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Recreation of Subaltern History in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*

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By

Bijay Tuladhar

Symbol No.: 280273

T.U. Regd. No.:16466-94

Central Department of English,

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

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Tribhuvan University
Central Department of English
Kirtipur, Kathmandu

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Recreation of Subaltern History in Amitav Ghosh’s *In An Antique Land*,” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Bijay Tuladhar, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

Members of Research Committee:

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antic Land* focuses on the history of marginalized people and community of ancient time period. It is complex text which bears the quality of partially history, partially fiction and partially travel writing in which Ghosh trails back to twelfth century and brings the issues on how India came into the contact with Egypt with the story of Ben Yiju, Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his Indian slave Bomma. By trailing to antique past he insight deeply into the cultural and social development of Egypt from religious movements to Operation Desert Storm. Ghosh has not only written the historical novel rather he has evoked the history of marginal people who have been abandoned by mainstream history. Combining keen observations with painstaking historical research, he present the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of political and historical changes in their lives. With all great qualities of travel writer, Ghosh searches for the hidden history of subaltern in this novel.

Keywords: subaltern, subaltern history, marginal, post colonialism, new historicism, diaspora, colonization.

Recreation of Subaltern History in Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*

This research work aims to depict the history of marginalized people and community of ancient time period based on Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. It is a complex text which bears the quality of partially history, partially fiction and partially travel writing in which Ghosh trails back to the twelfth century and brings the issues on how India came into the contact with Egypt at that time with the story of Ben Yiju, Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his Indian slave Bomma. By trailing to the antique past and revealing the history of commoners, Ghosh has not only written the historical novel rather he has evoked the history of marginalized people who have been abounded by mainstream history. In this sense, Ghosh take the New Historicist stand point while writing this historical fiction. He presents the societies of two centuries separated from one another by eight hundred years by combining fiction, history, travel and anthropology.

In the novel *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh set out to find an Indian slave, name unknown, who some seven hundred years before had traveled to the Middle East. The journey took him to a small village in Egypt, where medieval customs coexist with twentieth-century desires and discontents. In the novel, Ghosh wants to re-create the life of his Indian predecessor. He finds himself immersed in those of his modern Egyptian neighbors. Combining keen observations with painstaking historical research, Ghosh serves up skeptics and holy men, merchants and sorcerers. Some of these figures are real, some are only imagined, but all emerge as vividly as the characters in a great novel. In this sense, *In an Antique Land* is a historical novel that reveals the hidden characters from history which is analyzed through new historicist perspective.

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices. A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts color critic's conclusions.

New historicism is a theoretical method based on parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical era. Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, H. Aram Veseer are some of the prominent new historicists. According to new historicist every literary text has its situation within the institutions, social practices and discourses that constitute the overall culture of particular time and place. In this regard, Louis Montrose takes new historicism as, "a shift from an essential or immanent to a historical, contextual and conjunctural model of signification and a general suspicion of closed systems, totalities, and universals" (393).

It is impossible to get objective truth in any text because like all human beings, writers also live in a particular time and place and their views are shaped consciously or unconsciously by the experiences within their own culture as Louis Montrose defines the new historicism "as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history" (416). The 'historicity of texts' means that the text is embedded with certain economic, cultural, social and political conditions of its production.

In an Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh is a story about Egypt, the antique land referred and narrated by a man who himself belonged to another antique land, India. The similarity deals even in the conquests made by the intruders who set up colonies in the parts which they made their own. It has three major aspects. First, as a student of Anthropology the novelist searches for the life of Ben Yiju, Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his Indian slave Bomma. Secondly, he has a deep insight into the cultural and social development of Egypt from the religious movements to Operation Desert Storm and thirdly, the dreams and aspirations of ordinary human beings and the effect of political and historical changes in their lives. In this sense, Ghosh searches for the hidden history of subaltern in this novel.

Likewise, Amitav Ghosh ends his tale there and tries to wrap up his historical thread also, drawing tenuous parallels between modern times and a story that he is largely obliged to guess on the basis of some ambiguous letters. He includes some explanations on the nature of ancient slavery as a social institution rather than a crime and he also sheds some light on the destructions of Arab-Indian trade due to the conquering navies of Europe who, seeing that no one else claimed the naval traffic for themselves, reasoned that it must be up for grabs.

