

“Prompter’s Whisper”: History, Travel and Narrative in Post-Colonial Indian English Travel Writing

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Abstract

The theory revolution and the counter-traditional wave in humanities in the 1980s have garnered attention towards new localism by positing alternatives to the great tradition. In this, Travel writing has proved adaptable and responsive to post-colonial and Globalization studies, thereby shaking off its ‘middlebrow’ status. Keeping in mind the relevance of travel writing in Global politics, the paper aims to engage with *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveller’s Tale* (1992) by Amitav Ghosh to delineate the question of History, Travel and Narrative in Indian English Travel Writing. The paper contends that Ghosh uses the Hybrid non-fiction space of the travelogue to write a counter-narrative to the Eurocentric discourse of Travel writing. It seeks to foreground that the reverse Grand tour of Amitav Ghosh problematizes the western hegemonic hold on the field of Ethnography and History. The paper is divided into two parts- the first part will establish *In an Antique Land* as Resistive subaltern history, followed by the second part, which focuses on Ghosh’s privileging of third world ethnography to write an alternative narrative.

Keywords: Travel, Subaltern History, Ethnography, Narrative.

1. Introduction

Etymologically, the word “travel” derives its meaning from the word *travelian* connotating ‘toil’, ‘to labour’, and making a journey. Travel has always been conflated with the Europeanised form of travel which involves mapping, surveying, and gazing at the place encountered. The assumption, therefore, is that all other types of travels imitate the ‘Grand Tour’ taken by the Europeans in which the figure of English Gentleman was dominant. The ignorance of different forms and modes of travels explicates how Europeans used travel as a genre to disseminate their colonizing mission. The paper posits that postcolonial Indian English Travel writings offers innovative narrative techniques and straddles the generic boundaries to subvert the predominance of the Europeanised form of Travel writing and offers a counter-narrative form of narrative. By directing focus on the themes of history, identity and poetics and politics of mobility in *In an Antique Land*, the study dismantles the status of Travel writings as “Profit-driven or entertainment-oriented (Lisle,47)” and foregrounds its participation and role in the new condition of the modern world.

In an Antique Land: History in the guise of a traveller’s Tale as a hybrid non-fiction travelogue recounts the dual narrative of traverses of Amitav Ghosh into two Egyptian Villages- Lataifa and Nashway. What started as his endeavour to unearth the identity of a slave of MS H.6 in his anthropological research culminates in a travelogue. The narrative en-captures Amitav Ghosh’s Journey to the Antique land to record present-day Egypt’s cultural configuration and his scholarly

and textual journey to Geniza to recuperate the Indian slave's subaltern history and identity. By locating history and ethnography as its focal point, the paper will mull around questions like- how does post-colonial Indian Travel writing participate in the politics of 'difference'? What kind of innovative techniques are used by Ghosh to narrativize the subaltern history of Indian slave? Engagement with the question of History and ethnography is significant as both ethnography and History, like travel, are processes to analyze, perceive, and assimilate the community's sociology and cultural composition. Therefore, insight into the community helps in unrevealing the complex and intricate networks of power relations.

2. *History in the Guise of a Tale*

Traditionally, the urge to travel has been associated with the ceaseless human impulse to seek the unfamiliar and the unknown. However, the journey and the metaphor of journeying in Eurocentric Travel writers' hands have been a powerful trope for Colonization and Imperialization. By engaging in post-colonial politics, Ghosh problematizes the 'Monarch-of-all-I-survey' (Pratt, 2003) approach of the western Travel writers and offers nuanced and innovative ways of doing travel. Furthermore, the travelogue exposes the power structure involved in narrativizing the experience of travel and mobility. This section of the paper will delineate Ghosh's involvement in writing the resistive History.

