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BEYOND THE IMPERIAL LENS: POST-COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S IN AN ANTIQUE LAND

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Abstract: This article explores Amitav Ghosh's in an Antique Land (1992) as a seminal work of post-colonial historiography that subverts traditional imperial narratives. Subtitled History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale, the work represents a "technical innovation" by Ghosh, blending social anthropology, historical research, and personal narrative to humanize archival data. The study examines how Ghosh utilizes a dual-timeline structure to reconstruct the "shadowy" life of Bomma, an 12th-century Indian slave, alongside his own 20th-century ethnographic fieldwork in the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashaway.

Amitav Ghosh (born 1956) is one of the most celebrated contemporary authors in Indian English literature. An award-winning novelist, essayist, and scholar, he is best known for his sophisticated blending of social anthropology, historical research, and fictional narrative. Ghosh's work often explores the complex intersections of colonialism, transnational migration, and climate change. In 2018, he became the first English-language writer to be honored with the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary distinction. His major works include The Shadow Lines (1988): A seminal novel exploring the "invented" nature of national borders and the trauma of the 1947 Partition. In an Antique Land (1992) which is a unique blend of Egyptian fieldwork and medieval history. The Ibis Trilogy (2005–2015) is a sprawling historical epic (Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, Flood of Fire) centered on the Opium Wars and the movement of indentured laborers. The Great Derangement (2016) is a non-fiction critique of literature's failure to address the scale of the global climate crisis. With a D.Phil. in Social Anthropology from Oxford University, Ghosh writes with a researcher's precision and a poet's empathy, making him a central figure in post-colonial literature.

Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land (1992), subtitled History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale, stands as a pioneering departure from traditional literary forms. While often categorized as a novel for thematic convenience, the work is more accurately described as a rigorous personal research project enriched by imaginative and creative flourishes. It is an intricately constructed narrative that explores the profound themes of historical displacement, cultural alienation, and the fractured nature of memory. The book represents a sophisticated synthesis of genres, merging anthropological insight with the intimacy of a travelogue, the immediacy of a diary, and the evocative power of fictionalized interludes. Reflecting on the work's hybridity, Ghosh remarked in an interview: "Within the parameters of history, I have tried to capture a story—a narrative—without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer, I have ventured on a technical innovation." (Hawley 6)

Amitav Ghosh's "technical innovation" lies in his ability to humanize archival data, transcending his D.Phil research to blend ethnography with a non-linear historiography. By connecting the medieval past to the post-colonial present, he transforms scholarly inquiry into a meditation on the shared histories of the Indian Ocean. Structurally, the work is a cyclical journey—moving from the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashaway to Mangalore, India, and back—sandwiched between a prologue and epilogue that anchor his intellectual quest.

The narrative functions as a dual biography across two distinct timelines are (1) The 12th Century: Ghosh reconstructs the "shadowy" life of Bomma, an Indian slave mentioned in the correspondence of the Tunisian merchant Abraham Ben Yiju, set against the backdrop of a flourishing medieval trade network. (2) The 20th Century: Ghosh charts his own contemporary fieldwork via three chronological markers (1980, 1988, and 1991), eventually concluding under the harrowing shadow of the Gulf War. By weaving these eras together, Ghosh illustrates the erosion of a historically fluid, pluralistic world by the rigid borders of modern nationalism.

Ghosh's "subversive history" begins with the rescue of Bomma, an Indian slave, from archival oblivion. First identified in a 1148 letter (MS H.6) mentioned by scholar E. Strauss, Bomma's presence was solidified for Ghosh in S.D. Goitein's Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders. Through what Padmini Mongia calls "narrative intervention," Ghosh transforms this shadowy footnote into a dynamic figure with a "geographical home, a personality, and a professional life." The contemporary narrative begins with Ghosh's doctoral research in Lataifa, Egypt. Initially housed with the abrasive shopkeeper Abu-Ali, Ghosh eventually relocates to Nashaway for a more conducive environment. However, his most significant bond is with Shaikh Musa, whose domestic life offers Ghosh an intimate window into the village social fabric.

These ethnographic encounters are marked by a unique cultural friction; the villagers, particularly Ustaz Mustapha, view Ghosh through a proselytizing lens. This is driven by a local conviction in the inherent logical power of Islamic texts—a belief so strong that Mustapha suggests even Ghosh's father would inevitably convert upon reading them. This intersection of medieval archival discovery and modern cultural negotiation forms the heart of Ghosh's "subversive" project.