Ghosh writes this novel with great care and tenderness and is honest, funny and wry – all the great qualities of a travel writer. The only shame is that he makes it bit complicated with the dual narrative theme, a challenge that few ever manage to pass off successfully and even more unlikely a stunt when dealing with ancient anthropology. Ghosh trails back to 1146 through a letter catalogued MS H.6, by a merchant KhalafIbnIshaq to a trader named Abraham. Ben Yiju who was living in Mangalore on the south-western coast of India became the center of interest. The letter mentions a certain slave and sends him plentiful Greetings. Ghosh was

mesmerized by the history and soon found himself in Tunisia learning Arabic specifically Judaeo- Arabic, a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, written language. In 1980 he travelled to Egypt, to a small village Lataifa where he began to observe and learn about the Egyptian people and their lifestyle. From there, Ghosh travelled to another Egyptian village, Nashawy and then on to Mangalore, India living with the people in the towns and villages. He was doing this mainly to track the travels of Ben Yiju and of his slave a man whom Ghosh began to think of as Bomma. Ghosh's characters were coquetted in a complicated web of kinship relations of which Ghosh was curious. The perceptions of these people regarding India, is ancient and construed as for them, Hindus remained uncircumcised, burnt their dead, consumed spicy food and worshipped cows. He was interrogated about his culture. Why does Ghosh trail back to the ancient time in *In an Antique Land* through the narrator's research of the times of Abraham Ben Yiju? Why he has brought the history of commoners which is not included in official history?

By trailing to the antique past and revealing the history of commoners, Ghosh has not written historical novel rather he has taken a new historical or critical perspective towards the history in order to voice the subaltern characters of history in *In An Antique Land*. In this sense, the novel is a meditation on history in which Ghosh overlaps time and presents the societies of two centuries.

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Indian author is mostly known for his award winning novels *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies*, *In an Antique Land*, and *The Hungry Tide*. *The Calcutta Chromosome* is also one of his less known but still very important novels and award winning works of science fiction. He was born to a Bengali family in Calcutta, India and he is very interested in Indian history. Ghosh is well known for his interest in the Indian colonial history and the contribution

of the English language in the postcolonial world. *In The Calcutta Chromosome* he points towards an “alternative” history that makes me interested to work on this book.

Regarding Ghosh’s writing pattern his critic Khandoker Farzana mentions:

Ghosh’s writing style is very much inspired by the other Bengali Indian writers such as Rabindranath Tagore or Phanishwar Nath Renu. His childhood was spent in Calcutta and his representation of the geographical picture of Calcutta in the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is also influenced by his personal experiences. (2)

Amitav Ghosh is the Bengali Indian novelist who writes in English. Most of his novels are set in Calcutta and West Bengal.

Like his other novels, his novel *In an Antique Land* has been analyzed through various perspectives by different critics. Sumitra D’ Chettry analyzes the novel by considering Ghosh’s consciousness to build his large canvas of history. She mentions:

In an Antique Land has plot, theme, and characterization, a complex fiction engaged with a specific history uninteresting and offering critical interpretation of that history today. In the main plot, is the journey of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave while in the sub-plot is in the opposite direction i.e, towards guns , bombs and tanks of the Western Imperialists Powers which caused destruction of the world when Egyptians were stranded in Iraq during the Operation Desert Storm. The colonizers who built the man-made barriers and introduced the deep scars between the Hindus and the Muslims based on customs like burning of the dead, absence of circumcision in boys and clitoridectomy in girls.

Ghosh writes about cunningness, egotism and betrayal. The characters of the contemporary world are people whom the research scholar meets during his pursuit of Bomma. These characters have been brought to life by a few deft strokes of the brush and almost each character reveals the havoc wrought by the post-colonial malady of distrust and selfishness. Abu Ali personifies cupidity, Imam Ibrahim symbolizes bigotry and narrow-mindedness, Sheikh Musa's humane and tolerance, while Zaghoul remains the same. Jabeer grows from a quiet boy to self-critical and Nabeel is found to be ambitious.