Amitav Ghosh questions the dominant western understanding of History as a singular objective quest for facts by underlining gaps, silences and lacunas in the official History. The text exposes the power relationship involved in the narrativizing of History and its process of documentation. The sub-title of the travelogue, '*History in the guise of a traveller's Tale*,' re-defines and destabilizes the Eurocentric ways of knowledge creation by questioning absolutism, fixity and linearity asserted in the dominant discourse of History. Instead, it foregrounds the multiplicity of post-colonial History by incorporating the unremembered and unwritten. By linking the history-making process to a tale, Ghosh has invited questions around the 'construct-ed-ness' of History. By underlining the fictionality in the objective quest for truth in History, the text dismantles the pre-assumed objectivity of Historiography.

The title of the travelogue, which is an allusion to Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias in Egypt', opens up the complex questions of history-formation, translation, and the traveller's subjectivity. Ghosh, by traversing 'in' the Antique land as opposed to Shelley's representation of it as a 'dead place' and as a desert', offers the mundane details of the hustle-bustle of everyday life. Ghosh uses the backdrop of the present and now time to reflect upon Egypt's 12th century Medieval syncretic History. The delineation of Egyptian cultural configuration provides a stark contrast to present-day Egypt's disarrayed world, shaping itself under Globalisation's influence. As Shirley chew in her reading of the travelogue points out, Shelley's entire sonnet represents a feeling of loss and inevitability. "Egypt as time-space is flattened out, emptied by its history, people and culture and laid open to the scrutiny of the visitor from the west"¹. In his travelogue, Ghosh travels against the grain where the dominant trends of travel from the Centre to the periphery are questioned.

Ghosh's delineation of Bomma-Yiju story highlights the displacement in the official History, which overlooks pre-colonial History of an "elaborate correspondence linking of the Mediterranean, fustat (old Cairo) and south India." (Vernerey, 2012), in favour of the linearity of modern-day History. As Vernerey points out, "these figures represent an absent history of the movement, trade, accommodation and syncretism that supersedes the dominance of present-day, Euro-American cultures by nearly a millennium." (2012, p.175) As opposed to medieval

cosmopolitan History, this reading of modern History only underlines the rupture in Egypt’s cultural configuration, evident from creating a nation and national boundaries. Ghosh notes- “it was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had probably been drawn through tie rather than territory., to allocate a choice of histories” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 95)

The porosity of the religious and cultural boundaries between Ben-Yiju and Bomma offers an alternate vision to contemporary History. To emphasize the relationship of trust between Bomma and Ben Yiju, he explains a different conception of slavery. “It is largely because the medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conception, both of servitude and its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom. Slavery then was not figured along the lines of today’s master-slave relation. Instead of exploited servitude, it was more of a “patron and client” and often a mean of “creating fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise undertaken” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 195) - In a review of this travelogue- Clifford Geertz has called the representative of 12th-century world of Indian Ocean trade as a ‘multicultural bazaar’ⁱⁱ. In the contemporary world, it is divided into distinct and separated national boundaries.

Ghosh sheds light on the unremembered History by connecting the common everyday History to the larger event happening at the macrocosmic level. Ghosh links the everyday affairs with the larger world affairs to emphasize- how what is happening at the local level is informed and shaped by global politics. To illustrate, he explains the time Khalaf Ibn Ishaq letter was written: “Palestine was a thoroughfare for European armies” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 34). The narrative technique also allows Ghosh to use ‘massive campaigns of European armies’ to connect the plunder of colonialism in the past to its continuity in the present.

The travelogue juxtaposes the chaotic modern History as oppose to the syncretic History of twelfth-century Egypt to highlight History as a process. Ghosh delineation of transiting nature of History becomes vital as it allows him to reflect upon the power nexus involves in its creation. Ghosh, in the travelogue, notes that there is a ‘sly allegory between history and power’. As Debbie Lisle also notes, “by painstakingly tracing the story of the slave Bomma through his master Ben Yiju correspondence, Ghosh introduces the readers to the insufficiencies of archival historical documentation and the gaps in the supposedly complete historical records.” (Lisle, 253). However, this is not to foreground Ghosh’s attempt to fill those insufficiencies in the existing History.

