

REPRESENTATION OF THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL EGYPT: AMITAV GHOSH'S *IN AN ANTIQUE LAND*

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The novel presents these two antique lands of Egypt and India having a powerful symbiotic bond. As historian who narrates the ancient ties of more than one country, Amitav Ghosh presents this novel in terms of civilizational encounters and historical ties between Egypt and India. Ghosh expresses his personal opinion about the historical ties between the two countries:

Our countries were very similar, for India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation.... Our countries were poor, for they had both been ransacked by imperialists, and now they were both trying in very similar ways, to cope with poverty, and all the other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories. ...our two countries had always supported each other in the past: Mahatma Gandhi had come to Egypt to consult Sa'ad Zaghloul Pasha, the leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement and later Nehru and Nasser had forged a close alliance.¹⁶

Ghosh reveals in the novel three important spatial tropes, India, Egypt and the West. While India and Egypt have ancient ties, the West is represented as the powerful interventionist in the relationship between the two. The two antique lands reveal some human relationships that efface the distance between the middle ages and the modern times, between antiquity and modernity. But the West, with its rhetoric, its ideologies, its ways of thinking has superimposed itself on the histories of the two antique lands. Ghosh tries to show that intervention of the west has destroyed the process of dialogue, exchange, assimilation and syncretism of the people of the two nations.

In order to describe the medieval history of Egypt, and its relation with another antique land, Ghosh has presented the history of Cairo, the personal history of Ben Yiju and the medieval historical documents of Geniza. The history of the religions that flourished in these two countries, such as Judaism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism, has been presented sometimes in terms of violent political confrontations. Despite their physical distance, the two

countries are counterposed in this novel in terms of historical, cultural, religious and political affinities. In the following section I will show how Ghosh brings out the historical significance of Egypt through focusing the history of Cairo.

1. Cairo: A Civilizational Metaphor

Amitav Ghosh presents Cairo from a historical perspective that suggests its civilizational significance. As the novel itself reveals, "Cairo is Egypt's own metaphor for itself." (32) As the capital of Egypt and one of the busiest places in the middle east, Cairo has its own historical significance, that is visible in every part of the city. It is a birth place for many civilizations besides her own civilization. In the Arabic literature and in the Quran Cairo is described as a land with long history, besides being a home place for many languages and cultures that grew later to become highly acclaimed ones. That Cairo was a vibrant city is clear from the different names (Babylon, al-Fusat, al-Qahira, etc.) given to it by various conquerors and peoples who inhabited it through the cultures. It is also a place where different towns had flourished and co-existed. The best example of this is the Roman fortress which stands for an assimilation of various civilizations. Cairo was also home to Jewish migrants from different regions in the Middle East who were involved in a flourishing trade between Egypt and India and who moved with equal ease between Tunisia, Egypt, Aden and India. Cairo represented a culture that transcended the division of religion, language, ethnicity and creed. Thus, it absorbed outsiders and outside influences. Cairo represents a polyvalent culture that is nowhere to be seen today. Cairo's past character has been totally transformed in the modern period under the spell of the western influence. Like many other developing countries, Egypt is attracted towards the western world which has sown the seeds of division in terms of nation, culture, language and religion.

2. The Story of Abraham Ben Yiju

The story of Abraham Ben Yiju which is a symbol of the history of Egypt's past, is presented in the novel through different and varying historical documents preserved during the medieval period and in places of knowledge and research. One such document that Ghosh deals with a collection of letters entitled letters of medieval Jewish Traders (1973) translated and edited by Prof. S.D. Goitein of Princeton university. This collection is prefaced with a foot note about Ben Yiju:

.... a Jewish merchant, originally of Tunisia, who had gone to India by way of Egypt, as a trader, and had spent Seventeen years there. A man of many accomplishments, a distinguished calligrapher, scholar and poet, Ben Yiju had returned to Egypt, having amassed great wealth in India. The last years of his life were spent in Egypt and his papers found their way into his synagogue in Cairo; they were eventually discovered in a chamber known as Geniza. (19)