Amitav Ghosh has been an important presence, bringing to fictional practice his grounding not only in anthropology but also in subaltern history. *In an Antique Land* is much more than a mere anthropological account. Ghosh's writing with that of Salman Rushdie, Nandana Dutta compares:

Ghosh does not cut a swath through an entire national imaginary like Rushdie. Instead he adopts a complex inversion of the subaltern method that involves two processes: one, the selection of small, neglected events from the national story in a concession to subaltern practice –the little narrative against the grand; and two, the neglect by the narrative of some aspect of these stories. He does this by choosing his historical area carefully, keeping some part of it silent and invisible and then meditating on silence as it is revealed as a fictional and historical necessity. (18)

These retrievals are a necessary aspect of both the method of subaltern history and of its critique that Ghosh's text offers.

Amitav Ghosh is a Bengali Indian author best known for his fictions in English. He holds a place of singular distinction in the contemporary Indo-Anglian

literature. He has started writing in the 1980s, and strengthened the new English fiction for his new themes and techniques that deserve freshness and vitality.

However, some of the critics even have focused his writing as a post-colonial of diasporic writing. In this connection, Md. AbulKalam Azad mentions:

In his fiction, Amitav Ghosh brilliantly deals with the postcolonial identity of subaltern and their diasporic movement. In his essay, “The Diaspora in Indian Culture” Amitav Ghosh tries to see Indian Diaspora from cultural and political points of view. He observes that the huge migration from this subcontinent that began in the mid-19th century is not only one of the most significant demographic dislocations of the modern world; it represents nowadays an important force in global culture. (124)

As a diasporic writer, Ghosh lives in Brooklyn of New York. He has also residences in Goa and Kolkata of India. After completing his PhD, he decided to pursue his career in writing. First, he worked as a journalist with the Indian Express newspaper in New Delhi. Md. AbulKalam Azad mentions, “He has taught English and Comparative Literature at the Queens College, City University of New York, Columbia University, and Harvard University in the USA. For his distinguished contribution to the literary world, Amitav Ghosh was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature” (124). Ghosh has now turned to writing full-time, and split his time between the United States and India.

Though various critics have focused on the various issues from diverse perspectives while observing the novel *In an Antique Land* they have not deeply focused on various issues from diverse perspectives of Subaltern history. Thus, this research brings the new historicist perspective to observe the novel in order to trace

the history of subaltern in the novel. The interface between history and fiction has been an area of rich potential for the postcolonial novelist in South Asia and this is evident in the practice of many novelists from the region who have used historical material as backdrop but have also used fiction to comment on recent events in their countries. This research work shows that Ghosh, by retrieving and giving place to the historically repressed event in the fiction, achieves a swerve from simply 'righting the record' and releases the marginal as a referent in the present with his deep mediation upon history.

This research work aims to include the theoretical modality of New Historicism to deal with the voices of the marginal characters from the history in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. This research work aims to include the theoretical modality of 'New Historicism' to deal with the relevance of the events and incidents mentioned in the text with the historical facts of ancient India and Egypt. New historicism keeps the reciprocal concern between history and fiction. Thus, a text is not free from the sociopolitical and historical influence as told by Michel Foucault. Keeping this notion into the consideration, this research work will include the ideas from new historicists such as Louis Montrose, H. Aram Vesser and Peter Barry.

New historicism was developed as a literary theory in the late 1970s. Yet, the term was only coined several years later by Stephen Greenblatt, an American critic who first used the term in a 1982 essay collection dealing with Renaissance studies. According to a very basic definition in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*, new historicism is "a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period" (172). Previously, literary critics had predominantly used text-only approaches to interpret a literary work and, thus, historical influences on a text had often been neglected. Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*

being the historical literary text, it is relevant to deal with New Historicists perspective to evoke the historicity of text because every text is situated in certain time frame. So, In contrast to former approaches, new historicism does not privilege the literary text, but instead “literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other” (Barry 172). This new understanding of the relationship between these different types of texts also calls for a new understanding of the relationship between text and context. Hence, advocates of the theory are interested in the representation of history in written texts, or, as Barry calls it, in “history-as-text” (175). That is why, it is obvious to deal both the literary and non-literary texts with New Historicists' ideas and perspectives.