Interestingly, from The recollection of the past of Slave of MS H.6 to the revelation of his subaltern identity as Bomma, the entire travelogue delineates the recollection in the form of the scraps and fragments of information. By presenting Bomma’s story in fragments, Ghosh underlines the incompleteness of historical endeavour. As Edward Said also notes, “[...] subaltern history is that which is riddled by such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of the symbol of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality... In another world, subaltern history is the literal fact is a narrative missing from the official History.” (as cited in Vernerey, 2012) Ghosh alters the ‘official’ of History by including fiction into serious History. He strays from the popular realm by refusing to encapture the History of the monarchs and kings; instead, he traces the subaltern history of an Indian slave. Ghosh in the travelogue notes that “ the reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individuals 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” (4)

Ghosh uses the space of the travelogue to write a resistive subaltern history. From the reference of the slave MS H.6 as a “prompter’s whisper”, Ghosh recuperates the subaltern history of

the slave so that the entire focus is centred around him. Ghosh ends the text with the Indian slave having 'the last laugh'. The importance of the letter is grounded when Ghosh underlines "within the tornado of grand designs and historical destinies, Khalaf ibn Ishaq's letter seems to open a trapdoor into a vast network of foxholes where real life continues uninterrupted." (3)

Ghosh writes a counter-narrative to western travel writing. Ghosh erases all physical traces of the West from his text. As Robert Dixon illustrates, western presence in the text is only used as a reference point. The move away from Europe is, as Inderpal Grewal suggests, - 'to create a new map of the old world as the world without Europe' (as cited in Edwards and Graulund 2012, 49). The text depicts the 'Antique' land as a land rich in history, culture and unique traditions. Unlike the stereotypical representation of a third world country where the place's fixity is emphasized, Ghosh portrays them in the culture of mobility and their association with modernity. The text illustrates that "the men of the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the sheikhdom of Persian gulf...a few had visited Europe: some had a passport so thick that they opened like ink-blackened concertinas" (as quoted Edwards and Graulund 2012, 57) Ghosh notes- "[E]veryone's on the move and has been for centuries: dwelling in Travel (Merrill 2008, 108). "the areas around Nashway had never been a rooted kind of place; at times it seemed to be possessed of all the busy resettlement of an airport transit lounge. Indeed, a long history of travel was recorded in the very names of the area's families. They spoke lines with distant parts of the Arabs world cities (Ghosh, 1993, p. 173-174).

Furthermore, The normative assumption that the subject of the traveller will traverse the present geography of the place and narrate his findings back in the form of a text is also refuted in the travelogue as Ghosh "by focusing as much on the textuality of travel writing as on the mobility of travel, [He]challenges those who claim that travel practice is dead or dying" (Edwards and Graulund 2012, 61). Along with offering different ways of travelling, Ghosh also foregrounds the unstable self of the travelling subject.

The two pivotal episodes which delineate Ghosh's dismantling of the European Historiographical project are- Naming of the 'Masr' and the pillaging of Geniza, which he visited for archival reference to recuperate the subaltern consciousness of the Indian slave, Bomma. In the episodes describing Geniza and Masr, Ghosh underlines the relationship between power and History. The systematic renaming of Masr, which earlier was considered Mother of Earth, and pillaging and plundering of the Geniza stands as a synecdoche of history's larger pattern and how it affects power-making. This is evident when Ghosh points out that " within the western historiographical records the unarmed character of the Indian ocean trade is often represented as a lack ... that invited the intervention of Europe with its increasing proficiency in the war... as the Europeans were unable to compete in the Indian ocean trade by purely commercial mean...they were to take control of it by aggression pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores"(Ghosh, 1993, p. 286)

Ghosh exposes the imperialist streak of European History by presenting the ruins of the Masr and Geniza. He illustrates that as Egypt started gaining "a new strategic importance within the disposition of European empire. She was also gradually evolving into a new continent of riches for the western scholarly and artistic imagination" (Ghosh, 1993, p. 59). The power nexus between travelling, exploring, and the History-making process is indicated by how Egypt is recorded In the Oxford English dictionary as "intense darkness (see Exodus X.22)" (Ghosh, 1993, p.32) in a way that justifies the plundering of the culture repository for their scholarly endeavour. This interconnection of Egypt's History with exodus and darkness is in tandem with European stereotypes, where the West's presence is justified to civilize the barbaric land. Similarly, Ghosh explains she was