His birth place was known in the middle ages as Ifriya situated in today's Tunisia. Following the migration of traders to Egypt, Ben Yiju also migrates to Egypt and joins the synagogue of the Palestinians. He then moves from Egypt to Aden and later to India. The trading and economic opportunities of India draws Ben Yiju's attention towards its commercial centres. In pursuing the trade, Ben Yiju settles in Malabar as a trader before 1132 A.D. He spends seventeen years in port city of Mangalore. He is able to move with equal ease between Tunisia, Egypt, Aden and India. His journey through different countries reflects his adaptability to different conditions and environments. Through his journey Abraham Ben Yiju is able to cross the gulfs between two countries separated by different cultures, religions, traditions beliefs and political ideologies. Unlike other traders-cum-travellers like Abu Said Halfon and Abu Zikri Sijilmasi, Ben Yiju does not seem to have travelled back to Aden or Egypt even once in nineteen or twenty years that he is in India. Many reasons compel him to stay back in the Malabar coast. First, his trade flourishes and he feels no need to travel back to Aden. The second reason is his camaraderie with Bomma, his slave who looks after his trade in the middle east. Most importantly, what tempts Ben Yiju to stay in Mangalore is a Nair woman

Ashu whom he marries and raises a family in the Malabar coast. The story of Abraham Ben Yiju becomes vital for an anthropologist who believes that history throws significant light into what a society is now and what it will be in future. In Ben Yiju Ghosh finds the whole persona of an individual, a society and a nation. Abraham Ben Yiju as an individual reflects the country he belongs to, and his life is a mirror of Egyptian Civilization, Culture, belief and history. In portraying Ben Yiju, Ghosh attempts to describe and recover the lost and parallel histories of Egypt and Indian trade. As Clifford Geertz observes in his review of the book, "... in this mobile, polyglot and virtually borderless region, which no one owned and no one dominated, Arabs, Jews, Iberians, Greeks, Indians various sorts of Italians and Africans pursued trade and learning private lives and public fortunes, bumping up against one another but more or less getting along or getting within broad and general rules for communication, property and the conduct of business. It was, we might say, a sort of multi-cultural bazaar. Today this part of the world is divided like the rest of the globe into singular and separated national states." Ghosh attributes this perceptible differences to the colonial days of the two countries. What Ghosh tries to say is that though they are two different countries in the world map, they represent only one civilization that is human civilization. It is in this context one has to look at the history of Egypt represented by Ben Yiju. If one is to go as a scholar to study Egyptian's ways of life and culture, he/she would find it difficult to come across a Ben Yiju. In this gap of eight centuries, it is the rulers who have been highly responsible for the present state.

The treatment of Bomma, a slave of Ben Yiju who is sent to Egypt by Ben Yiju, is equally noteworthy in the novel. Though Bomma is considered to be a slave of Ben Yiju, the relationship between the two is not one of master and servant but one of equals. The slave who appears frequently in the letters written to and by Ben Yiju, reveal that there is a close friendship between the two. In one of his regular exchanges of letters with Ben Yiju, Khalaf Ibn Ishaq makes a specific mention of the slave and sends him plentiful greetings. The three characters of the slave's names are B M A and Professor Goitein explains it as Bomma, derived from Brhma. Again Prof. Vivek Rai of Mangalore University tells Ghosh in an interview that the

slave is born into one of the several matrilineal communities of Tulunad who practice the worship of certain spirit deities known as Bhutas. In Ghosh's novel, Bomma appears as a trusted slave and the bond between him and his master Ben Yiju suggests that theirs is more than a business relationship; it is in fact a bridge between the two most ancient cultures and civilizations.

