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Egypt, India, Ideology: *In An Antique Land* as a Rebuttal to the Traditional Travel Text

Traditional travel writing is not built on the foundation of a concert of voices; it is a discourse sustained by a single overpowering ideology: imperialism. The sprawling colonial empires of Europe and the United States of America may have reached their nadir, but the narratives created and enforced by the travel writing of “high imperialism” continue to be transmitted through many contemporary travel texts (Thompson 154-155). Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* eschews these narratives, giving voice to the subaltern and reviving a cosmopolitan discourse between Egypt and India long silenced by imperial hegemony. Ghosh forges a scathing critique of the legacy of empire through his reversal of the traditional roles of traveller and local, as well as through parallel narratives, juxtaposing the troubled present of the “Global South” with the tapestry of cultural connections and trade routes that once linked Egypt and India. Absent from this narrative is the domineering “monarch-of-all-I-survey” mentality and in its place is an acute awareness that both author and subject are bound within the Western gaze. Ghosh’s reconstruction of history in conjunction with personal narrative and his recognition of the social and political power that grows out of the barrels of Western guns coagulate to form a gripping and subversive counter narrative that speaks truth to power.

Carl Thompson argues that traditional travel writing is steeped in the “hubristic, ethnocentric assumptions” that “produced, and were simultaneously a product of, a pervasive imagery and ideology of empire” (137). Many traditional travel texts are guilty of complicity

with empire in the degradation and othering of peoples inhabiting the regions that would become the targets of colonial expansion. To this end traditional travel writing employs numerous different methods of vilifying, idealizing, patronizing, and/or completely disregarding the “natives” of a given region. The lens of scientific classification is often employed in travel writing as a means of establishing the colonial “other” as less evolved or at the very least, less civilized than the conquering travel writer. Referencing the scientific classification in literature surrounding the peoples of the South African Lowveld, Shireen Ally remarks,

African abodes are naturalized (often remarked as being built into rock, or made out of unprocessed natural materials), at the same time as their bodies are biologized. There are references to the physical characteristics of Africans — comparing noses, and sometimes, dispositions. But, this is only in rare moments when they enter the narrative. For the most part, they are rendered textually invisible. (55)

The portion of the “constellation” of othering techniques that manifests in travel writing is often dependent upon the region of the world being written about. For instance, the motifs of cannibalism and child-like innocence, among others, frequently appear in travel literature pertaining to indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific islands, while of Orientalist texts Thompson remarks that “Orientals were routinely depicted as sensual and cruel, whilst Oriental societies were usually assumed to have a natural tendency towards despotism” (134). In other words, the array of literary and rhetorical devices used to “other” are as varied and numerous as the peoples they misrepresent.

Orientalism is of particular significance in the examination of *In an Antique Land* because both India and Egypt traditionally fall within the sweeping category of the “Orient,” which encompasses everything from Anatolia and the Middle East to China and Japan

(Thompson 134). In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said outlines the four principal dogmas upon which orientalism is founded, asserting,

one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a "classical" Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically "objective." A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared . . . or to be controlled. (300-301)

These four principal dogmas continue to appear in contemporary travel writing, and maintain a noticeable presence in the dialogues of *In an Antique Land*. The presence of these dogmas is no accident on Ghosh's part; they reinforce his assertion that those living in the Orient are "travelling in the West," defined, in other words, by Western standards of classification rather than on their own terms (236). This is made especially apparent in Ghosh's discussion of Egypt's name for itself, "Masr," in which he asserts that "[o]nly Europe has always insisted on knowing the country not on its own terms, but as a dark mirror for itself" (32). Ghosh recognizes the continuation of Western hegemony over the Orient, and in his recognition he participates in a critique of the conditions that allow for its continuation.

In an Antique Land is a dynamic text, using the interplay between the personal and the historical to open a dialogue regarding the cosmopolitanism of Egypt and India's shared past, and the Western imperialism that strangled it. The text commences with the introduction of "The

Slave of MS H.6,” an obscure figure in a twelfth century letter found in the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra in Cairo. In this letter, from a merchant in the port of Aden, Khalaf ibn Ishaq, to his friend in Mangalore, Abraham Ben Yiju, the Slave of MS H.6 is singled out and sent “plentiful greetings”(Ghosh 16). The Slave is anomalous because, by virtue of ordinary people lacking the power to “inscribe themselves physically upon time,” it is “nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all” (Ghosh 17). Ghosh enters the text as a student at Oxford in 1978, grappling with the question of where he might do fieldwork. After stumbling upon The Slave of MS H.6 in S.D. Gotein’s collection *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, he becomes fascinated, learning Arabic and installing himself in the Egyptian village of Lataifa in order to research the slave, who had given him “a right to be there, a sense of entitlement” (Ghosh 19).

