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History and Post-colonialism in Amitav Ghosh's Select Novel

[1] R. Deepak, [2] Dr.C.S.Jeyaraman,

[1]Part-Time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

[2]Research Guide & Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Devanga Arts College, Aruppukottai, Tamil Nadu, India. (Affliated with Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai) Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh has handled history and how he made it as an integral part of wearing a story. His novels are replete with historical documents, facts and ideologies and question the concept of history in the colonial and post colonial contexts. Ghosh asserts that history is an inevitable and remarkable one. Post colonialism is a meaning of one's position compared with the colonial past. It is not merely a question of time, of the aftermath of colonialism, but one of attitude which goes beyond the attempt to confront colonialism to become an attempt to transcend it. The debate of history has to be located in a post modernist as well as post colonial context. The setting of most of the historical novels is in the context of some historical framework unless the novelist willfully places his action in an imaginary locale hoping to highlight a special metaphysical point of view. The historical novel naturally presents no surface wave of escapism but a deep, unconscious movement towards national homogeneity. It is in the historical novel only that the actually daily events / problems of life can be encountered, examined, exposed, challenged and rectified. Ghosh recounts his travels at an ethnographic researcher in rural Egypt, juxtaposing the cosmopolitan perspective with the effects of provincial isolation. Ghosh further juxtaposes the narrative of the personal experiences with both an account of his research into the lives of a medieval merchant and one of his slaves and the imaginative reconstruction of the narrative(s) of their lives. This paper focus on Land is based on the author's personal experience when he spent several months in Egypt in the 80's doing research in social anthropology. Ghosh captures history with all its complexities. There are multiple ways in which he engages history and aspects of historicism as an intrinsic aspect of his works. This is an attempt to write subaltern history through fiction and making the theory into practice in a unique manner.

Key words: history, postcolonial, identity, historical, ideologies, discourse, anthropology

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh has handled history and how he made it as an integral part of wearing a story or stories. His novels are replete with historical documents, facts and ideologies and question the concept of history in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. Ghosh asserts that history is an inevitable one. Post-colonialism is a definition of one's position compared with the colonial past. It is not merely a question of time, of the aftermath of colonialism, but one of attitude which goes beyond the attempt to confront colonialism to become an attempt to transcend it, to step outside the influence and the framework, to reclaim an autonomous and free Identity. The writing of history as part of this endeavor becomes significant because the historical narrative is in itself a statement of the self, and an expression of the conceptualization of the historical process. It goes over the past to understand the present. It is an attempt at an explanation.

The debate of history has to be located in a post-modernist as well as postcolonial context. Post-modernism denies any 'fixity' to truth, past or present. With reference to history, post-modernism is "denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus any objective truth about the past." (12) The post-modernist perception is that history cannot capture the past "as it really happened." Such an inquiry prompts dissolution of the boundaries of signification which mark myth and history

off against one another. Furthermore, with post colonialism the whole edifice of history crumbles. Any type of discourse, from the point of view of post colonialism, is a construction underpinned by power and dominance.

The underlying conception of Time in history is what has caused a misleading polarization. The Time factor has also been a site of conflicting world-views. History unfolds itself through a linear, progressive time. Historical time therefore implies an irreversibility and uniqueness of events. Modern cultures have a historical / linear view of time. Literature cultures generate 'historical' accounts of the world. The post colonialists perceive history as discourse sediment in political and cultural hegemonies.

In recent times, a great body of historical fiction has emerged on the literary scene. Many Indian English novelists have turned their attention to the past as much to trace the deepening mood of nationalism. In fact, a close study of the contemporary novels reveal writers' preoccupation with the historical past. They bring out their historical milieu. Writers like Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal, Shashi Tharoor, Salman Rushdie, and Amitav Ghosh are interested in blending fact and fiction to create a historical novel. These novelists are concerned with history. They are beyond the traditional way of assessing events. They have to blend history with their vision and philosophy. It is because a historical novel is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist. Their technique of writing fiction makes them describe their vision or world-vision. However, a distinction must be made between the conscious use of history and its sub-conscious presentation. The setting of most of the historical novels is in the context of some historical framework unless the novelist willfully places his action in an imaginary locale hoping to highlight a special metaphysical or political point of view. The historical novel represents no surface wave of escapism but a deep, unconscious movement towards national homogeneity. It is in the historical novel only that the actual daily problems of life can be encountered, examined, exposed, challenged and rectified.