Ghosh's return to the archive in 1988 was marked by a deep linguistic turn. By mastering Judaeo-Arabic—medieval Arabic written in Hebrew script—he discovered a remarkable auditory continuity between the 12th-century correspondence of Ben Yiju and the 20th-century dialects of the Nile Delta. This research led him to Fustat, the first Islamic capital of Egypt. Once a thriving commercial hub, Fustat declined under Ottoman expansion and the shift from Indian Ocean trade to Atlantic colonial routes, eventually surviving only as an archaeological "rubbish dump" in Old Cairo.

Central to Fustat's history is the Ben Ezra Synagogue and its Geniza—a sacred repository for documents bearing the name of God. This archive remained undisturbed for seven centuries, preserving an invaluable record of medieval cosmopolitan life. By the 19th century, this "limelight" attracted a wave of Western "scholar-adventurers," including Simon Van Geldern, Jacob Saphir, and the sisters Agnes S. Lewis and Margaret D. Gibson. Ghosh poignantly notes that while scholars like Solomon Schechter extracted the archive for European institutions, the indigenous Jews of Cairo—the direct heirs to this tradition—had dwindled into an impoverished minority. Ghosh's narrative reflects his fascination with these raw, physical materials, celebrating their survival against the "rubbish heap of time" and their power to humanize a forgotten global past.

As Ghosh delves deeper into the medieval records of Abraham Ben Yiju, he simultaneously re-engages with the living community of Lataifa and Nashaway. He observes a significant demographic shift: the village is increasingly defined by out-migration, with a large portion of the male population seeking labor in the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf and Iraq (rather than Iran). Among his younger circle, only Jabir remains rooted in Egypt. During this return, Ghosh meets Imam Ibrahim, an influential figure from one of the founding families of Nashaway, whose rigid worldview serves as a foil to the fluid, cosmopolitan world Ghosh is uncovering in the archives. His research also brings him into contact with Ustaz Sabry, a local intellectual writing a thesis on medieval Egyptian history, representing a modern bridge to the past. The socio-economic reality of the village is further highlighted through Sabry's students, Nabeel and Ismail. The narrative follows the struggle of Nabeel's older brother, Ali, who initially toils in the fields to fund Nabeel's education but eventually finds financial success through overseas labor. This newfound wealth facilitates his marriage to Ismail's sister, Fawzia, illustrating how modern migration reshapes traditional social hierarchies—much like the mercantile travels of Ben Yiju did centuries prior.

Turning back to the 12th century, Ghosh reconstructs the family life of Abraham Ben Yiju. Born to a rabbi, Ben Yiju maintained close epistolary ties with his brothers, Yusuf and Mubashshir, and his sister, Berakha. Under the mentorship of Madmun ibn al-Hasan ibn Bundar, the Chief Representative of Merchants in Aden, Ben Yiju established himself in the thriving trade network of the Indian Ocean. Ghosh notes that Ben Yiju relocated from Aden to the Malabar Coast sometime before 1132, remaining in India for nearly twenty years. Drawing on the accounts of the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, who visited Mangalore two centuries later, Ghosh depicts an expatriate community of North African and Middle Eastern merchants living in great splendor.

Ben Yiju existed in a "polyglot" world, likely finding more in common with fellow Muslim expatriate traders than with the local nobility. Business in this era was conducted via a linguistic pidgin, a hybrid of Arabic, Persian, and local South Indian languages.

One of the most subversive elements of this history is Ben Yiju's domestic life. Shortly after arriving in Mangalore, he legally manumitted (freed) a slave-girl named Ashu and married her. Ghosh notes that medieval India was regarded by foreign travelers as a place of relative sexual and social fluidity. He speculates that Ashu may have undergone a formal conversion to Judaism before their union, creating a "Nair-Hebrew" household that defied the rigid communal boundaries of later centuries. In Amitav Ghosh's reconstruction of the medieval world, slavery is presented not merely as a state of subjugation, but as a complex social institution. In the Middle East and Northern India, slaves were often entrusted with significant commercial responsibilities and treated as faithful companions. Ghosh observes:

Slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up through that route, 'slavery' was thus often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government. (IAAL: 259)

Packed with anecdotes and exuberant detail, the narrative offers an expansive look at the customs, religions, and social structures of both modern Egyptians and medieval Indians. The book provides a historical panorama of Egypt, stretching from the era of the Crusades to the modern devastation of Operation Desert Storm. Ghosh masterfully portrays the political and social textures of various nations, offering scholarly commentary on events ranging from the communal riots in Calcutta and East Pakistan to a comparative study of the shared roots and divergent paths of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Sufism.

Ghosh presents a sophisticated fusion of fiction and historiography, objectively detailing the mutual curiosity and occasional cultural friction between Egyptians and Indians. He records Egyptian inquiries into Indian customs—ranging from funeral rites to circumcision—often highlighting the "civilizational" lens through which each culture views the "other." A poignant example of this occurs when a villager, bewildered by Indian traditions, confronts Ghosh about the worship of cows and the practice of cremation: You have to put a stop to it," he called out after me as I hurried away down the lane … You should try to civilize your people.