Ghosh's exploration of the nature of the relationship between Ben Yiju and his slave enables him to arrive at a complete understanding of the medieval concept of slavery, as he tells us, is quite different from the contemporary notion:

In the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from "slavery" as it came to be practised after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century. In the life times of Bomma and Ben Yiju, servitude was a part of a very flexible set of hierarchies and it often followed a logic completely contrary to that which modern expectations suggest. (259-60)

As Ghosh points out, at one level, slaves are akin to the apprentices and agents who are entitled to a share of the firm's profits and at another level, "slavery was also often used as a means of fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated".(280) Slaves were inducted into the household of their masters and were regarded as their family members: "slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sections of the army and the bureaucracy".(200) But the most extraordinary feature of the medieval institution of slavery is its role as a spiritual metaphor. At the highest level the bond between master and slave acquires a religious and spiritual dimension. One such example is the 'vachanakara' saint poets of South India, who use slavery as a poetic image:

.... to represent the devotee's quest for God: through the transforming power of metaphor the poets became their Lord's servants and lovers, androgynous in their longing; slaves, searching for their master with a passion that dissolved self-hood, wealth, caste and gender, indeed difference itself. In their poetry it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very

notion of relationship, of human bonds as well as the possibility of their transcendence. (260-261)

However, if the relationship that exist between Ben Yiju and Bomma is a spiritual one is not clear. But it is certain that Bomma is very close to his master and is more of a companion and partner to him than a slave. In spite of the wide gulf separating the medieval Sufis from the Saint poets of southern India, there is in fact a commonality in the nature of their quest and similarly in their use of poetic imagery. The poetic imagery and spiritual metaphors can appropriately express the relation between a merchant and his agent. In Bomma's time in India, as Ben Yiju's time in the Middle East. The Vachanakara, the saint poet, preaches an egalitarian culture, creating fraternal communities of artisans and working people. Ghosh opposes the poetic medieval concept of slavery with the colonial institution of servitude prevalent in Egypt under British rule before the days of the revolution:

Those were terrible times, he said, before Jamal Abd al-Nasir and the Revolution of 1952, when the Pashas, the king and their 'kindly uncles', the British army, had their way in all things and the fellaheen had been forced to labour at their orders, like flies, working without proper recompense.(194)

In the period of western colonialism man's relationship to man is interpreted only in terms of the ruler and the subject, the master and the slave, the colonizer and the colonized. The medieval world that Ghosh has brought out in the novel challenges many of the assumptions about the advent of colonialism and the post-colonial world. Bomma's medieval world is richly created by Ghosh as a vital cosmopolitan one that is quite different from that of today. Intermarriages between communities and people are just a small instance of that cosmopolitanism. This unique culture had been born out of the assimilation of the categories of Hinduism, Islam and Judaism and is nurtured by the tradition of peaceful co-existence of oceanic merchants, irrespective of their religious faiths. This cosmopolitan culture ends with the appearance of the maritime powers of the European on the Indian Ocean. Before the arrival of Vasco da Gama, people had traded on the Indian Ocean respecting the laws of peace that governed the water and did not allow militaristic nature of land battles on to the laws of the water. The Portuguese changed the whole system.

The medieval world of trade between Egypt and India that had been running smoothly and graciously was brought under a system of military dominance and autonomy. The traders were exploited in ways that were alien to their lives. The emergence of European colonialism with its aggressiveness put an end to the singular traditions that had flourished for centuries. It is at this point that Ben Yiju thinks of leaving India. Speaking of the unusual linkages between the Tunisian Ben Yiju, his Nair wife and his Indian slave Bomma, Ghosh says that the confluence that brought them together ended. with the coming of Vasco da Gama in 1498:

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

With the Portuguese discovery of India and the flourishing trade routes, the unharmed multicultural trade disappeared. This discovery led to opening up of new avenue of commerce and trade but it also led to sowing the seeds of mistrust and hatred and a loss of identity and feeling of alienation. Hence today a Ben Yiju is Ben Yiju and Bomma is Bomma. These two do not see eye to eye as two equals but view each other with a sense of disdain and hatred.