“becoming a victim of the enlightenment’s conception of knowledge and discovery”. This plundering of the riches of the Geniza is an allegory between power and the writing of History. As Ghosh notes, “by the first world war; the Geniza had finally been emptied of all its documents...the irony is that for the most part, they went to countries which would have since long since destroyed the Geniza had it been part of their History. Now it was Masr, which had sustained the Geniza for almost a millennium, that was left with no trace of its riches: not a single or straw of paper to remind her of that aspect of the past” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 66)

Amitav Ghosh offers an alternative perspective of history that does not claim itself as absolute and complete but acceptive of fractures and gaps. The constant meandering between the past and the present tense in the narrative further debunks the established normative spatial and temporal boundaries of history. Do displacement of time and the narrative in the text stand symptomatic of larger cultural displacement? The next section of the paper will problematize the monolithic idea of culture and its effect on the present Egyptian society recorded by Ghosh in the travelogue.

3. *Ethnographic Travel, Travelling Ethnography*

In ‘Metaphysics of Modernity’ⁱⁱⁱ, Anshuman Mondal argues that ‘Anthropology acts like a history of other side’, which helps form a “rhetoric of historical supersession”. This, in turn, helps modern Knowledge universalize by ‘erasing marks of encounter with other knowledge’ (76). Ghosh’s subversion of western ethnographical practices questions how knowledge creation and representation of others have been used in ethnography for disguised colonial and imperial endeavours.

Travel and ethnography share a long historical relationship. Clifford points out that in the Post-colonial ethnography, “ancient and settled” field site becomes an entry point into the complex History of dwelling and travel in the twentieth century. Ethnographer’s subjectivity is no longer observing the local and natives and the discrete and pure cultural forms. It is an entry point into the hybridity of both culture and identity. *In an antique land*, a travelogue offers an alternative way of doing ethnography where the third world is not taken as an enclosed space cut off from the hustle-bustle of worldly affairs.

Ghosh, at the outset, foregrounds the land of exotic as land with the History of travel and transit. In *the Imam and the Indian*, Ghosh notes- “the men of the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge. Many of them had worked and travelled in the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, others had been in Lybia and Jordan and Syria...some of them had passports so thick that they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas” (The Imam and the Indian). Similarly, the travelogue highlights that

“ and none of this was new: their grandparents and ancestors and relatives had travelled and migrated too, much the same way as mine had...you could read the history of this restlessness in the villager’s surname...the wanderlust of its founders had been ploughed into the soil of the village: it seemed to me sometimes that every man in it was a traveller”.(Ghosh, 135)

In his research, by inviting attention to culture and its representation, Ghosh notes that people from the village have been constant travellers since time immemorial. As Renato Rosaldo argues- “in contrast with the classic view which posts culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous way of intersection where distinct process cross from within and beyond its border” (as cited in Dixon, 2015, p. 3) Unlike the traditional

view, where an ethnographer researcher is the one who sets the question and occupies a hierarchical position, Ghosh as a traveller invites self-scrutiny. To illustrate, Ghosh faces tough questions like - On the practice of burning the dead- “why do you allow it? Can’t you see that it’s a primitive and backward custom? Are you savages that you permit something like that? ...how will your country ever progress if you carry on doing these things?” (Ghosh, 1993, p. 177) when Ghosh is taken aback by the change of the authority, he is told that “they were asking questions,’ he said, ‘just like you do; they didn’t mean any harm. Why do you let this talk of cows and burning and circumcision worry you so much? These are just customs; naturally, people should be curious. These are not things to be upset about.’ (Ghosh, 1993, p. 152) this overturning of the established hierarchy between the observer and the observed exposes the power nexus involved in the knowledge creation, where things are modified and filtered to suit the Ethnographer’s assumption. For instance, Ghosh is bombarded with information during his research which compels him to contemplate his ethnographer role. He is interrupted and bombarded with information that is not even asked. To illustrate, Ghosh notes- “women use their forefingers to push corn down the throats of their geese,’ added Shaikh Musa’s son Ahmed, an earnest young man, who was a great deal more heedful of my duties as the gatherer of information than I.” (Ghosh, 9) At other points, Ghosh is reminded of his duty as an ethnographer. “no sooner had Shaikh Musa left than Ahmed began to tell me how cotton was rotated with the fodder crop berseem. ‘write it down, he said, handing me my notebook, ‘or else you’ll forget.” (24)