A frequently quoted phrase by the theorist Louis Montrose identifies the new historicists' “reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (qtd. in Abrams 219) as a key feature of the approach. It means that history is seen as 'textualized', that is as a group of linguistic traces that can be recalled, but is always mediated through the narrator and the reader. This, in turn, makes the attempt to depict history objectively impossible and changes the relationship of history and literature fundamentally. Therefore, new historicists consider historical accounts as equally interpretable as literary texts, since both are seen as “expressions of the same historical moment” (Barry 173) and can, therefore, both be analyzed in this respect. *In an Antique Land*, being the text of factual accounts of certain timeframe, bears the quality of New Historicism.

Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* as a factual account of certain timeframe bears not only the quality of travel writing or journalistic report, being the account of the experiences of emigrants carries the notion of historical, cultural and political purpose. Similarly, it deals with the issues like function of institutions, power and

discourses. Social, cultural and political purposes, function of power and discourse in the construction of truth from the ruling group as well as counter discourse of the politically and culturally marginal groups which are related with New Historicism could be traced in the text *In an Antique Land*. The text is the complete outcome of the power relationship between people of center and people of margin.

New historicism is informed by Marxist ideas and Michel Foucault's notions of power relations. One effect of new historicism in its time was that it forced “critics to focus on the problems of historical representation and knowledge that are a part of any critical endeavor” (Childers 208) in a time when text-only approaches dominated literary criticism. The new historicists' general view of culture and power has been widely accepted, even by severe critics of the movement such as Jean Howard, Carolyn Porter, and Theodore Levin.

In this particular context it concerns not only the relation of the work of the new historicists to politics and culture in general but also to the work of the theorist who has been identified by Greenblatt and others as having provided a major impetus for their own rethinking of cultural and political minorities especially the discourse made by power and counter discourse against the power holders.

Historical Criticism insisted that to understand a literary piece, we need to understand the author's biography and social background, ideas circulating at the time, and the cultural milieu. This school of criticism fell into disfavor as the New Critics emerged. New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce

themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a "truth" but a "cultural construct") reflected in a given work.

New Historicism is more "socio historical" and concerned with ideological products or cultural constructs which are formations of any era. So, New Historicists, insisting that ideology manifests itself in literary productions and discourse, interest themselves in the interpretive constructions which the members of a society or culture apply to their experience. The issue of culture has been at the center of critical and literary-critical studies for quite some time now, and nowhere has it been more prominent than in the influential form of literary criticism that has come to be known as the "new historicism." There is the difficulty of summarizing convincingly the project of the new historicism given both the diversity of the work of those who have been labeled new historicists and the multifaceted nature of the project itself. But certainly one of the most important contributions of the new historicists lies in the insistence and persuasiveness with which they have argued for the central importance of culture not only in relation to literary studies but to the human sciences in general.

A portrayal of complexity in history with the nation in the Indian context is an insertion of the mixed feelings, contradictions, and sorrows into the history of modernity. However, the suppressed thoughts and violence that were used in the victory of the modern is played down in histories that celebrate the arrival of the modern state. Commenting on this fact, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, "Histories that aim to displace a hyper real Europe from the center towards which all historical imagination currently gravitates will have to seek out relentlessly this connection between violence and idealism that lies at the heart of the process by which the narratives of citizenship away modernity come to find a natural home in history" (243).

History can be seen to function in accordance with a fixed agenda that seeks to domesticate a variety of things by way of persuading, both personal and impersonal. It is important in the establishment of meaning, in the creation of truth, and in deciding the master and the slave. This explains Europe's acquisition of the epithet "modern" which established the existing notion of imminent colonial expansion as witnessed by the world history. The reciprocal relationship between history and culture as NgugiWa Thiong'o points out:

Culture is a product of the history of a people which it in turn New historicists were frequently criticized, at least initially, for a perceived failure to articulate the methodological or theoretical bases for their work. It was nonetheless obvious from the beginning that what was "new" about the new historicism was an implicit frustration with the limitations of previous attempts to understand and describe the relation of cultural artifacts of all sorts like literary, theatrical, visual, and so forth to the historical forces and subjects they had been thought by previous literary historians merely to reflect. The initial work of the new historicists was rooted in an always implicit but at times explicit critique of older forms of historicism that saw culture as the expression of the unified worldview of a particular historical period or social group or class. (17)