Discussion

Amitav Ghosh revisits his travels at an ethnographic researcher in rural Egypt, juxtaposing the cosmopolitan perspective with the effects of provincial isolation. His further juxtaposes the narrative of the general experiences with both an account of his research into the lives of a medieval merchant and one of his slaves and the imaginative reconstruction. It incorporates two narrative strands; a medieval narrative and a contemporary one. In the medieval narrative, Ghosh attempts to construct the lives of a medieval slave named Bomma and his patron, Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who lived in the twelfth century and moved between different parts of the orient. His journey took him to Egypt and Aden and then Mangalore before he finally settled in Egypt. The medieval narrative runs parallel to a contemporary narrative based on Ghosh's anthropological field work in two Egyptian villages, Lataifa and Nashawy, back in the early 1980s. His journey leads to a world totally different from that of Ben Yiju a postcolonial world fraught with boundaries that run across national, cultural, linguistic, religious and class differences.

In an Antique Land, the novel is based on the author's personal experience when he spent several months in Egypt in the 80's doing research in social anthropology. Intrigued by a casual reference to a slave in a letter to Abraham Ben Yiju, in Mangalore, published by S.D. Goitein in his collection of medieval documents found in the Geniza of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, Amitav Ghosh decides to pursue the matter, vaguely referred to, finding out more about the slave and his master. Yiju was a Jewish merchant, a member of the international community. Born in Tunisia in the 12th century, he lived in Cairo, Aden and Mangalore in South West India before returning to Cairo where he probably died. By concentrating on the micro-history of a minor figure, Ghosh wishes to highlight the complexity of the Mediterranean medieval world, where Jewish holy men were honoured in Muslim Egypt, documents and letters were written by the Jewish community in colloquial Arabic but in Hebrew characters. By interlocking his vicissitudes among poor Egyptian villagers, (including a final clash with the police), with those of Yiju and his Indian slave Bomma, the writer emphasizes the absurdities of

today's rigid border divisions compared to the fluidity of the medieval world where people sometimes could move more freely than today.

In an Antique Land**,** the narrative is based on history. It is a historical dimension. Characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. In it, Ghosh reveals the inter relationships between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures and their histories. The central background is twelfth century, around 1130 A.D. The history centers on the character Abraham Ben Yiju, the Jewish merchant, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade and his Indian slave. He married a slave girl called Ashu, belonging to the matrilineal community of Nairs and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades. To be authentic in history, Ghosh has made use of a few disconnected clues, a few scraps of paper including some of Ben Yiju's letters preserved as medieval documents in various Universities and research centers. The transcriptions of the letters written by a merchant in Aden named Kalaf ibn Ishaq to Ben Yiju in Mangalore were used by Ghosh to make it a historical novel. He came upon those letters when he was a student of social anthropology at Oxford.

Ghosh explains: "……the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests-the people who had the power to inscribe them physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of the 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" (16-17).

Ghosh came to learn from Strauss's article and Goiten's book that the letters had been recovered from a 'Geniza' in the biggest Palestinian synagogue in an unusual hybrid language. Known today as Judaeo-Arabic, it was in fact, "a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, transcribed in Hebrew script and liberally strewn with Hebrew and Aramic" (103). Most of the Geniza documents were written in it and there was only a handful of scholars in the world who could decipher this bafflingly esoteric language.

