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## **Aspect of Culture in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land***

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### **Abstract**

Amitav Ghosh's fiction conspicuously portrays the complexity of various cultures in the past as well as in the post-modern world. Majority of his novels represent his interpretation of history and the world and their influence on life and society. *In an Antique Land* is a strange conglomeration of history, social anthropology, memoir and travel writing weaved together by the novelist's unique narrative art. The theme of cross-culturalism is firstly discussed in this novel with the character Ben Yiju. Ben Yiju was a Jewish merchant. Ben Yiju was a multi-faceted personality. He was a poet, calligrapher, businessman all rolled in to one. His slave was Bomma. The identity of the slave is portrayed by Ghosh with a careful piecing together of details in manuscripts rescued mainly from Geniza.

### **Keywords**

Complex; Confusing; Identity; Treasures; Expatriate; Multilingual Culture.



History records the lives of human beings but literature creates the life of human beings. Literature is purely imaginary but presents the artificiality in a natural way. Fiction is one of the tools for the authors to present the culture, history, customs and tradition of a society. Literature is a perennial source for expressing the author's personality, and about the age and the life of its people. Since English has become a global language, writings in English have got wide popularity especially in literature. The branch of Indian literature has got a sound standing and has received its due recognition in England, America and other English speaking countries and at home. The new English fiction exhibits confidence in tackling of new themes and experiments with new techniques and approaches to handle those themes. The new novelists of this generation have proved their mettle by winning several major literary awards, prizes and distinctions in competition with writers whose mother tongue was English.

Among the post-colonial writers Amitav Ghosh is very prominent. He has a discrete identity among his contemporaries. As a post-colonial writer, Amitav Ghosh's fiction conspicuously portrays the complexity of various cultures in the past as well as in the post modern world. Majority of his novels represent his interpretation of history and the world and their influence on life and society.

Amitav Ghosh is an experimentalist. In his first novel *The Circle of Reason* he has experimented with its form and in his second novel *The Shadow Lines* he has experimented with narrative technique. The third book *In an Antique Land* is with on multiple areas like form, style, content, narration and characterization. *In an Antique Land* is a strange conglomeration of History, Social Anthropology, memoir and travel writing weaved together by the novelist's unique narrative art. Amitav Ghosh has used the mode of the autobiographical traveller's tale to study the past thousand year's history in the context of two continents, namely Asia and Africa. Unlike some of his

contemporary writers his canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expression to new ideas and themes.

*In an Antique Land*, like other post-colonial novels, deals with the major themes such as historical and cultural displacement, alienation, displacement and dislocation. As it is clearly noted by John C.Hawley

The book is not recognizable as a novel, nor is it simply an historical investigation: it is a new genre, something that blends an anthropological record with a travelogue, a diary, and perhaps some imagined sections. The effect that this has on the readers is to force us to question whether particular events and characters are literally factual. (*Amitav Ghosh* 89)

Amitav Ghosh's mastery lies in using his double narrative technique. Through this he looks backward and forward, and presents the information in a gigantic way. It appeals to the readers' eyes. This kind of narrative technique enables him to explore the situations with a historical depth. His aim is to present the plight of culture and colonization from ancient to the present. One of the characteristic features of Ghosh's novels is the rejection of the political borders. Ghosh depicts this trait by introducing either by travel or migration. Travel is a symbol of quest and discovery. Like an excavator, Ghosh's fictional characters explore and step into the unknown worlds to a better understanding of the self and the environment around them.

Like his first two novels, in *In an Antique Land* also the characters travel. Ghosh's characters knew no boundaries. The novel depicts the great mercantile civilization that extended from the Mediterranean ports through Cairo and Aden in the Red Sea, across the Indian Ocean to the Malabar Coast. Here Ghosh delved into the history with a microscopic vision and brings out the link between India and Middle East. With his deep insight into history the readers recollect the past glory of Mangalore since it was related with Aden and some other Middle Eastern Ports, where maritime trade was brisk during that period.

In this regard, Shirley Chew comments on this novel as “Ghosh’s remaking of the lost world of the Mediterranean and Indian ocean trade conjures up a Mangalore long since vanished but trading community as well as the crossroads of the cultural and spiritual life of the Malabar” (*Texts and Worlds in In an Antique land* 110).

