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Freedom and Anxiety Existential Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh Novel in an Antique Land

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel explores the influence of Western frameworks of knowledge on India, focusing on the relationships and ties that extend beyond the neo-colonial relationship. The novel follows Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Hindu residing in an Egyptian village, as he conducts ethnographic fieldwork in an Egyptian village. The narrative revolves around the life of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia, who moved to the Malabar coast in the early 12th century and married a Nair woman named Ashu. He formed a friendship with Bomma, a slave belonging to a lower caste. The book highlights the preconceived notions and biases that have influenced the interaction between individuals of different cultures, particularly men and women. Both India and Egypt, while technically independent, are mentally subservient to Western influences. Amitav Ghosh uses the authentic voice exclusively when discussing India and Egypt as contemporary sovereign entities. Amitav Ghosh is a proficient anthropologist and engaged participant in the subaltern studies movement. The book embodies the postcolonial theories of Said and Bhabha in a highly imaginative and accessible manner. The main focal points of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory are evident in Amitav Ghosh's tale, which effectively portrays the tense connection between Egypt and India, two countries with distinct characteristics but united by a shared history of colonial oppression and a common aspiration for modernization.

Keywords: Freedom, Authenticity, Anxiety, Dread, Alienation and Existence.

Introduction

In an Antique Land is a novel by Amitav Ghosh that blends historical analysis, fictional storytelling, and travelogue writing to explore the twelfth-century relationship between India and Egypt. The story revolves around Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader from Tunisia, and his Indian slave, Bomma. The novelist, an anthropologist, focuses on Egypt, a nation with significant historical significance, and the similarities between the conquests of invaders who established colonies in lands they claimed as their own. Ghosh acknowledges that these individuals lack the tools to fully understand their shared characteristics, as the Western world's concept of "development" and "progress" has captivated them. The novel highlights

the experiences of marginalized individuals who have been overlooked by traditional historical accounts, revealing their stories and ancient history.

In Egypt, everyone Amitav Ghosh talked to seemed to be in a state of confused apprehension: in the taxi from Cairo to Damanhour, the other passenger talked randomly of disaster killing and vengeance. In the countryside, the confusion was even worse than in the cities; Lataifa alone alone although had been trying to invasion (IAL 293). The account of Ben Yiju enlightens him on the process through which Mangalore lost almost all evidence of its remarkable history with the arrival of the colonial force. Ghosh explores various customs and folk beliefs that challenge the twelfth century.

Existential themes in literature and film often involve characters facing a crisis, originating from ancient stories. These themes are more prevalent in contemporary literature and popular culture. These themes are present when the protagonist is stripped of their fundamental assumptions, confronts the absurdity of existence, and questions the meaning of life. The term “existential” is derived from the combination of “existence” and “essence,” referring to the fundamental nature of being alive. It involves inquiring about the essence of existence, such as the meaning of life, fundamental identity, ultimate purpose, optimal way to lead life, definition of death, outcome, and existence of a deity. These questions often arise when reading Amitav Ghosh novel *In an Antique Land* the superficial significance of life is removed, often due to tragic events, separation from loved ones, disruptions to daily routines, detachment from usual identities, or the ultimate end: death. In *An Antique Land*, Ghosh, an Indian anthropologist, explores the distant Egyptian culture of the mid-1980s through his research work in Egypt. The book, published in 1992, is a blend of ethnography, history, and travel narrative, addressing human concerns and interpersonal interactions. Amitav Ghosh lived in isolated regions of Egypt, closely examining daily routines, living conditions, dispositions, attitudes, agricultural infrastructure, and the inclination towards modernization of the local population.