Likewise, from the perspective of Stephen Greenblatt and others, culture could no longer be considered merely the mirror of the so-called deeper political forces and powers but must be seen instead as a political force or power in its own right. The research purposes here is not to review the numerous provocative discussions of the new historicism that have focused for the most part on the relation of new historicism

to other forms of literary, historical, or cultural analysis and criticism. The issue this research proposes to examine is somewhat a different one of the relationship between power holders and powerless people. In this regard, the text blurs all the false notion, truths, assumptions created by the ruler with its position in parallel historical position than mainstream history. In this sense, the text could be taken as the counter-discourse against official history.

Amitav Ghosh is a postmodern writer who attempts to express different discourses on the history of some nations in his fictions. After the arrival of post-structuralism and later Postcolonialism on the academic scene, truth of history has been questioned. Reconstructing history is a narrative style of the postcolonial writers in their attempt to make the meta-narratives of history easier to understand. Amitav Ghosh effectively makes use of it to promote the narrative as an alternative mode of knowledge to the scientific one which has been founded the western imperial enterprise. The basic idea that reflects his writings is that history like culture and knowledge is not an absolute independent thought, but a construct. So it is possible to remake it with intuition.

Amitav Ghosh always researches and brings together the social, cultural, and political events of the past the far-past, the present, and the future. He has stuffed his research too much in *In An Antique Land* which has made the text as the mixture genres of history, travel, research and fiction. He has done so because he aims to counter the official ruling class history and aims to speak through the voice of margin from the new historicist perspective.

Ghosh's ability to tell a tale by using memory is an important aspect to reveal the past. As an anthropologist, Ghosh is interested in ancient culture and he manages to translate this very aesthetically into fictional form in *In An Antique Land*. Ghoshtoo

blurs the various genres, which is so common in twentieth century writing. History is an important and inalienable aspect of much of Ghosh's fiction. *In An Antique Land* is allegorical and that in the novel, there is a clear demarcation between history and historiography. The novel raises certain ambivalent issues and attempt to subvert them. Alienation is not merely a modern concept of feeling. Ghosh believes that migration compounds the feeling of alienation as is evident from the past.

Likewise, Ghosh's ability to combine the personal and the historical in an aesthetic manner reaches its culmination in *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh integrates the historical achievement of the Indian traders from a decolonized point of view. In the past India attracted merchants from various far off places even though the means of communication were few. *In An Antique Land* portrays the extortion and greed of colonialism, which ended the intimate relationship between individuals as different as Ben Yiju and Bomma.

The novel reveals Ghosh's research abilities and interest in Anthropology. As a postcolonial writer, cultural heritage and identity have become important facts of Ghosh's personality. The keen ability for deep research which is seen in this novel is a quality to reveal the history through marginal perspectives. History is easily interwoven into the narrative framework and Ghosh attempt a comparative study of Asian and African, Indian and Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic cultures. Using the autobiographical traveler's tale to study the past, Ghosh's canvass is vast and wide. Character delineation has been handled expertly by Ghosh in this novel and the three dimensional characters—Abu Ali, Musa Mustafa Jabir, Sabry— bring life and color to his fiction. Ghosh blurs the barriers of nation, country and time dissolve in the consciousness of the author and he reaches a tragic realization of how unscrupulous political forces continue to suffocate human aspirations. The narrative of *In*

An Antique Land has two plots. This novel also repudiates canonical forms of history. The story of the Egyptian merchant Ben Yiju and his slave Bomma is intertwined with the narrator, Amitav's own story of his stay in the two villages of Egypt while doing research on the merchant. Ghosh himself is given permission by Oxford to use the Geniza library, "The study of Egyptian antiquities passed from being as esoteric and quasi-mystical pursuit into a freshly-charted field of scholarly enterprise, and in the service of the new science several travelers undertook journeys of discovery into Egypt" (131).

