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Reconstructing Private History in Amitav Ghosh's Novel "In an Antique Land"

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Abstract:

The act of using history in English literature is a good old practice since the times of chronicles. Many English writers have also used History as part of their fictional art. Amitav Ghosh frequently uses history in his novels. He freely mixes fact and fiction to cook a new dish called 'Historical Fiction'. He tries to look into History from a new dimension, which was never looked before by historians. He places public history and private history side by side and discusses the effect of the historical incidents on common people. . In the novel 'In an Antique Land' Amitav Ghosh tries to reconstruct the private history of an Indian slave whose history is unknown to this world until it is traced by the writer himself. This Research paper is an attempt to study how Amitav Ghosh treats history in his novel 'In an Antique Land'. The aim of this paper is to analyse how Amitav Ghosh has reconstructed Private history of an Indian slave using Geniza documents.

Keywords: Public history, private history, silenced history, synagogue, Geniza documents, Tulu folklore, philology, Bhuta shrines, Magavira tribe

*With a whole temple in his body
Where's the need for another?
No one asked for two.*

-Vachanakara saint-poets (*In an Antique Land*, p.225)

Literature is a vital record of man's experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. We can say Literature is a mirror that reflects life. It is the record of writer's observation and imagination about life. To make their creative art more interesting writers use history as a tool. Here the writers try to perceive history from a different humanistic perspective.

The word 'History' is derived from the Greek word 'istoria' which means inquiry, research or exploration of information. Broadly History can be understood as a record of important events in the origin and development of mankind. Famous Historians like R.W. Emerson and Thomas Carlyle defined History as a subject that traces the essence of the past innumerable biographies of great men. From the above definitions it can be understood that History focuses on the life and actions of the great men and nations of the past.

John. J. Anderson in his famous book *A Manual of General History* defined History as "a narration of the events which have happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as well as of other great changes which have affected the political and social condition of the human race" (p.9).

E.H. Carr in his work *what is History?* Defined in a different manner as "History is interpretation" (23). The interpretation of the available documents and records is one possible interpretation of the past. There may be different ways of interpretation. The available documents or records may cover only a limited part of the history. E.H.Carr states that "History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (p.30)

The act of using history in English literature is a good old practice since the times of chronicles. William Shakespeare used Historical themes and figures in his dramas like *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *King Lear*, *Edward III* etc. Writers like Leo Tolstoy, Bertolt Brecht also used history in their works. George Bernard Shaw used history in his dramas like *Caesar and Cleopatra*, *The Devil's Disciple*, *Saint Joan* to put forward his ideology. Bertolt Brecht's plays like *Mother Courage and her Children*, *Three Penny Opera* etc have history as theme in them.

Many Indian English writers have also used History as part of their fictional art. In the pre-independence period writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Rabindranath Tagore has used history of India in their works. The Indian trio R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao have recorded Indian freedom struggle in some of their works. R.K. Narayan's *waiting for Mahatma*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* are some of the example for this. Post-Independent Writers like Kushwanth Singh and Chaman Nahal

recorded the Indian partition of 1947 in their works. Kushwanth Singh's 'A Train to Pakistan (1956), Chaman Nahal's Azadi (1977) are some of the examples for this.

The Indian English novels published from 1970's reveal a different perspective of the past. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Sashi Tharoor and others followed this new way of interpreting the past and reinventing history. Through their works they projected the history of the people who were unimportant and insignificant, victims and sufferers. Through their characters they try to give life to the people who were marginalised and neglected. They try to give voice to these people who were silent sufferers and voiceless. Their approach or interpretation of History is certainly different and interesting.

"There is a sense in which all novels are historical novels because every novel is an account of something that has already happened, unless it is science fiction. So history is absolutely at the heart of the novel" (Amitav Ghosh in an Interview about History)

Amitav Ghosh frequently uses history in his novels. He freely mixes fact and fiction to cook a new dish called 'Historical Fiction'. He tries to look into History from a new dimension, which was never looked before by historians. In his novels he interprets the colonial rule, partition of the country, riots, violence and the resultant migrations mostly from the Indian History. Using history as themes in the novels may not be new to the English fiction but his approach to these historical incidents is certainly different. He tries to read these old Histories through the eyes of the common people, who were not worthy of documentation by the historians. Through his works he tries to narrate the histories of the common people which were not recorded or documented by the historians. Thus he tries to project the new truths of history. He places public history and private history side by side and discusses the effect of the historical incidents on common people.

In 1978 Amitav Ghosh was at Oxford University pursuing his research in Social anthropology. At Oxford he came upon a collection of letters entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* translated and edited by S.D.Goitein of Princeton University. Those letters were collected from different synagogues of Jews in the Middle East region. Among these Amitav Ghosh could find an interesting letter with reference to an Indian slave. The letter was written by Khalaf ibn Ishaq from Egypt in 1139. It was addressed to Ben Yiju, an Egyptian merchant at Mangalore, India. Amitav felt it very interesting. So, he thought of tracing the origin and life of the Indian slave and his Egyptian master.