While conducting his research, Ghosh finds his culture is perceived as unfamiliar by some of the inhabitants of the village, who persistently, and sometimes with an air of consternation, question him about the religion and culture of India. In becoming an object of study for the villagers, he becomes subjected to the collective gaze of the community, amounting to a reversal of the traditional roles of traveller and local. Equally subversive is the text’s reliance on conversations between the villagers and Ghosh, which renders the self-aggrandizing authorial agenda, endemic to traditional travel writing, a non-entity in the text (Chambers 6). The humility with which Ghosh treats his position as author becomes especially noticeable in his behaviour during Ramadan: following the advice of the villagers, he does not fast because “to belong to that immense community [Islam] was a privilege which they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made [the villagers] doubly conscious of its boundaries” (76).

Parallel to his activity in Lataifa, Ghosh continues to research *The Slave*, constructing images of some of the people who spawned the tropes that he is engaged in subverting. He depicts these “travellers,” in particular the plunderer of the Cairo Geniza, Dr Solomon Schechter, as little more than cutthroat scholars and antiquities dealers who took advantage of the kindness and trust of those engaged in maintaining their histories. The wholesale appropriation of the documents contained within the Geniza is depicted as a byproduct of the ideology of imperialism, which had manufactured “a world in which the interests of the powerful defined necessity, while the demands of the poor appeared as greed” (Ghosh 94). Through his investigation of the past, Ghosh begins to contextualize the present social and political positions of the decolonized world, developing an image of a historical and cultural vacuum left behind by the thinly veiled looting of artifacts and documents under colonial rule. Ghosh leaves Egypt in 1981, and only after a period of seven years does he return to begin his investigation of *The Slave* of MS H.6 anew.

Returning to Egypt in 1988, having spent several years devoted to research and learning Judaeo-Arabic, Ghosh settles in the town of Nashawy, a mere one and a half miles away from Lataifa. Over the course of his stay in Nashawy, Ghosh develops an increasingly nuanced understanding of the global awareness with which the residents of Lataifa and Nashawy view their position in the world. At a wedding ceremony, for example, he is amazed by the incredulity of the guests when he insists that life in India is much like life in Egypt, and later, in a moment of realization, remarks,

they had constructed a certain ladder of ‘Development’ in their minds, and because all their images of material life were of those who stood in the rungs above, the circumstances of those below had become more or less unimaginable. I had an inkling

then of the real and desperate seriousness of their engagement with modernism, because I realized that the fellaheen saw the material circumstances of their lives in exactly the same way that a university economist would: as a situation that was shamefully anachronistic. (Ghosh 200)

The awareness that the people of Lataifa and Nashawy have of their subaltern status establishes that the inhabitants of the decolonized world are not divorced from the material realities left behind by colonialism, nor are they unaffected by contemporary Western neocolonial policy. The climax of Ghosh's residence in Nashawy, and arguably the text itself, is a conflict with a local imam that once again serves to bring the social and material realities of life in a decolonized region into view. After their argument devolves into a spat over whose country has the most "guns and bombs," Ghosh understands his relationship with his opponent perfectly, realizing, "[w]e were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West . . . for millions and millions of people on the landmasses around us, the West meant only this — science and tanks and guns and bombs" (236). The triumph of the language of war over that of reconciliation and understanding renders the continued hegemony of the West over its former colonies abundantly clear. In her essay "Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*," Claire Chambers argues that Ghosh subverts imperial narratives in his depiction of the reality of life in the decolonized world, demonstrating a rejection of any "attempt to extricate the 'primitive' mind undamaged from the wreckage of colonialism" (15-16).