This is a comment on the fact that historical research was activated by the Oriental School after the discovery of the colonial 'other.' Though the Geniza library contains every written document of the past, the historical documentation of Ben Yiju and his slave is inadequate. Amitav finds it imperative to make connections between the letters exchanged by the merchant with this slave, and the customs followed by the people in the villages of Egypt as well as in Mangalore in India, to arrive at authentic facts about the lives of the two men. These attempts at the research reveal certain truths hitherto known to him, "You have to put a stop to it", she called out after me as I hurried away down the lane. 'You should try to civilize your people. You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead" (126).

Postcolonial history is reflected by various characters throughout the novel. It clearly refers to the fact that canonical history is imperialist in nature. It has created stereotypes about the Orient and these are stacked in books as objective records of truth. The expression of history is not a general and overall information about the world but it is selective picture of the past events. Amitav's attempt at the scholarly research on the lives of Ben Yiju and Bomma is also an attempt at questioning orientalist history.

Ghosh does not make any statement about the merchant or his slave; he makes references to historical incidents to justify his research. In the end, the story this novel comes across as important, not as an objective, but as an event which not clear has connections with various events of recent times, though it happened centuries ago. Ghosh, therefore, seems to parody History's claims to objective factuality in order to highlight the personal and the individual. While referring to Ben Yiju reasons for marrying a girl outside his faith, he says, "If I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof" (230).

A parody of the idea of recorded history as truth is evident in the use of words like 'proof' and 'documents.' Ghosh stays in Nashawy for his research; but over a period of just a few years, he sees the village getting affected the storm of 'development'. Like modern India, modern Egypt too loses its local identity and enters the age of machine-guns and technology offered by the West. The history of the ordinary people and their ordinary rural lives will never be a part of recorded history: "If was thus that I had my first suspicion of what it might mean to belong to a 'historical civilization', and it left me bewildered because, for my own part, it was precisely the absoluteness of time and the discreteness of epochs that I always had trouble in imaging"

The irony is that the Indian and Egyptian civilizations are the ones which boast off the greatest antiquity and historicity. The colonizers' histories have rendered all ancient 'historical civilizations', a historical in their documents and evidences.

Ghosh finds a number of common traits between Ben Yiju and his slave who crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages, and the people he has met in Egypt and in India. But he feels sad to realize that these people are not prepared to understand the similarities among themselves. They are all carried away by the notion of

‘development’ and ‘progress’ created by the West. The story of Ben Yiju reveals to him how Mangalore “came to lose virtually every trace of its extraordinary past” (245) with the advent of the colonial power. Amitav refers to a range of popular traditions and folk beliefs “which upturn and invert the categories of Sanskrit Hinduism” (263).

The hybridity which he finds in local faiths in India is also prevalent among the villagers of Egypt. Imam Ibrahim is knowledgeable about the traditional kinds of medicine and there are festivals such as mow lids in honour of the saints who are not a part of the mainstream Islam. But colonization has led to the destruction of all these local histories and cultures and given rise to mainstream canonical history and religion. The colonial power colludes with the dominating power of the colonized country. Therefore the mainstream “history” is a product of the collusion between various dominating forces the colonial and the colonized. Ghosh writes “[Zaghloul] has read many of the classical texts and he is very knowledgeable about plants and herbs and things like that’ ...’ Those leaves and powders don’t work anymore,’ he [Zaghloul] said. ‘Nowadays everyone goes to the clinic and gets an injection, and that’s the end of it” (142). Indians and Egyptians have both shared similar religious practices, attitudes, and lifestyles which do not fit into the framework of modern Western notions of ‘progress’ and development.

The narrator laments on the fact that in present times they hate each other not on the basis of personal experience but stereotypes created by History which is written in Western Orientalist academies. He finds it miraculous that parts of Bomma’s story have survived in spite of the historical interventions, “It seemed uncanny that I had never known. All those years that in defiance of the enforcers of

History, a remnant of Bomma's world had survived, not far where I had been living" (432).

