyist to extract a random few bits from first one and then another, connect these excerpts by any sort of plot you choose, and you will have a novel. Anonymouscrictic (1788).

Clifford Greetz, in Chapter 1, titled, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought", of his book *Local Knowledge*, describes the contemporary writings in social sciences and humanities. He says:

"but the present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult to label authors [what is Foucault- historian, philosopher, political theorist? What Thomas Kuhn- historian, philosopher, sociologist of knowledge?] or to classify works [what is George Stein's 'After Babel'- linguist, criticism, culture history? What William Gass's 'On Being Blue' – treatise, causerie, apologetic?] ... it is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redressing of the cultural map – moving a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes- but an alternation of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think. The same is the case with Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*.

Like the epic, history and novel, the literature of travel has evolved through the centuries. Like them, it has existed since the beginnings of oral and written literature. As with other forms of literature its quantity and

nature have varied because of political, religious, economic and other social and human factors. And like them, it includes countless subtypes that continually approach each other, separate, join, overlap and consistently defy neat classification. *In An Antique Land* is one such example where under the genre of travel narrative, we come across the medley of sub genres. It is a book which can be termed as historical fiction since it covers the history of two countries i.e. modern Egypt and medieval India along with the fictional imagination of the author.

In An Antique Land, published in the year 1992, came into existence when Ghosh visited Egypt for his doctoral research in the field of social anthropology. This ethnographical travelogue comprises of four parts along with a prologue and an epilogue. Its first part-entitled 'Lataifa' consists of twelve chapters. The second part 'Nashawy' has seventeen chapters and is followed by the third part named 'Mangalore' where one can understand the medieval Indian commercial relationship with the expatriate merchants of other countries. It has ten chapters. The concluding fourth part entitled 'Going Back' comprises of seven chapters.

In An Antique Land is a combination of ethnography, historiography, geography, memoir and cross cultural elements. It is a work in which two narratives are moving side by side like two woollen threads woven together to make a coherent structure. In his essay entitled "*Providing Historical Redress*", Mr.Swapna Chakravorty says:

"Like many of its precursors, the novel moves in and out of two narratives and time scales: one for the teller, and other for his tale. Both stories involve travel across cultures and continents, the concurrent journeys enabling the author to reconcile the contrary demands of the dead and the living, of time and space, of involvement and distance."

In An Antique Land is a cross cultural narrative where Ghosh, himself the representative of Indian culture, meets and interacts with the remote Egyptian culture of mid- 80's. Ghosh went to Egypt for his Ph.D. fieldwork in social anthropology. Published in 1992, the book is partly based on the research work conducted by Ghosh but in the mainstream and in a general reading the book appears as ethnography, history, and travel narrative. The book also deals with human concerns and relationships. While living in the remote areas of Egypt, Ghosh keenly observed the day-to-day activities of the people, their standard of living, their temperaments, their attitudes, agricultural set-up and their urge towards modernization. The readers are amused to see the simple and friendly nature of Egyptian people in the first two parts i.e. Lataifa and Nashawy. They have a very straight-forward and open attitude towards Ghosh. They became his guide; Abu Ali, his gargantuan landlord; Khamees the rat; Imam Ibrahim his adversary; Zaghoul the weaver; and solemn, grave, ambitious and sensitive Nabeel. They asked him simple questions on cow- worshipping, burning of the dead and on circumcision and for Ghosh it was a very complicated matter to answer those simple questions and satisfy those people. One can simply acknowledge the difference in the ideologies and perspectives and point- of - views when looked into the same matter from different cultural concerns. Ghosh displays keen and minute observation and penetrating insight while dealing with the social and cultural development of Egypt. The author himself experienced the dreams and aspirations of the ordinary human beings and the effect of social, cultural and political changes on their lives. The narrator beautifully defines the effect of technology on the common rural man. To quote Ghosh:

"It was a brand new diesel water pump, the first of its kind to come to Lataifa. There were several such pumps in the surrounding villages: they were known genetically as 'al-makana al- Hindi' the Indian machine, for they were all manufactured in India." [IAAL:53]

As far as the design of the text is concerned, it magically and intrinsically interweaves myriad genres under one frame. Every genre provides beautification to it. But history plays a vital role. The narrator wants to study the effect of history on mankind. Through the window of colonialism when Ghosh peeped into history he found the effect of imperialism on Egypt.

In the eighteenth century, a new breed of traveller began to flock into Cairo, Europeans with scholarly and antiquarian interests, for whom Masr was merely the picturesque but largely incidental location of an older, and far more important landscape. By this time Europe was far in advance of the rest of

the world in armaments and industry, and on the points of those weapons the high age of imperialism was about to be ushered in. [IAAL:60].