Ghosh further problematizes the traditional way of doing Ethnography by inviting attention to the role of language and the question of translation. Unlike Western ethnographers who never face language barriers in depicting other cultures’ customs and traditions, Ghosh is challenged with language barriers in his ethnographic endeavour. Ghosh notices “the obstacle of language... Ben Yiju’s documents were mostly written in an unusual, hybrid language” (Ghosh, 1993, p.72). Ghosh further acknowledges that “I would never be equipped to produce authoritative editions of Geniza texts...as I followed the slave’s trail from the library to library, there were times when the magnifying glass would drop out of my hand when I came upon certain words and turns of phrase for I would suddenly hear the voice of Shaikh Musa speaking in documents in front of me” (Ghosh, 1993, p.74). In doing so, Ghosh debunks the dominant language hierarchy, which considers itself self-sufficient and well-equipped to explain all the cultural and social understanding of other cultures without facing any difficulty. Hence, Ghosh successfully foregrounds the alternative way of doing ethnography with a difference.

Amitav Ghosh overturns the observer’s hierarchy, who maintains scientific detachment from their observed field of study; Ghosh opens his narrative by tracing the interpersonal relationship with the people of Lataifa and his experience of being a lodger in Abu -Ali’s house. Ghosh’s account is not a third-person account of his observation; it is a mixture of his experiences, observations and the friendship that he made there. Neelam Srivastava argues that Ghosh replaces Ethnographer’s authoritative persona using his innovative narrative techniques, wherein he places the observer. The observed in a constant exchange of dialogues and camaraderie. Ghosh dismantles the traditional boundaries around which are pre-fixed for ethnographical and a historical account with his narrative techniques. The switching of the past tense and inclusion of autobiographical elements in the travelogue serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it foregrounds the usually detach identity of the narrator-historian cum ethnographer. Secondly, with the personal introduction, Ghosh binds together the two different narrative strands of his narrative. Bomma, the Indian Slave, serves as the connecting link between these two disparate narratives. Also, as Neelam Srivastava notes- “The Third World anthropologist now conceives of his research as extending a long history of inter-cultural relations contacts not defined by European Expansion or the dichotomy of East

and West.” (Clifford, 27)^{iv}. Amitav Ghosh ‘dwells-in-travel’ to record the multiplicity of culture and foregrounds the non-western understanding and process of ethnography.

4. Conclusion

The paper establishes the relevance and participation of travel literature in contemporary global politics has provided insight into the politics of narrativizing History and representation of ‘other’ culture in post-colonial Travel writing. The paper contributes to the more extensive debate about culture, its transition and displacement in the present globalized world. By underlining the multiplicity of history and viability of non-western form of Knowledge, it participates in the call for greater scrutiny of postcolonial travel writing to look for alternative ways of knowledge creation.

Notes

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- ⁱ *Visiting Antiquity, Encountering the Contemporary: Research and Travel in In an Antique Land*. (n.d.).
- ⁱⁱ Clifford Geertz, Review of Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land, The Australian*, 25 August 1993(rpt. From *New Republic*) p.30, as cited in Robert Dixon, “‘Travelling in the West’: The Writing of Amitav Ghosh” in Tabish Khair (ed.) *Amitav Ghosh: A critical Companion* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) pp. 9-35
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Metaphysics of modernity-Mondal*, Anshuman A. *Amitav Ghosh*. Manchester University Press, 2013. Print.
- ^{iv} Clifford, James. “Looking for Bomma”, *London Review of Books*, pg-24, 1994. Print

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