The readers are entertained by the straightforward and affable demeanor of the Egyptian folk in the initial sections, such as Lataifa and Nashawy. He was posed with questions like cow-worshipping, cremation practices, and circumcision, but found it challenging to respond to these basic questions and meet the expectations of those individuals. Ghosh demonstrates astute and meticulous observation and profound understanding when examining the social and cultural progress of Egypt. However, history plays a crucial role in the narrator’s exploration of Egypt’s history. He discovered the impact of imperialism on Egypt during the 18th century, when European travelers started visiting Cairo, primarily interested in scholastic pursuits and antiquities. This led to the era of imperialism, driven by powerful weapons from Europe. Frantz Fanon writes that: “Nobody has a monopoly on truth, neither the leader nor the militant. The search for truth in local situations is the responsibility of the community.” (TWE 139)

Amitav Ghosh also conducted research on Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who conducted business in Mangalore. Mangalore, located at the end of a narrow strip of land, is described as a ridge of hills that stretches out from a cluster of towering peaks in the far distance. expatriate merchants throughout the 12th century. Throughout the book, the narrator and readers witness the consequences of the Iraq-Kuwait Gulf War of 1990, which resulted in significant misery for many people from Egypt. To adapt to the Egyptian environment, Amitav Ghosh acquired proficiency in the Arabic language and the Tulu language to understand the dynamics of the master-slave relationship. Amitav Ghosh emphasizes the importance of learning languages before engaging with the Indian Ocean region, highlighting the linguistic diversity of the Indian Ocean region. In *An Antique Land* is a cross-cultural story that engages readers on an intellectual and emotional

level, prompting contemplation of battle, lessons derived from history, and the essence of civilization.

Historical research is a systematic investigation of the past to distinguish between reliable and unreliable accounts. It helps us understand and appreciate changes in the present while learning lessons from past mistakes. Ghosh, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Oxford University, begins his account in Lataifa, an Egyptian village, with Dr. Aly Issa, a professor at the University of Alexandria. He meets Abu-'Ali, a bossy middle-aged entrepreneur, and is transferred to Nashawy, a town with a larger population. Shaikh Musa, a famous individual in the village, manages a government-subsidized store. Amitav Ghosh returns to Egypt in 1981 and conducts an investigation on Abraham Ben Yiju and his enslaved person. He learns Arabic and discovers that the dialect spoken in Lataifa and Nashawy closely mimics the sounds he discovered in Ben Yiju's works. Ben Yiju lived in a Roman fortress called "Babylon" in the southern region of Cairo, particularly in Old Cairo or Masr. Fustat, Egypt's former capital, has been replaced by Cairo and serves as an extensive waste. Ben Yiju, a Jewish individual with significant ties to the Indian trade, was associated with a synagogue.

Khalaf ibn Ishaq makes a point of singling him out and sending him 'plentiful greetings.' That is all: no more than a name and a greeting. But 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 themselves physically upon time. 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. (IAL 6)

The Jewish merchants engaged in trade in the Indian Ocean in a similar manner to how they did in the Mediterranean. They actively worked to maintain their unity and interconnectedness as a minority group. The Cairo Genizah source materials consist of letters and other papers of partnership that demonstrate the Jewish preference for engaging in business partnerships with either their own relatives or others from their own community. The collection of key commodities sent from India to the Mediterranean region includes botanical specimens, iron and steel, 12th century Indian silk, textiles, footwear, and tropical fruits. Jewish businessmen and Indians invested in these commodities, with Abraham Ben Yiju being a notable figure. Yiju was engaged in trading along the sea route between the Mediterranean and India, and he also owned a foundry producing bronze wares in Mangalore, India. The completed bronze and brass goods produced by Yiju's factory were transported to the Mediterranean.

Objectives

In an Antique Land is a book by Amitav Ghosh that explores the life of Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader from Cairo, and his enslaved companion, Bomma, during the 12th century in India. The book uses historical research and narrative storytelling techniques to reconstruct the lives and experiences of individuals. It highlights the cultural exchange between India, Egypt, and the Middle East in the 12th century, and provides a comprehensive account of Ben Yiju's life, including his commercial transactions and interactions with Bomma. The book also explores the complex connections between masters and slaves, highlighting Bomma's struggles with selfhood and inclusion. The book challenges the distinction between narrative and history, highlighting the influence of storytelling in historical study.

The Ben Ezra congregation possessed a repository, sometimes referred to as a "geniza," where various types of manuscripts were housed. Due to a peculiar series of events, the contents of this specific geniza remained untouched for almost seven centuries. When it

was eventually found, it was hailed as the most extensive compilation of medieval documents ever unearthed. Amitav Ghosh, 86 years old, chronicles the historical journey of numerous scholars who have successfully drew global attention to the hidden intellectual riches stored in this remote storeroom. One of the most significant letters in Amitav Ghosh's work is a fragment of paper inscribed on a fragment of excellent quality paper, which spans the entire length of both sides and is easily legible.