3. Dispersal of Medieval Historical Documents in Geniza

Ghosh's account of Geniza presents another aspect of Egyptian history through which he explores the dispersal of medieval historical documents by the emergence of colonialism.

As an anthropologist, Ghosh could lay his hands during the process of his research on Geniza documents. Which has in them a lot of information about medieval life, culture and belief (both religious and attitude) of the people in Egypt. The Geniza documents also reveal how people belonging to different religious cultures and beliefs co-existed. The Geniza emerges as the perfect metaphor for its people and for the spirit of the times. The documents collected in it come from the parts of the world from where Jews had migrated to Egypt. The Geniza documents were looted in 1864 by western cultural predators, who secretly

moved vast chunks of the materials and stored them away in different libraries across the world. The western scholars who prominently looted Geniza documents were Jacob-Saphir, Firkowitch, Adler, and others. The Geniza was finally emptied of all its documents during the First World War. Ghosh's account of Geniza is a sad one:

By the First World War, the Geniza had finally been emptied of all its documents. In its home country however, nobody took the slightest notice of its dispersal. In some profound sense, the Islamic high culture of Masr had never really noticed, never found a place for the parallel history the Geniza represented, and its removal only confirmed a particular vision of the past. It was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories. (95)

The dispersal of the Geniza material during the late nineteenth century under the impact of European and particularly British scholarship coincide with the age of high imperialism and orientalism. The Geniza collection was produced in the first place by a medieval trading culture, without borders as it blended Arab and Hebrew traditions. According to Ghosh the blame lies not only with the scholars and collectors, who disperse it, but also the Islamic high culture that does not have the slightest notice of its dispersal.

Ghosh's depiction of medieval historical documents in Geniza brought in this novel reveals not merely the history of Egypt but also the expansion of European colonialism over the Middle East. The plundering of Geniza documents points to the aggression of colonialism on religious cultural documents which were once evidence of intellectual superiority of the Middle East. As Javed Majeed points out, "The removal of the manuscript material from the middle east to Europe and later to the U.S. becomes a paradigm of methods of European orientalist scholarship in the colonial and post-colonial period." He also remarks, "The central concern of the novel is less with diaspora as the migration of people and more with diaspora as the dispersion of manuscripts and archival material from an original point of collection." Migration is mainly about the uprooting of bodies of archival material which becomes a measure of the disruptive effects of European colonial

expansion. Ghosh describes the strong connection between academic interest and British administrative influence that allowed the western Scholars to plunder the most substantial collection of Geniza documents and erase from the memory of Egypt an entire phase of its past.

4. Historical Links between Judaism and Islam

Amitav Ghosh has also brought out the historical links between Judaism and Islam. Though presently these two religions seem to be antagonistic to each other, when we go back to their history, we find that both have the same Semitic origin, they have the same mythological and historical background, they have physical proximity and close linguistic and cultural bonds. In terms of cultural festivities there is close resemblance between them. The Sufis were an important influence on Judaism. They were orthodoxed too. Equally significant is the story of the Sidi Abu Hasira who is born of Jewish parents and reportedly converted to Islam when he comes over to Egypt. He has followers among both these communities. Both Jews and Muslims alike visit his tomb. Ghosh points out that both Muslims and Jews have accepted Sidi Abu Hasira as a saint. An endnote suggests that both ethnographic fieldwork and historical study present evidence of many such cases of Jewish and Muslim saints worshipping together. Ghosh also points out that Abu-Hasira's

conversion does not create any communal disturbance at that time of syncretism. But today this sort of conversion often creates communal discord.

Amitav Ghosh has highlighted the medieval history of Egypt, through the history of Cairo, the story of Abraham Ben Yiju, the dispersal of medieval historical documents and the historical links between Judaism and Islam. Ghosh's aim in presenting these diverse histories of the Egypt is to show that medieval Egypt represents a cross cultural cosmopolitanism that completely breaks down under the impact of colonialism.

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