*In an Antique Land* is based on journey and so it is apparently a travelogue. But underneath the text lies Ghosh’s minute details of the problems that his characters face due to migration. The story revolves around the research being conducted by the narrator in the Egypt. The discussion begins in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and ends in the year 1991, at the commencement of the Gulf war, popularly known as Operation Desert Storm. Here Ghosh associates the spice trade of the medieval times with the oil industry of the modern times. In the pursuit of his research he notices how the western culture is systematically destroying the local culture in the present scenario. It is the style of Ghosh in which he gives the current situation a historical depth by displaying history as a process of continuous circulation. This offers a glimpse of the plight of the world to the readers. Ghosh has projected this without any bias. This shows that he is a genuine researcher.

The theme of cross-culturalism is firstly discussed in this novel with the character Ben Yiju. Ben Yiju was a Jewish merchant. Ben Yiju was a multi-faceted personality. He was a poet, calligrapher, businessman all rolled in to one. His slave was Bomma. The identity of the slave is portrayed by Ghosh with a careful piecing together of details in manuscripts rescued mainly from Geniza.

In the prologue Ben Yiju is described as “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” (8). At an early age he joined the Palestinian congregation

in Masr. These people were well educated. They were not born to privilege and entitlement. The vast majority of them were traders. Since they were well educated, the synagogue's members followed a custom that was widespread at the time, of depositing their writings in a special chamber in the synagogue so that they could be deposited with special rites later. The chambers in which the documents were kept were known by the term 'Geniza'. Geniza is a storehouse in which all sorts of documents were stored. The word Geniza is thought to have come in to Hebrew from a Persian root, ganj, which means 'Storehouse'.

Crossing the borders may even lead to acquisition of language. Language is a problem in travelling. Since the documents are written in Judo-Arabic in a colloquial dialect, Ghosh finds this language as an obstacle to go through the documents. He himself expresses that "when I first read about it, Judo-Arabic sounded bafflingly esoteric: it is not easy, after all, to see oneself sitting down to leaf through a collection of eight-hundred-year-old documents, written in a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic transcribed in the Hebrew Script, and liberally strewn with Hebrew and Aramaic. At it's easiest, Arabic is very difficult for a foreigner' (79-80). Ghosh's problem of language is up to some extent becomes easy for him by communicating with the natives. Though he has learnt Tunisia he has not fully deciphered the language in the manuscripts.

Ghosh gives the historical details of the synagogue of Ben Ezra and how he finds the life of Ben Yiju in Oxford and Cambridge libraries. Ghosh says:

By the end of the eighteenth century Egypt had become the scholarly counterpart of those great landmasses that were then being claimed and explored by European settlers: unknown to herself, she was already well on her way to becoming a victim of the Enlightenment's conceptions of knowledge and discovery. (61)

The author traces the history of scholars who gradually brought world's attention to the vast intellectual treasures of Geniza. It is a pity that in its

home nobody took the slightest notice of the disposal of Genize documents to the West. By giving a brief account on the spreading of the documents before attempting the characters of Bomma and Ben Yiju, Ghosh has offered a narrative of medieval cultural practices to the readers.

Abraham Ben Yiju's family name is *ibn Yiju* or *Ben Yiju*. In Hebrew it was probably derived from the name of a Berber tribe that had once been the protectors, or patrons, of his lineage" (122). He was born in Mahdia, which was then a major centre of Jewish culture, as well as one of the most important ports in Ifriqiya. He had two brothers, Yusuf and Mubashshir, and one sister, Berakha. Ben Yiju was well educated and very well versed in doctrinal and religious matters. With the determination of becoming a trader, he met Madmun *ibn al- Hasan ibn Bundat*, a wealthy and powerful trader. At last he became the mentor and then the business partner in Yiju's trade. Ben Yiju first learned the rudiments of the Indian ocean trade in the warehouse of Madmun. In Aden he also came across Khalaf *ibn Ishaq*, who became his close friend. This information is transparent among the letters that were exchanged among the three.

In 1132 A.D Ben Yiju moved to the Malabar Coast and did not return to Aden for nearly two decades. The reasons are many. The first one might be that whenever the need arose he preferred to send his slave- the slave of MSH. 6- to Aden to transact his business there, while he himself remained in Mangalore. The second reason might be a matter with a debt or a financial irregularity. "If it were only an unpaid debt that prevented Ben Yiju's return to Aden, he and his friends would surely have settled the matter quickly and quietly"... (129). Here Ghosh has offered different interpretations on Ben Yiju's stay in Malabar. In a letter written by Madmun contains.