Ghosh has done multitasking in his travelogue. As a student of anthropology he researched the life of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant originally from Tunisia who was doing his business in Mangalore, Mangalore as Ghosh defines, "It sits upon the tip of a long finger of steeply rising land; a ridge of hills which extends out of towering knuckle of peaks in the far distance." [IAAL:197]. Ghosh's interest was aroused when he observed the presence of some Indian in the letters written by those expatriate merchants in the 12th century. Ghosh writes. "I knew nothing about the slave of MS H.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement". The slave of MS H.6 was Bomma, a native of Tulunad, the area around Mangalore. Bomma visited Egypt in the medieval times to fulfil some mercantile job of his master Abraham Ben Yiju.

There is a narrative shift in the entire course of novel from personal to historical and then again from historical to personal. The readers have experienced a variety of things present in the book during their reading. The book is like a life full of incidences and coincidences which one is not aware of. Ghosh make his readers wander from developed Cairo and Alexandria to remotest Lataifa and Nashawy, from modern New York to developing Baghdad, from 20th century Oxford to medieval South India of 12th century AD. During the course of the novel the narrator, along with his readers, experience the cause and effect of Iraq-Kuwait Gulf War of 1990 where many people from Egypt were suffering. They wanted to return to their homeland but they could not. To quote Ghosh:

"Egyptians never go out there on street at night; if some drunken Iraqis came across you they'd kill you, just like that, and nobody would even know, for they'd throw away your papers. It's happened, happens all the time. They blame us, you see, they say 'you've taken our jobs and grown rich while we are fighting and dying.'" [IAAL:295].

This war was reminiscent of his childhood experience of riots in Dhaka. As Ghosh aptly puts it:

"My memories of what I saw are very vivid, but at the same time oddly out of synch, like a sloppily edited film. A large crowd was thronging around our house, a mob of hundreds of men, their faces shining red in the light of the burning torches in their hands, rags tied on sticks, whose flames seem to be swirling against our walls in waves of fire. As I watch, the flames begin to dance around the house, and while they circle the walls the people gathered inside mill around the garden, cower in huddles and cover their faces. I can see the enraged mob and the dancing flames with a vivid, burning clarity, yet all of it happens in utter silence; my memory, in an act of benign protection, has excised every single sound." [IAAL:169]

Every travel and travelling requires a locale. No travel is possible without a geographical area. And every geographical area has its own history. As James Clifford in *Notes On Travel and Theory in Travelling Theory, Travelling Theorists*, suggests, "Every centre or home is someone else's periphery or diaspora". Thus every geographical entity is always inhabited with more intact history. When one travels, the geographical places help him to establish the 'self' and make him understand the 'other'.

Travelling is always a mixture of going away to some place, dwelling and coming back to home. Going away to some locality provides centrality while dwelling gives courage to travel again to another geographical entity with new experiences from previous travel. As Syed Manzoorul Islam in his book *The Ethics of Travels: From Marco Polo to Kafka* suggests that "dwelling and travelling merge into one another". Ghosh is situating himself to the place where he travels and dwells and the discovery of Bomma, the Indian slave of the Tunisian master, is metaphorically suggestive of the fact that India established itself into a foreign land centuries before. Centuries before, people had been moving from one place to another not only through the land but they had explored the huge oceans and magnificent deserts. Being traders and merchants, they established relationships which flourished through Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Arabian Sea. They were not privileged people. Ghosh looked into the transactions and trade from the vantage point of 20th century; from the postcolonial and postmodern ideology. He became aware of the proximity between the two nations. While living on the foreign land, Bomma's discovery as an Indian emerges as a source of satisfaction for Ghosh. It

brings a feeling of home for Ghosh. He finds himself standing with Bomma and helps to celebrate the unknown to the level of known.

Ghosh's stay in Egypt was for a short while but his relationship with the country and its people was true, sincere and loving. He forms a lasting bond with Egyptian people. Ghosh respects those people and in return was respected by them. Ghosh gives a scientific description of Egyptian people and their cultures with their customs, habits and mutual differences. Being an anthropologist, Ghosh was playing dual role and to develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, Ghosh has to become both a participant in the life of the setting and also maintains the stance of an observer.

A typical ethnography, *In An Antique Land* is a holistic study and so includes a brief history and an analysis of the terrain, the climate and the habitat. It focuses on the cultural groups of people who interacted overtime. Here Ghosh explains about the learnt patterns of thought, values, behaviour, beliefs and language of a culture shared by a group of people. This piece of literature substantially contributes to our understanding of the social life of the people of Egypt. This text is purely reflexive of Ghosh's self-awareness and self-exposure to Egyptian culture and language. In order to live in Egyptian setting, he learned the Arabic language. To understand the master slave relationship he learned Tulu language. As Ghosh himself said that 'Indian Ocean region is linguistically very diverse and anyone who approaches it should first learn languages'. The novel in the end expresses the reality, a true and credible account of cultural, social and individual reality. The novel substantially moves the readers both intellectually and emotionally and questions the happenings of wars, about the lessons learnt from history and about the meaning of civilization.

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