



History-Fiction Interface and the Civilizational Clash in Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*

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Introduction

Each journey signifies endless connotations in literature. Kafka's celebrated fiction *The Castle* is the story of K., the unwanted land surveyor who is never to be admitted to the Castle nor accepted in the village, and he seems to have set on a confusing journey on his side. The character of Yezad in Mistry's *The Family Matters* walks into a fire temple, only to learn that the relevance of this sacred temple is on the verge of extinction. Conrad's mind capturing fiction *The Shadow-Line* depicts the perilous voyage of a young captain as a process; The protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* makes a journey or a return journey to a place from where he is unlikely to move further. Tridib, Amitav Ghosh's mind capturing character in *The Shadow Lines*, makes a journey, crosses the border, but never returns.

Ghosh's yet another character, a 22-year-old young narrator (the writer himself), undertakes a journey to Lataifa and Nashawy, two unfamiliar villages in Alexandria in Egypt, parallel to his

efforts to unearth the history of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish trader from Cairo, who travelled to and settled in Mangalore, a port city in the South-western coast of India in the twelfth century. Ben Yiju did not return to Aden, his home town for about two decades, instead, marries a Nair woman (a prominent caste in Kerala), and befriends Bomma, a toddy-loving fisherman from Tulunad (Mangalore), who later becomes Ben Yiju's Indian slave and business agent to look after his business interests and his trade.

Geniza documents

Deciphering certain letters and correspondences circulated among Ben Yiju and his associates sometime in the first half of the 12th century, now classified as Geniza documents and preserved in the leading universities in Europe and in Egypt, life of Ben Yiju is being recreated by Ghosh in this historical fiction. On the one side, it's about the life and time of Ben Yiju and his associates, the other side, it's also about the young narrator's portrayal of a different civilization- life and society in Cairo



in Egypt, representing the middle east region, far away from the Indian or Hindustani culture and traditions.

Clash of Civilizations

Towards the end of the twentieth century Samuel Huntington's much influential text *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), laid down a clear polarised world where each civilisations vying for its legitimate place and perhaps trying to dominate the other spaces. Quoting the American diplomat, Henry Kissinger, Huntington writes: "the international system of the twenty-first century...will contain at least six major powers- the United States, Europe, China, Japan, Russia and probably India- as well as a multiplicity of medium-sized and smaller countries" (qtd. P. 28). The importance of religion in shaping each present world order is also to be noted when Christopher Dawson writes "religion is a central defining characteristic of civilizations and the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest".¹

In Huntington's thesis, the clash emerges between the two civilizations- here between the young narrator and the local villagers of Lataifa and Nashawy, representing two major civilizations of the world imprisoned and illuminated by Hinduism in Indian and Islam in the middle eastern region, particularly Egypt in our context.

The narrator finds parallel stories of individuals who had great powers to heal people in both cultures. But he is slapped with straight blunt question son Hindu religious prophets, the burning of dead bodies as a religious rite, compulsory military service and cow worshipping etc. "Ya doctor, tell me", one fellow (villager) asks, "is it true that ... in your country, you burn your dead?" (p. 136); 'Do they have a holy Book? Another asks; and "Who is your prophet?"; "Is it true that everyone in your country worships cow?"...(137). The narrator gets into a constructive discussion, but fails miserably sometimes.

The intriguing questions give way for certain

claims too. For example, Ustaz Mustafa would say to the author: "I will take you with me to the graveyard and you can watch me reciting the Quran... You will see then how much better Islam is than this 'Hinduki' of yours" (p. 34) . At one instance, their cultural and political differences escalate into a serious argument and they both claim to have possession of better guns and tanks and bombs as mark of their civilizational traits. At this point, the writer feels the pains of civilizational differences people hold in the modern borderless worlds. He writes: "the Imam and I: delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a poor claim to the technology of modern science..."(p. 193).