In *An Antique Land* is a unique work that explores historical and cultural displacement, alienation, and the intricacies of envisioning another individual's perspective of reality. The author, Ghosh, examines documents and traced Ben Yiju's journeys while reestablishing contact with Shaikh Musa and other acquaintances during his initial visit. He observes a significant increase in the number of Egyptians employed abroad, particularly in Iraq. Ghosh forms new connections and introduces a roster of names that readers should familiarize themselves with. Imam Ibrahim, a prominent figure in Nashawy, is part of the affluent Badawy family. Scholar Ghosh, a medieval Egyptian historian, meets Ustaz Sabry and his pupils, Nabeel and Ismail. Nabeel's sibling Ali, wealthy abroad, marries Ismail's sister Fawzia. Ghosh forms a partnership with Khamees, Eid, and Busaina to acquire property and wealth. Ghosh discovers that Ben Yiju's father migrated to Malabar coast in 1132 for unknown reasons. He emancipates a enslaved woman named Ashu and they marry. Ghosh suggests Ben Yiju may have influenced Ashu to convert to Judaism or entered a temporary marriage.

Slavery was a key recruitment tool for the military and administrative system, often serving as a means for professional advancement and government entry. Amitav Ghosh conducted research at Oxford University on Abraham Ben Yiju and his enslaved companion, Khalaf ibn Ishaq. His letters addressed commercial matters rather than political disputes, and Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia, accumulated wealth through commerce with India. The manuscripts were discovered in a synagogue in Cairo several decades later. Amitav Ghosh's trip to Egypt led him to investigate libraries, books, and records, as well as his imagined travel back in time to the interconnected realms of twelfth-century trade between Egypt and India. Frantz Fanon writes that, "The process of liberation of man, independently of the concrete situations in which he finds himself, includes and concerns the whole of humanity." (TAR 144).

Amitav Ghosh, an Indian student at Oxford, experienced a sense of alienation upon arriving in Britain for his studies. The residents of Nashawy display apathy for his distinctive traditions and partake in harsh and atypical rituals, representing an unorthodox and autocratic government linked to the Islamic religion. Ghosh views himself as an individual with restricted sway, unable to effectively assert his position within the prevailing social order dominated by the influential "Pharaohs." Amitav Ghosh began to distinguish between the interests of the upper and lower castes in the Egyptian community and aligned himself with the lower caste, as they do not impose their religious beliefs on him in an oppressive way. While traveling to Nashawy in 1988, Ghosh encountered a profound sense of alienation stemming from inquiries about Indian customs, such as circumcision, cow worship, and mandatory military service. An analysis of the current literature also uncovered the interdependence between historical elements and present-day society.

Amitav Ghosh's tenure in Mangalore equipped him with profound expertise on the historical facets of mercantile trade in the Indian Ocean prior to the advent of Europeans. He found that the trade was predominantly tranquil, with sporadic instances of pirate assaults. After finishing his education and participating in conversations with Imam Ibrahim, Ghosh formed a more profound bond with representatives from two antiquated societies and identified himself as a member of the "subaltern" social class within a wider historical and geographical context. Albert Camus writes that, "I see many people die because they judge

that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.” (TMS 4)

In an *Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh explores the lives of Abraham Ben Yiju, a 12th-century Jewish trader, and his slaves Ashu and Bomma. The book begins in 1980 in Lataifa, Egypt, where Amitav Ghosh is a graduate student working on his doctoral dissertation. He then moves to Nashawy, where he provides a detailed account of the people he encounters, their personal lives, relationships, and attempts to persuade him to embrace Islam. Ghosh departs from Egypt in 1981 and works on refining his Arabic skills and acquiring proficiency in the dialect used by Ben Yiju in his writings. In 1988, he revisits the two settlements and discovers that the Cairo Geniza, a collection of records belonging to Ben Yiju’s synagogue, closely resembles the spoken language in Lataifa and Nashawy. During his visit, Ghosh reacquaints himself with the individuals he encountered, who have migrated to other nations for employment. He also encounters numerous individuals who have migrated to other nations. Ben Yiju sought refuge in India to avoid a violent vendetta and liberated and married a slave girl named Ashu. After returning to his homeland, he returned to Egypt. Ghosh reexamines the unidentified slave, Bomma, who served as an apprentice to Ben Yiju and eventually took control of the merchant’s business.