Ghosh determined to trace the "antique" world of the Jewish merchant and his slave. With a view to verifying the authenticity of the available material, Ghosh had gone to Tunisia and learnt Arabic; in 1980, he was in Egypt, "installed in a village called Lataifa, a couple of hours journey to the south-east of Alexandria" (19). Ghosh returned to Egypt twice again, in 1988 and then in 1990. The search continued in Mangalore and culminated in Annenberg Research Institute, Philadelphia, where the 'last testament' of the Slave's life a handwritten document stating that Ben Yiju owed a sum of money to his slave for household purchases was preserved. Thus, what one finds in the story of Ben Yiju is not an imaginary picture, but an authentic account of the twelfth century. Hence, it is history. In fact, it is the abundance of verified facts that reinforces the historical dimension of Ghosh's book. For instance, in the first section of the book ("Lataifa") one finds an introduction of historical facts about "the Egyptian Babylon" and a description of Ben Ezra's Synagogue and its Geniza in Cairo, as mentioned by the British historian A.J. Butler. The tenth chapter of this section (that details the loot of the Geniza documents by European scholars from eighteenth century onwards) is pure history. Again, in the second section entitled "Nashawy," one finds historical documentation. The third section, "Mangalore," contains the accounts of ibn Batuta, the folk life of Tulunad, the history of Tulu language and culture, and the life story of the Mogera fishermen. In this section, there is plenty of information about the trade relations between India and the Middle East during Ben Yiju's life time.

The next story of Abu Ali and Shaikh Musa in Lataifa and that of Ustaz Sabri and the Imam in Nashawy introduce a number of unforgettable characters. It is not mere narration but delightfully presented stories within a story. Along with the rise and fall of the larger society, one notices the progression of the major characters. Gradually, the narrative part of the book assumes a self-sufficient form. At the historical level, as at the temporal, Ghosh's narrative runs on parallel lines. There were tremendous political disturbances in the Middle

East when Ben Yiju left for India. The European superpowers were uniting for a Crusade against Islam. Ben Yiju's return to Aden after seventeen year's stay in Mangalore coincided with the political turmoil over large areas in the Middle East and North Africa. The raids of Ifriqiya, Yiju's homeland, by Sicilian armies and the forceful conversion and large scale massacre of the Jews were followed by famine and disease, leading to the exodus of a substantial section of the Jewish population.

In the twentieth century, there were the two world wars and the Holocaust. When Ghosh visited Egypt in 1980 and 1988, the Iran-Iraq war was going on. His last visit to Egypt took place soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The newspapers were talking of vast flood of Egyptian workers pouring out of Iraq, and his co-passengers in the taxi from Cairo to Damanhour "talked randomly of disaster, killing and vengeance' (350) in confused apprehension. Hundreds of thousands of American and European troops were being mobilized for an all-out attack on Iraq. It was the greatest army ever assembled in the Persian Gulf since the days of the Crusades. But amidst "this tornado of grand designs and historical destinies," (15) the lives of the common people continued uninterrupted. The Indian Ocean trade that brought the Jewish merchants from Tunisia to Aden and then to the Malabar Coast, and that gave rise to a unique culture of accommodation, mutual trust and compromise, had flourished amidst these political up-heavals. Ghosh peeps through the "foxholes" (16) of history to trace that singular tradition that had brought Ben Yiju and his Indian slave into close contact, and their "small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories" (339) which prevailed until some centuries ago, but which then became partitioned in several areas where they had once existed.

The novel In An antique Land centers round Abraham Ben Yiju and his Indian slave named Bomma. It is not easy to present facts of history in a narrative vein. But, like a master craftsman, Ghosh has interwoven history and narrative with a rare dexterity in the story of Ben Yiju. The work was stupendous; arranging the varied materials in historical sequence and building up the complete account of the twelfth century out of fragmentary documents. Though at a few places Ghosh had to have recourse to imagination to fill in certain gaps (for instance, his remark about Bomma cheering Adenese soldiers with a flask of wine to fight against a group of pirates raiding merchant vessels is not supported by historical document), he remained more or less faithful to the available material. He did not sacrifice historical authenticity to the claims of fiction. Ghosh's search for the origin of the slave provides the readers with a wonderful study in social anthropology and a valuable "insight into the uses of History" (270). This story takes the reader back to an antiquated world in the Middle Ages when, despite religious, social and geographical divisions, "a culture of accommodation and compromise" (288) had spread over a wide area in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent that made the crossing of the paths of the Jewish merchant and his Hindu slave possible.