To Ramachandra Guha, the prominent historian, the text witnesses "a steady progress of academic deprovincialization", a blurring of scholarly divisions. Eric D. Smith's first reaction to *In an Antique Land* is its quality of "mercurial defiance of generic classification". The text, as he feels, is conflicted generically as well as ideologically, and reflects the "postmodern anxieties of nationalism, cultural difference, modernization and historiography" a feature that qualify the book to be properly called *novelistic* in Bakhtinian terms. 4859

Recreating the life of a person requires utmost care and diligence and often becomes problematic. It is very interesting to note the sources based on which an historical character is brought to life in the present era. At the same time, when a life story is attempted through the lens of a creative artist, the result is different. For example, the famous Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis's brilliant work titled *God's Pauper* is an imaginary re-telling of the life of the medieval Christian saint, Francis of Assisi, but surprisingly

¹Dawson, Dynamics of World History, p.128.



bears the subtitle 'A Novel' by the author himself. The dividing line between fact and fiction; precision and imagination collapse at the hands of a true writer.

History-Fiction Interaction

Dhar in his scholarly work *History Fiction Interface* (1999) analyses the deep nexus between history and the novel over the years in the West as well as in the Indian literature. The consensus among scholars is that the literary genre 'the novel' came to India in its own under the influence of the novel in the West, particularly of Britain (Dhar, 1999: 19). In order to represent a truthful picture of life in their writings, novelists based the human actions (through their characters) in certain identifiable geographical and historical space in the context of comprehensible time-frame (Ibid., p.19).

The eminent critic Ramamurti, in a chapter on "Historical Novels", discusses the same theme from a different dimension. Analysing the works of novelists published prior-1930, he writes that though Indian English fiction hasn't produced historical novelists of the stature of Scott, Balzac, Pushkin, Manzoni, Anatole France and Roman Rolland, the period witnessed the advent of a few historical romances and novels with a historical background. He also adds up names like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Romesh Chunder Dutt and Jogender Singh are representatives of this tradition (qtd. Ibid., 20). For example, he makes an assessment on Jogendar Singh's *NurJehan*, pointing to a similar attitude when he writes:

In an historical novel of smaller dimension all that we can look for are historical veracity and consistency and Jogendar Singh's novel has both. There is in the characters of both Jahangir and Nur Jehan a consistency which is not only in keeping with historical truth but also explains that historical truth. They may not be very "living" but they are true and convincing portrayals (qtd.p. 21).

Similarly, after analysing Manohar Malgaonkar's fiction, Uma Parameswaran compares and elevates Malgonkar with Scott. "Similar to Scott",

writes Parameswaran, "Malgonkar also recreated history successfully not through historical figures or events but through types who are moulded by historical circumstances but are at the same time individualistic enough to be round characters" (qtd.22).

T.N.Dhar's scholarly argument is that despite India possessed a great historical tradition, some how, it did not continue in the long run. He writes:

"As an older civilization than the West, Indian had a highly evolved philosophical tradition, which encompassed diverse areas of knowledge, such as aesthetics, metaphysics, ethics, and numerous other complicated speculative systems, but it could not generate and sustain the kind of debate over the issues concerning the relation between history and the arts (including fiction), tatwe witness in the West. This is, however, not to imply that thinking on them was totally non-existent; terms like *it hihasa* and *kavya* do figure in the ancient Sanskrit for history and literature/poetry. But this is about it. Some believe that there must have been some thinking on the issues related to the, but it has not survived. Others, however, maintain that, on account of their distinctive outlook on life, ancient Indians neither attached the kind of importance to history that it got in the West or did they understand it the way it was understood there (1999:37).

During the Greek era, the border line between fact and fiction was unclear. Toynbee felt Homer's *Iliad* a unique blend of history and fiction. Even with the shift from Greek to Roman accounts of history, no proper approach has been developed and historians ascribe this feature to the anti-historical attitude of both the Greeks and Romans. Along with the advent of Christianity this perspective on history changed and they introduced the element of Providence and "a periodised view of history" was also emerged after this. (40). Then came the Renaissance which altered the element of divine will and instead, human actions were given priority over divine will. The eighteenth century is crucial in understanding the history-novel interaction as that was the age when "the novel came into being

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as a distinct form of prosefiction and a critical thinking on the appropriate content and form of history struck a firm base" (ibid., p.40).