Against the backdrop of a contemporary society characterized by alienation and material poverty, Ghosh develops an image of a rich cosmopolitan past shared by Egypt and India. Ghosh traces the route travelled by Ben Yiju from his hometown of Mahdia, in Tunisia, to his eventual place of settlement in Mangalore, on the Malabar coast of India. Along this route are many

vibrant and bustling ports, ones that see traffic from the Mediterranean, India, and China, conjuring the image of a diverse collection of societies drawn together by a complex tapestry of trade routes. Ghosh remarks that Ben Yiju may have been forced into exile and suggests that The Slave of MS H.6 may have been the middleman through whom he conducted his business. Ben Yiju's marriage in India is also discussed, and this is of note because the woman he married was a slave who was not Jewish by religion or by descent. Although Ghosh concedes that this marriage likely caused a certain degree of dissent among Ben Yiju's friends and family, it nonetheless demonstrates the relative unimportance of race and religion in the period prior to European imperialism's eradication of the cosmopolitanism of the past. Ghosh, following in the footsteps of Ben Yiju, leaves Egypt once more and travels to Mangalore in 1990 in pursuit of the still elusive Slave of MS H.6.

Ghosh recounts his time in Mangalore beginning with a reversal of traditional travel tropes through the statement: "[s]een from the sea, on a clear day, Mangalore can take a newcomer's breath away. It sits upon the tip of a long finger of steeply rising land; a ridge of hills which extends out of a towering knuckle of peaks in the far distance" (241). By establishing his position as one below the city and gazing upwards at it, Ghosh subverts the traditional image of the Western traveller atop a hill acting out the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" scene (Thompson 120). Much of Ghosh's time in Mangalore is spent in active pursuit of information pertaining to The Slave of MS H.6, whose name, he deduces, was likely "Bomma," a diminutive of "Berme," a great spirit in the local pantheon. It is in Mangalore that the threads of the parallel narrative become most intertwined, and with the discovery of The Slave of MS H.6's true name, Ghosh finally succeeds in humanizing an ordinary person, physically inscribed on time. While in Mangalore, Ghosh discovers another local religious icon, the Bobbariya-bhuta, the spirit of a

Muslim mariner who died at sea. When visiting a local Hindu temple run by zealots, he is thrilled and amused to find that this spirit has escaped the war of symbols between religions, becoming embedded in a Sanskritic pantheon in spite of his origins; however, this is only a glimmer of an egalitarian past, and Ghosh laments the battle that cemented European imperial control over the Indian Ocean: the battle that pitted a transcontinental fleet assembled by Indian states, Hindu and Muslim, and Egypt against a Portuguese force, whose victory signalled the end of “a culture of accommodation and compromise” (Ghosh 288). Bobbariya-bhuta is only a remnant of Ben Yiju’s era, an anachronism belonging to a culture supplanted by an ideology of domination.

Abraham Ben Yiju and Ghosh leave Mangalore together, albeit separated by eight centuries, and upon returning to Egypt, find a world unfamiliar. Ben Yiju’s return is characterized by the betrayal of his family, the loss of his friends, and the absence of his wife, who had stayed behind in India, and it is here that he withdraws into history, his fate unknown. Ghosh returns to Lataifa and finds it emptier, as many of the citizens have travelled to work in Iraq under increasingly hostile conditions, but by virtue of the money they send back, the village is provided with many modern amenities once considered luxuries there. In his depiction of a Middle East increasingly characterized by diaspora, Ghosh asserts that people in the region are greatly affected by the conflicts and enmities spawned by the legacy of empire. The Lataifa to which Ghosh returns has been swept up in the politics of the Middle East, shattering the motif of the “politically unengaged Arab,” only concerned with village life and unaware of the outside world (Rezk 233). Closing with the image of an Egyptian exodus from Iraq in the wake of anti-immigrant violence, Ghosh illustrates the repercussions of the West’s imperial past, and its continued hegemonic policy.

By reversing the roles of traveller and local, viewing the present as contextualized by the colonial and precolonial past, and eschewing definitive authorial authority, Ghosh cultivates a powerful rebuttal to the ideology of the traditional travel text. He acknowledges that the spectres of the colonial past still haunt decolonized countries, and that their inhabitants are not divorced from the material realities of their lot in the world. By recognizing the contemporary echoes of imperialism, Ghosh also offers a critique of the continued hegemony of the West in the formerly colonized world. In fine, *In an Antique Land* creates a compelling counter travel narrative, painting an image of a centuries-old Egyptian-Indian identity, hopelessly entangled in insular nationalism, imperial ambition, and the memory of a cosmopolitan past.

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