"Bomma" which had once "had a wide currency within Tulu Culture," (250) relates the slave to the "Bhuta-cult," the worship of spirit deities which is still practised in certain areas of Tulunad. The name was derived from the name of a deity of the Tulu myth, "Berme" or "Bermeru," the "principal figure in the pantheon of Tuluva Bhuta- deities. (254) "Bermeru" was not the same as the Brahma of classical Sanskritic mythology. But in course of time, "with the growth of Brahminical influence, the Tulu deity "Benne" had slowly become assimilated to the Sanskritic deity, "Brahma" (254). Bomma had been born in one of the several matrilineal communities of Tulunad that played an important role in the Bhuta-cult. The Bhuta-cult was not considered to be religion at all. In fact, "it fell far beneath the Himalayan gaze of canonical Hindu practice" and it was "dismissed as mere 'devil worship' and superstition." (264)

The imagery and spiritual metaphors might well appear remote from the mundane relation between a merchant and his agent. Bomma was probably not familiar with the teachings of the contemporary saint poets. But he belonged to a community which had long been relegated to the fringes of the orthodox and hierarchical Hindu society, he must certainly have been intimately aware of the "great range of popular traditions and folk-beliefs which upturn and invert the categories of Sanskritic Hinduism." (262) As a well-educated person, Ben Yiju, for

his part, might well have been acquainted with the teachings of the Sufis. At the same time, he might have "shared in some of the beliefs and practices that have always formed the hidden and subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions of the Middle East: the exorcism cults, the magical rites, the customs of visiting saints's graves and such like" (263). And it was, in all probability, those "inarticulate counter-beliefs" that formed a common ground between the patriarchal Jew and the matrilineal Tulu, "who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable gulf" (263). This unique culture which had been born of the subversion of the categories of Hinduism, Islam and Judaism and was nurtured by the "peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade" and the "pacifist customs and beliefs" (287) of the merchants irrespective of their religious faiths in Malabar and the Middle East, collapsed after the appearance of the maritime powers of Europe on the Indian Ocean. The arrival of Vasco da Gama on the Indian Coast on May 17, 1498-about three hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju left Mangalore-and the consequent political developments sounded the knell of the strange world of Ben Yiju, Ashu and Bomma and marked the beginning of the European supremacy in the Indian Ocean trade. The European aggression put an end to the singular traditions in which the Eastern trade, itself the product of a "rare cultural choice," (287) had flourished for centuries.

In a sense of the novel, it is the story of two Indians in Egypt. The first one is Bomma, the slave and business agent of the medieval Jewish merchant, Ben Yiju, who followed his master when the latter returned to Aden around 1148 A.D. and remained faithful to him till the end of his life. The other Indian is Ghosh who, in 1980 about eight hundred and fifty years after Ben Yiju's voyage to India-travelled to Egypt to trail the story of the slave of MS H. 6, a story miraculously preserved in the footnotes of history. It is a strange, colourful world at once medieval and modem-presented in the garb of a traveller's tale. It is here, in the Egyptian backwater, that Ghosh sought to retrieve the remnants of the antique civilization of the twelfth century.

When Ghosh revisited the villages seven years later, he was astonished by the changes that had overtaken them. There was no electricity at Lataifa in 1980. Someone had bought a diesel water pump from a nearby town. Such machines were "generically known as 'al- makana al-Hindi,' the Indian machine, for they were all manufactured in India" (72). The whole village had gathered on the courtyard of the owner, waiting expectantly as Ghosh, the "doktor al-Hindi," who had been invited to give his expert opinion, examined the machine. But in 1988, he found refrigerator in every house, new brick buildings in place of adobe houses, calculators, TV sets, cassette players, and even food processors. The people owed their prosperity to the Gulf money. Most of the young men of the villages had left Egypt by that time to find jobs in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, but mostly in war-riven Iraq whose own men had gone to the borders to fight with Iran. The "gleanings from that distant war" (299) had worked a silent economic revolution in rural Egypt and changed the lives of the fellaheen. People were sending their children to schools and colleges and were talking about development. But ignorance, fanaticism and superstition still prevailed. Ghosh was asked the same embarrassing question about Hinduism, the burning of the dead and the "purification" of women in India over and over again. It was one such question from the Imam of Nashawy that made Ghosh flare up and enter into an angry altercation with the religious fanatic who publicly humiliated him for the burning of the dead in his country. Ghosh details: "I had participated in our own final defeat, in me dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us... the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done; of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words" (236-237)