Conclusion

In an *Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh is a captivating book that challenges simple classifications. The book consists of two interwoven narratives: an anthropological narrative and a historical reconstruction of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader from the 12th century, and his Indian slave, Ashu, using valuable resources from the Cairo Geniza papers. Ghosh examines the consequences of colonialism and its influence on cultures and identities, synthesizing cultures and criticizing Western knowledge systems, particularly within anthropology. The setting and characters are vividly depicted, with Amitav hosh vividly portraying the Egyptian villages of Lataifa and Nashawy, providing detailed descriptions of the people he meets and their daily routines. The enigmatic Indian slave, Abraham Ben Yiju, adds historical depth. The book also explores the interconnectedness of Egypt and India throughout history, exposing both narrow-mindedness and empathy, prejudice, and fondness.

In an *Antique Land* is a novel that spans around eight hundred years, focusing on two interconnected episodes. The prologue begins in the 12th century, during the Crusades’ arrival in Jerusalem, and features Khalaf Ibn-e-Ishaq, a historical figure in the novel, writing a letter to his friend Yiju in Mangalore, India. Ghosh, a 22-year-old Oxford research scholar in social anthropology, embarks on an expedition to Latifa, Egypt, to uncover the narrative of Yiju, an Indian slave known as the slave of M.S H.6. The voyage transports readers from England to Egypt and ultimately to India. Ghosh presents a comparative analysis of pre-and post-colonial Egyptian and Indian societies by recreating the historical Indian Oceanic trade world of the Middle Ages and contrasting it with his experiences in India and Egypt during the latter half of the 20th century. The novel adopts a first-person narrative voice, combining personal anecdotes from Ghosh’s experiences in Egypt and India with comprehensive chapters that delve into the social, political, and cultural aspects of these colonized nations.

It critically analyzes the distorted, colonial interpretations of the Middle Ages or the ‘Dark Ages’, which portray this period of history as primitive, rigid, intolerant, violent, and negative. Instead, Ghosh’s characters create a distinct and unexpected world that is perfectly suited for the present and deserving of our focus. The medieval Arab-Indian milieu depicted in the story highlights the flexibility and acceptance of diverse identities, as evidenced by the unorthodox yet personal relationships between various people. Ghosh also showcases the

intense trust and familial bonds between a slave named Bomma and his master Yiju, as well as between Bomma and Ishaq, a friend of the master. This challenge our preconceived notions of the cruel and dehumanizing relationship between masters and slaves associated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Amitav Ghosh uses Bomma's journeys to depict a medieval Indian Oceanic commerce world characterized by non-violence, tolerance, and a profound appreciation for individuals of all backgrounds. The syncretic and inclusive world once inhabited by Yiju, Bomma, and Ashu has now been permanently lost, with every remnant of such kind and loving societies eradicated. Ghosh's work is significant because it presents an alternate moral framework of a medieval society where personal identities were not fixed. In an Antique Land by Ghosh is a groundbreaking book that challenges conventional historical narratives by providing a nuanced understanding of the past. It emphasizes the importance of cultural interaction and interconnectedness among different regions and people.

The book also challenges readers' preconceptions about history, culture, and identity. It highlights the interplay between personal experiences and wider historical frameworks. Ghosh's thorough investigation and storytelling vividly portray the lives of Ben Yiju and Bomma, questioning assumptions and challenging preconceptions. The book emphasizes the intricate network of relationships between different civilizations, communities, and individuals throughout history. The book demonstrates the power of storytelling in historical investigation, making the past more accessible and captivating. It also promotes empathy and comprehension by encouraging readers to empathize with the experiences of others. In conclusion, In an Antique Land is a profound and introspective piece that enhances our understanding of history, its relevance to the present, and the intricacies of human existence.

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