Concerning what he my [master] mentioned [in his letter]. That he has resolved to return to Aden, but that which prevents him [from returning] is the fear that it would be said that he had acted

rashly. His servant spoke to [the king] al- malik al-said concerning him.... And took from him his guarantee as a safeguard against his return, insha' allah. So he [my master] has nothing to fear: [the king] will resolve everything in his court in the country of India. And if, God forbend, he were to lose....what he has and his children were part of that [loss]... (129)

The letter is incomplete and ambiguous. The letter proves that Ben Yiju's departure for India was not entirely voluntary. There is something that compelled him to remain in India. The letter is mysterious. Here he has referred Ben Yiju as his master and to himself as his servant. There is a suspicion that Ben Yiju might have committed a crime or been accused of. On the other hand there is some possibility for guessing that he might have certain threat from others. In Arabic tradition if a man committed crime, in order to find protection for him and his relatives, the accused would leave the place. "Ben Yiju may have fled to India in order to escape a blood feud" (130).

Since it was very difficult to determine the reason, Ghosh with his availability of resources projected the problems that might be faced by Ben Yiju during his travel to India. The author has borrowed the travel experience of an Andalusia Arab, ibn Jubair, who travelled on the same route some sixty years after Ben Yiju. He noticed that to reach the port 'Aidhab', crossing the desert was necessary. He knew the hardship of migration. Those days' camels were used for carrying the baggage. After reaching the port Jubair noticed the mysteries of the medieval trade route between Egypt and India. He noticed the surroundings and the people: "their men and women go naked abroad, wearing nothing but the rag which covers their genitals, and most not even this. In a word they are a breed of no regard and it is no sin to pour maledictions upon them" (142). This description provides a light on the readers mind on the difficulty of travelling in the ancient times. The people suffered a lot and they had to pay extra money also when the situation demanded. The people even

tolerated the humiliation. There was no alternative for them. Based on this idea and a letter, Ghosh says that Ben Yiju owed a large sum of money to an old man for transporting goods of the weight of five bahars. In the letter there is the voice of an old man complaining of Ben Yiju's refusal to meet a particular debt. The letter reflects the trader's tactics those days. As tricksterism is a part of cross-culturalism, the letter was first sent to Madmun at Aden, then redirected to Ben Yiju at Mangalore.

Hope is the beginning. In the general sense the migrants have had a lot of hopes before beginning their journey. But after reaching the place their dreams shatter and they face a sense of alienation. This has happened in the case of Ben Yiju in Malabar. After arriving in Malabar he felt the need of a wife and family. As a result of this he married Ashu, a slave girl. He must have decided to marry an Indian girl only because it was impossible for him to return to Egypt in the near future. Ashu was a beautiful woman. He could have married a woman from the ancient sect of the Jews of Malabar, but he fell prey to the beauty of Ashu who belonged to the matrilineal community of Nairs. Though Ben Yiju was very well educated and had a strong faith in his religion, he at last married a slave girl. It shows that Yiju is revolutionary. He wanted some change in his life. Their marriage was modelled upon the institution of 'temporary marriage', a kind of marital union that was widely practiced by expatriate Iranian traders.

Here Ghosh brings out a light on how the Indian culture was in a state of change with the arrival of traders. Indian culture gives a lot of importance to the marriage system. Indians give a lot of importance to caste, religion and horoscope. But in those days the ports were buzzed with multi-culturalism. This kind of environment created a strong influence on the marriage system of India.

Ghosh with his historical insight, has gradually understood that there might be no language problem for Ben Yiju. Ghosh invites his readers to



speculate on the language, now lost, which Ben Yiju would have used in his day-to-day dealing with people so different from each other as his wife Ashu, his associates Madmun and Khalaf and his slave Bomma. Necessarily it would have to reflect the qualities of reciprocity and compromise that typify the trading community. In fact Ben Yiju had dealt with several different linguistic regions. As Ghosh says about the way of possible communication in those days,

Common sense suggest that in an area as large and as diverse as the Indian Ocean, business could not possibly have been conducted in Tulu, Arabic, Gujarati or indeed any tongue that was native to a single group of traders; to function at all the language of everyday business would have had to be both simpler and much more widely dispersed than any ordinary language. Given what we know about the practices of Arab traders in other multilingual areas (The Mediterranean for example) it seems likely that the problem was resolved by using a trading argot, or an elaborated pidgin language... since no language corresponding to that name is known to exist it is possible that was referring to a pidgin, one that was possibly compounded largely of Perso-Arabic and north Indian elements and was in use amongst merchants and traders all along the coast". (230-231)

Thus the coast is given the Arabic name of Malabar which means an area shared by many aspects of a common culture. This description of Ghosh mirrors up the inter-cultural negotiation of people in the pre-colonial period.

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