As Collingwood felt while the novelists wrote comprehensively about its nature and function, historians, too, thought of history as a special form of through, different from science and theology (qtd, 40); historians like Hume and Gibbon created a new form of history-writing the eighteenth century. Both novelists and historians worked to give a distinct shape to their respective disciplines. Fielding called his novels 'histories' because he wanted the readers to distinguish his work from the existing narrative form of the romances. The historians too laboured to distinguish their work from various form of quasi-legend and antiquarian history. Their result of their result was that "the factual world of historical interpretation and the fictive world of the novel gradually achieved more distinct identities"(Braudypp.4-5)

History-fiction connection acquired greater solidity in the nineteenth century in Britain and both influenced each other in new and meaningful ways. Walter Scott occupies a significant position in this regard with his use of historiographical methods that enriched his fictional accounts (44). There was one more reason, Dhar identifies, that benefited Scott to rise to the prominence of writing historical fiction in the nineteenth century. The eighteenth-century historians paid no much attention to certain parts of the human action in the past, especially those of the medieval times, considering them as barbaric and therefore "unworthy of investigation"(44).

India missed out on developing a well-formulated Indian theory and practice of history. In his book on Indian historiography, A.K. Warder writes 'Indian historiography seems never to have been presented in any comprehensive overview before. In fact, it is even widely supposed not to exist. (1972, viii). Scholars provide various explanations to this, most of which related to the philosophic foundations of the Hindu view of life. Keeping this as a premise, T.N. Dhar, makes a series of questions to unearth the probable reasons to such

an ancient Indian knowledge system:

Can we say that the ancient Hindus, because of their preoccupation with matters spiritual, did not possess historical sense, as we understand it now? Or it is that... they did have a world sense, but did not work hard enough to devise appropriate means for recording their activities? (65). As for the writer, the sequestrations are important because in the historiographical war that is going on among the scholars, several historians argue that Hindu view of history does not distinguish between history and myth, because of which it legitimises a view of the past by invoking traditions and disregarding evidence. They "cite *Ramayana* and *Mahabhrata*, in which fact and fiction are indistinguishable"(65)

Some critics counter this accusation saying, they did not lack historical sense, perhaps, they just did not work hard enough to write accounts which could meet the requirements of the nineteenth century Western conception of history. Some feel it would be ridiculous to view India lacking a historical sense, and Aurobindo stress the spiritual element of the Indian culture:

Very curiously, very fancifully, this defect has been set down to an ascetic want of interest in life; it is supposed that India was so much absorbed in the eternal that she deliberately despised and neglected time (my emphasis), so profoundly concentrated on the pursuit of ascetic brooding and quietistic peace that looked down on and took no interest in the memory of action. That is another myth(qtd.p.66).

The Jain and Buddhist views were also very closely related to the Hindu view. A sweeping change did take place in the historiographic tradition, since the Muslim invasion. This, as suggested by many critics, was rooted in Islamic historiography, which began from the times of Prophet, but expanded considerably in space and time during the medieval times (See Humphreys 1991). The further episodes in this tradition are detailed by T.N. Dhar (p.67) in the following way:

When the Muslims gained power in India, their



chroniclers wrote historical accounts, mainly because the faith required it. These were mostly about the kings, his court, and their activities, and consisted mainly of what is now called political and military history. About pre-Mughal historians of India, Hardy writes that in their choice of the deeds of people and their general outlook, they were governed by religious considerations. This is reflected in the writings of Barani, Afifi, Sirhindi, Amir Khusrau, and Isami. Their histories are largely confined to the Muslims; they have been written with a religious purpose and in a predominantly Muslim phraseology. Their primary purpose, though with varying intensities, lay in serving "the cause of true religion, namely Islam. Therein lies one of the principal motives for Muslim historical writing" (Hardy 113-15). However, the situation changed with the coming of the Mughals. Historiography was rid of its heavy religious trappings and embraced new areas of social and economic experience (Nizami 154 and 225). Abul Fazal's accounts, for example, contain information which extended beyond camp and court. These included details about Hindus, especially about their religion, philosophy and language. The result, as Mohibbul Hassan points out, was that it gradually opened up a new "rational and secular approach to history" (xiii; Mukhia 86).