Amitav Ghosh, as part of his research in 1980 visited two Egyptian villages Lataifa and Nashawy. He stayed there for three years doing his research work. There he met some interesting characters like Abu-Ali, a shop owner; Jabir, an intelligent young boy and relative of Abu-Ali; Ustaz Mustafa, a Lawyer; Ustaz Sabry, a teacher; Imam Ibrahim; Shaik Musa and his family members. Here the Writer narrates his experiences with those people at the Egyptian villages. In this narration we get lot of information about the history of Egypt, life of Jews and their culture, history of the synagogue at Ben Ezra. We can also understand the life, customs, traditions and Culture of Egyptian rural society. Here the writer also brings out the misunderstanding of the Indian culture and traditions by the Egyptians.

"She said 'Is it true what they say about you? That in your country people burns their dead? ...Why do they do it?' she cried. 'Don't they know it's wrong? You can't cheat the day of Judgement by burning your dead.' (p.99)

During his stay, there in those Egyptian villages, as part of his research, he visited the Synagogue of Ben Ezra. He was seriously trying to trace the life of the Indian slave. Here the Writer narrates tradition of Jews to dispose their documents into a Geniza, a chamber at the synagogue. He also narrates the visits of many western scholars to the synagogue and transporting valuable documents to different libraries in America, England, Germany and the research done by the scholars using these collections.

In 1981 Amitav Ghosh left Egypt with many gaps in reconstructing the story of the Indian slave. Then he studied many more documents of Goitein and other scholars. He tried to trace out the Indian slave with reference to Ben Yiju. In 1988 he again went to Egypt to continue his research. There he found a lot of difference in the life and the change brought by the money earned by the Egyptian youth in Iraq. Here he came to know that the Indian slave was probably from the place around Mangalore, India.

In 1990 Amitav Ghosh arrived at Mangalore and met Prof. B.A.Viveka Rai, one of the foremost experts on Tulu folklore and Philology. He did research about names of that region, Tulu language, Bhuta shrines, Magavira tribe etc. Finally after a long research for more than 12 years he could reconstruct the private history of the Indian slave and his Egyptian Master, who were part of the Indo-Egyptian trade during medieval period.

Public History is the History known to the public and which is recorded or documented by the Historians. The Documentation of the historical events is limited to the macro level. They cover the effect of the historical events at national and international levels. They may also cover the effect of these incidents on the lives of important and powerful people like Kings, Queens, Ministers and their Generals.

In an Antique Land we can find many historical references. History is sprinkled throughout the novel. We come across references to Second Crusade War between the Christian forces and the Muslim forces in 1148(p.1), Yom Kippur War, a war fought by the coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria against Israel in 1173(p.6), Arrival of Portuguese traveller Vasco-de-Gama in India in 1498(p.235). We also find brief history of Egyptian Kingdom (p.21), the life of Jews at the Synagogue of Ben Ezra during twelfth century (p.37), the Egyptian Revolution of 1952(p.115). This novel centres on the Indo-Egyptian trade during twelfth Century (p.122). Private History is the history not known to the public. The History which covers the life at individual level angle is called Private history. In his novels, Amitav Ghosh reconstructs private history around a public historical incident to show how it had affected the lives of common people. He tries to re-examine the public history from a new perspective. Amitav's perspective is more at individual level rather than at national and international level. His focus is more on the private history than the public history.

Amitav Ghosh's portrayal of private histories can be viewed from three angles. First the effect of Public history on the individuals, second the tools used by Amitav Ghosh in reconstructing the private history and finally how he tried to voice the helpless or the

voiceless subalterns from these private histories. In the novel *In an Antique Land* Amitav Ghosh tries to construct the private history of an Indian slave whose history is unknown to this world until it is traced by the writer himself.

Ben Yiju, the Egyptian merchant was born at Mahdia in Tunisia. By that time Mahdia was a major centre of Jewish Culture and one of the important ports of Ifriqiya. He was a Rabbi, a respected scholar. As a young man he went to Fustat and then to Aden in search of his fortune. In Aden he engaged himself in trade between India and Middle East over sea route. There he made friendship with business men like Madmun, Yusuf ibn Abraham, Khalaf ibn Ishaq. In 1132 he moved to Mangalore, India to escape from a blood feud with enemies in his business. In Mangalore he married an Indian Nair woman Ashu and had a son and a daughter.