Ghosh felt himself "a conspirator in the betrayal of the history that had led [him] to Nashawy; a witness to the extermination of a world of accommodations that [he] had believed to be still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still retrievable" (237). But his backward journey to Ben Yiju's world was not altogether un-rewarding. Despite ignorance and superstition, religion and politics, and the seemingly unbridgeable gulf of time and culture, Ghosh could trace points of contact with the ancient civilization Ben Yiju had come from. It was still

alive in Egypt and in India; in the inarticulate beliefs and religious practices of the people. One major discovery of Ghosh in Mangalore was a shrine devoted to a spirit-deity known as "Bobbariya-bhuta", "deemed by legend to be the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea" (271). The deity was venerated by a small group of fishermen along the Malabar Coast, known by the name of "Magavira" or "Mogera" who had traditionally belonged to the margins of the caste structure of the orthodox Hindu society and had been closely linked with the foreign merchants and mariners who came to trade in Malabar. Their links with foreign merchants were "commemorated in the traditional symbol of their distinct identity," (271) the Bobbariya-bhuta cult. The shrine Ghosh visited was "a large modern building, modelled after a classical Hindu temple" (273). It was situated in a rapidly developing village of fisherfolk that owed its prosperity to the Gulf money. The temple bore the posters of a "fundamentalist Hindu political organization, an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric" (273). But the real surprise awaited him inside the remodeled temple whose main place was reserved for the most Brahminical of Hindu gods, Vishnu: "…the image of Vishnu, but at slightly lower level. The old symbols, the mace and the pillar, had been dispensed with: he was now represented by an image, like a Hindu god" (274). However, it is to be admitted that Ghosh makes a thorough research on the subject he is going to take to make a story. Her novels are replete with historical facts and clear cut ideologies. He reads the world and visualizes it in his novels. He is a historical novelist with postmodern and postcolonial ideologies.

Conclusion

Historical events are intrinsic part of Ghosh's oeuvre. Amitav Ghosh dwells into the history of the subjects in his fictional as well as non-fictional works. He scrutinizes present turmoil as a result of past. He also examines the influence of past on present and reveals the predicament of individuals who are subjected to ,the events of history, individuals who do not appear in the spectrum of history but the ones whose life underwent a complete transformation because of the larger political, social and national upheavals. While describing historical visit, he uses the newspaper report to authenticate his picture. Ghosh engages personal reminiscence to replicate the workings of memory in 'remembered' histories. He focuses on memory of public events in private memory, which colours and distorts them in accordance with personal biases and priorities. It is used by Ghosh to call attention to the selective nature of recorded history of Indian nationalism and exclusion of all that was not in line with mainstream narrative. The story of grandmother about her classmate, who was an active member of an extremist group stand for the unsung freedom fighters who chose the other path for freedom fighting. As Prof. John Arnold sums up : "the insights of Marxism, anthropology, sociology and annaliste mentalite to produce an understanding of the everyday lives of past people, and how these lives combine to affect 'what really happened'. It should be clear by now that actions, of the general populace have just as much to do with 'big' events as decisions made by a small group of elite kings, politicians and rulers". (114)

Hence, Ghosh captures history with all its complexities. There are multiple ways in which he engages history and aspects of historicism as an intrinsic aspect of his works. He meets people and documents individual's history also documents it as an individual's story in fiction. Narrates history while visiting places, Juxtaposes present and past a recurrent element of fiction and non-fiction. Past restructured on the basis of documents, building up on traces. This is an attempt to write the article subaltern history through fiction and making the theory into practice in a unique manner.

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