The British followed soon and they initiated a systematic writing of history, through the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, though the main purpose was to justify the British rule in India. Making use of the archaeological findings and similar resources available, the Britishers reconstructed India's past, which was not too unbiased. The writers of such histories came to be known as imperial historians. According to Ravinder Kumar "British historical scholarship when it applied to India created a literature which reflected, in equal proportions, the apologetics of imperialism and the glorification of colonial social engineering in our society" (1983:88).

The greatest achievement of Ben Ezra congregation, however, was the product of largely fortuitous circumstances. The synagogue's

members followed a custom, widespread at the time, of depositing their writings in a special chamber in the synagogue so that they could be disposed of with special rites later... Since most writings in that epoch included at least one sacred invocation in the course of the text, the custom effectively ensured that written documents of every kind were deposited within the (39) synagogue. The chambers in which the documents were kept were known by the term 'Geniza',

Historical Fiction

As William S. Steuber Jr. writes "The term historical fiction combines history and fiction, fact and fancy, truth and fabrication, blended together. How much can the writer change and where must he stop? There is no general rule; it depends upon the effect he wants to produce"

The purpose of a historical fiction, Steuber continues, is to portray human emotions and character out of some particular period of the past. It comes as a learning for us, through which, "we also pick up a better understanding of the times and places under which the characters we have begun to know lived their lives. This helps us to understand some of the best influences of our lives today and where they come from".

"The process of writing historic fiction, as Steuber feels, offers the writer the "excitement of being a prosecutor", great possibilities of unearthing and making out significant pieces of information about the past under investigation.

Dhar, in his erudite work on the history-fiction scenario in the country reminds the readers of a certain responsibility that the novelists in India may undertake. Pointing at the way how several novelists in the West professedly used the resources of fiction to offer alternative renderings of the past.. to provide space for marginalised groups and communities and underprivileged sections of the society, what not the from the Indian novelists (72). Ghosh's works are certainly an answer to this apprehension and challenge where Ghosh attempts to recreate certain episodes in history and offer new meanings to the

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hit her to unknown events and charters buried too deep in the past.

The struggle of Literature

"The tension in literature, writes K. Satchidanandan, in his collection of essays titled, "Will Literature Survive", "is continually striving to escape from the finite number. The struggle of literature is in fact a struggle to escape from the confines of language; it stretches out from the utmost limits of what can be said. There is also an increasing tendency to treat culture as something dead, a pure museum piece, to reduce it to certain *quantifiable elements* so that it becomes manageable or to commodify culture in the form of saleable artefacts". Correspondingly David Beer writes that data has increasingly become the basis upon which the very fabric of the social and economic world is being constructed and reconfigured.

As Cubitt puts it: "To become data; land, skill, and knowledge had to be reduced to a common arithmetical form: land as a map, skill as bookkeeping, knowledge as database." In the due process, data becomes the environment which, has a dual consequence: First, it encloses information/knowledge in the commodity form of countable and exchangeable units; and second, it extends data fiction (quantification) back over previous environments and other domains of life. Thus to quote his words again:

"...the environment is no longer interpreted as nature but as the data of nature.

Territories once marked as the domains of local

gods are now

Ghosh's attempt in *In An Antique Land* is definitely a serious attempt to unearth not just local men and women, but land even local gods: stories of Sidi Abu Hasira and traditional heroes of Bhuta culture still ignite the minds of people whose imagination will be stirred by literature.

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