You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead." (IAAL: 126) Through these encounters, Ghosh illustrates that the "antique land" is not just a place in the past, but a site of ongoing cultural negotiation, where modern nationalism often obscures the fluid, pluralistic history that once connected these distant shores.

When Ghosh returns to the Nile Delta in 1988, he finds the village of the Fellaheen transformed by global labor migration. Approximately three million Egyptians had moved to Iraq to fill the workforce void left by the Iran-Iraq War. This emphasis on the hybrid, unsettled nature of culture is a hallmark of Ghosh's postmodern approach. He actively challenges "canonical" or Orientalist history, viewing it as an imperialist construct that presents a selective, stereotyped past as objective truth. By reconstructing the lives of Ben Yiju and Bomma, Ghosh subverts this tradition. His research extends into the Tulu culture of Mangalore, exploring the linguistic and social "singularities" of Tulunad. He highlights the Tulu language as a distinct Dravidian branch—rich in oral tradition but lacking its own script—that remains "closely enmeshed" with its neighbors.

As an anthropologist, Ghosh identifies the "push and pull" factors of migration. In the medieval era, trade and cultural exchange drove movement; in the 20th century, economic desperation serves as the "pull" factor for characters like Nabeel and Ismail. However, this displacement often leads to xenophobia. Just as the characters in The Glass Palace face alienation, the Egyptian migrants in Iraq are targeted by returning soldiers who resent them for "taking jobs and money" while Iraqis died at the front. Ghosh thus illustrates how the fluid, pluralistic world of the 12th century has been replaced by the rigid, hostile borders of the modern nation-state. In In an Antique Land, Amitav Ghosh utilizes "linguistic detective work" to repudiate the notion of hermetically sealed cultures. He focuses on Judaeo-Arabic—a medieval colloquial Arabic written in Hebrew script—as a primary example of cultural hybridity. This language suggests deep historical linkages between Jewish and Arab populations through a shared Aramaic heritage, challenging modern religious and ethnic dichotomies.

Ghosh further traces cultural transmission through etymology, noting that the English word "sugar" originates from the Arabic sukkar. Interestingly, in North India, sugar is still called misri, a linguistic commemoration of medieval traders like Ben Yiju and the refined tastes they imported from Masr (Egypt). He highlights Egypt's medieval role as a pioneer in large-scale sugarcane production, which exported both the product and its terminology across Asia.

As an anthropologist, Ghosh's obsession with location leads him to chart the shifting political and economic fortunes of Egyptian cities. He documents the Arab conquest of Egypt by General Amr ibn al-As in 641 A.D., a victory over Christian powers that led to the founding of al-Fustat. Fustat served as the capital for three centuries, replacing Alexandria, which had been the seat of power since its founding by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.

The narrative culminates in the rise of the Fatimid Empire in 969 A.D., established by the Ismaili Shia sect. Under Fatimid rule, Egypt became the pivotal hub of a global economy linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Ghosh emphasizes that the bazaars of Fustat and Cairo were early centers of globalization, circulating merchandise from East Africa, Southern Europe, India, China, and Indonesia. By highlighting this inclusive, medieval network, Ghosh exposes the modern era's rigid borders as a historical anomaly. Under the Fatimid Caliphate, Fustat emerged as a global commercial hub. Ghosh illustrates how the dynasty utilized trade with India as a strategic tool for Ismaili propaganda, successfully diverting Far Eastern maritime traffic from the Abbasid-controlled Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. This historical shift underscores Ghosh's broader project within Subaltern Studies: challenging the "elitist biases" of Western historiography by amplifying the "barely discernible" voices of medieval peasants and laborers. By centering these fragments, he exposes modern national borders as artificial disruptions of a historically fluid, transnational world.

The Cairo Geniza serves as the empirical heart of this inquiry. Untouched for centuries in the Ben Ezra Synagogue, the archive was exposed by British colonial expansion in 1882. Solomon Schechter eventually relocated the bulk of these records to Cambridge, forming the Taylor-Schechter Collection. Ghosh highlights the biting irony of this 140,000-fragment archive's current location: it physically validates Hegel's Eurocentric assertion that "History travels from East to West," with Europe acting as the "absolute end" of the historical narrative. Ultimately, by reconstructing the life of the slave Bomma, Ghosh bridges anthropology and ethnography to enact a "history from below." This narrative strategy, as noted by Mark R. Cohen, popularized the specialized work of scholars like S.D. Goitein, transforming the "human predicament" of the 12th century into a profound commentary on modern trade, diplomacy, and social development.

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