In the mean while Ben Yiju developed his business of goods export to Aden and import from there. An Indian slave Bomma joined the service of Ben Yiju. He also acted as a business assistant and business agent. The meaning of the word 'slave' in those days may be entirely different from the today's meaning. It might be the relationship of an obedient assistant to a master.

"Whatever the circumstances of their meeting, the terms under which Bomma entered Ben Yiju's service were probably entirely different from those suggested by the word 'slavery' today; their arrangement was probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship now understood".(p.122)

In 1135 Bomma went to Aden as a part of his business trip. When pirates attacked their ships he fought with them bravely. After that incident Ben Yiju's friends showed lot of respect to Bomma in their letters addressed to Ben Yiju. They began to prefix his name with the title 'Shaik'. In this Business Ben Yiju earned lot of money and fame. He had been requesting his friends in Aden to trace the whereabouts of his brothers and their families. He longed a lot to meet his brothers Yusuf and Mubashishir. In mid 1140's he got information about his younger brother Mubashishir. In 1149 Ben Yiju went back to Aden along with his son and daughter, leaving his wife Ashu at Mangalore. There he sent letters to his brothers but of no use. In the meanwhile he lost his son and was very much disturbed. Then he left his daughter in the care of his friend Khalaf ibn Ishaq and went to Yemeni mountains. He thought of rebuilding the lost relationship with his brothers with the marriage of his daughter. Finally he wrote another letter to his brother Yusuf, who was at Mazara, a small Sicilian town. Yusuf's elder son, Surur came and met Ben Yiju. The brothers met after a long time and married Surur and Ben Yiju's daughter. Thus the child of a Nair woman from the Malabar Coast was wedded to her Sicilian cousin in Fustat. Throughout these years Bomma was with his master. At the end, Ben Yiju went back to settle in Egypt in the last years of his life.

In *Reconstructing the Private histories* Amitav Ghosh usually uses different tools like Documents, Diaries, Memoirs, letters, Note book, News paper, Memory etc. In this novel he used the Geniza documents collected by various Research scholars from Western countries. The Jewish community at Masr, Cairo in twelfth century had followed a custom widespread at that time, of depositing their writings in a special chamber in the synagogue called Geniza. These documents could be disposed of with special rites later. During Eighteenth century when Egypt was invaded by the European forces. After that many scholars from Western countries visited the Geniza and took away many valuable documents and published them under different names. These publications reached different libraries, which were useful to Amitav Ghosh in reconstructing the Private history of the Indian slave and his Egyptian Master. The letter which first referred to the Indian slave bears the Catalogue number MS H.6 at the National and University Library in Jerusalem. Hence Amitav Ghosh calls him the slave of MS H.6 until his name is found.

All the details in the above private history are reconstructed with the minute details and references found in hundreds of Geniza documents now available at different libraries. When the documents fail to fill the gaps in the narration, Amitav Ghosh used his research mind to fill it. In this attempt Amitav Ghosh raises very interesting questions to make the readers think about the languages:

"What language did Ben Yiju speak with Ashu, for instance? Or for that matter, how did he communicate with Bomma, or with the merchants from various regions in India and beyond, with whom, given the nature of his occupation, he must have had to do business?"(p.230)

The novel *In an Antique Land* exhibits Amitav Ghosh's vast knowledge of different subjects like History, Sociology and Anthropology. Apart from being a creative writer here he also plays the role of a Historian, Sociologist, Anthropologist and Journalist. These subjects made him close to the Historical events and their effect on the common man or Voiceless people. By reconstructing the private history of Bomma, Amitav Ghosh tries to bring out the life of insignificant people who failed to enter the records of History. He put the bits and pieces of evidences available in an order to reconstruct the private history of a slave, who was not worthy enough to be recorded or documented by the historians. Bomma was a slave worked with a rich Egyptian merchant. His life is a silenced history. He has no voice of his own in any available documents. In Postcolonial theory we call the helpless and voiceless people as Subalterns. Here in this novel Amitav Ghosh has successfully voiced the subaltern, Bomma.

It can be concluded that Ghosh's treatment of history is different, because he focuses more on the effect of historical incidents on the lives of individuals rather than on the Historical incidents. He presents parallel narratives of public history and private history with private history occupying centre stage. Thus he brings the private histories into limelight, which was shadowed by the Public histories. Amitav Ghosh focuses more on how the historical incidents shattered the lives and hopes of ordinary people.

Amitav Ghosh does not question the public history but through his writings he questions its biased nature and its lack of comprehensiveness. He questions the way it had neglected the voiceless common people. He looks at the History not from the centre but from the periphery. This type of revisionist approach to the historical events is found in most of the novels written by Amitav Ghosh. Thus in this novel Amitav Ghosh is successful in making his readers understand the historiography of the Indo-Egyptian trade during twelfth Century. He is also successful in bringing out the silenced history and giving voice to the voiceless man like Bomma.

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