The parody of historical facts is evident throughout the novel. The narrator relates to "document" and 'proof' whenever he talks about Ben Yiju or Bomma and yet calls it a story, "Bomma's story ends in Philadelphia" (348). He refers to his stay and experiences too as story, "I sometimes wished I had told Nabeel a story" (204). This story is about the communal riots of 1964 in Dhaka which Ghosh had witnessed as a child. Another incident of communal and provincial violence in Egypt and Algeria triggered off by a football match, is a fact in Ismail's life also referred to as story, "Later Ismail told me a story" (352). He says, "the stories of those riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols" (210). 'History' and 'story' are etymologically related. Journalists also call their news reports 'stories'. Therefore 'story' is not necessarily the equivalent of 'fiction' or 'lies'. Ghosh, by using the word 'story' for the act of writing an autobiographical novel blurs both 'history' and fiction into 'story'.

This clearly shows that his aim in recreating the given history is not to make a new set of truth claims. The narrative of Ghosh is presented as a version of truth, because history in the form of fiction is itself subversive in nature, since it gives a new vision to the existing past and historicizes it. *In An Antique Land* raises certain ambivalent issues and attempts to subvert them. The writer is conscious with history in *In An Antique Land*.

The novel refers to displacement of human beings, their psyche, as well as their identities in riots and communal violence. Amitav Ghosh in *In An Antique Land* witnesses how ordinary human beings are uprooted or killed in the name of 'freedom' and 'progress'. It is History that defines, creates, and eliminates boundaries. The

novel shows how geographical boundaries at times lead to cultural differences which in turn create hatred among people. He mentions, “The celebrations of Egyptian football victory against Algeria culminates in violence and ultimately a lasting fear and hatred among the people of the two states” (353).

If history has created and named nations, it has also conditioned them into viewing each other differently and with feelings of antagonism. This feeling of fear and hatred of the ‘Other’ is very similar to what Said might call the Occident’s fear of the Orient and therefore a desire to appropriate it. History, which is monolithic does not recognize the local or individual. It defines nations, cultures, and people only in terms of totalities creating homogeneous modes of ‘nationalism’ or ‘freedom.’

History through allegorical fiction thus ceases to be a fixed monument and comes across as the creation of a discursive practice, which therefore lends itself to the possibility of transformation. In the novel, the writer refuses to accept history because the common people such as Nabeel with their individual pasts “vanish into the anonymity of History” (353). He reveals incredulity towards the universals created by History and subscribes to a postmodernist notion of History as a narrative and therefore the validity of all individual histories against canonical history which is treated as a metanarrative.

The text is told in first person narrative, in which the narrator is used as a lens through which one sees various paradigms of ideology and their constructs. The narrator is therefore a historian and a character at the same time, therefore subject as well as object simultaneously. The ultimate irony is that the narrators speak ‘objectively’ about their situations; they have no power to either control or alter them. Their history remains a version which the writer appropriates through the use of

allegory. Ghosh thus recreates the past by creating subjective/individual history in his fiction.

Postcolonial writers would say, fictionalizing of history is total subversion since as they contend that truth is not to be found in recorded statements but statements in the making, because anything which is codified becomes institutionalized. To understand what the past was about, it is necessary to impose a narrative upon it. There is an element of fiction in all historical accounts and the neglect of this fact by all historians abuses it by explaining away notions of history-writing as 'scientific'. History, therefore, conditions people into believing only in the reality of its own making. Every form of reality which is personal and not part of the written history is written off as fictive or imaginative. The novel also portrays how notions of nationhood are created. Though an individual like the narrator may not be able to free himself from the terrifying memory of Tridib's death in the riots, he is expected to believe that he is living in a 'free' country among 'free' people. The narrator's grandmother is a victim of a notion of nationalism which is fictional rather than factual. While on the one hand she aspires political freedom, on the other, she subscribes to stereotypical form the worship of heroism in the name of nationalism and patriotism, when the reality around her in the same and the reality created by history books.

The emphasis on discursive self-reflexivity and a meta discursive relationship to his own writing that come through in *In an Antique Land* are among the most apparent postmodernist features of Ghosh's work on an ideological level.

Representations of the past are an integral part of his oeuvre. In the context of history, his message seems to be that fiction may be as good, if not better, a basis for representing the past as historiography, which is seriously inhibited by its own

discursive form and logic. The same is true of the scientific discourse in general.

Science and its sub-branches stemming from the Enlightenment and modernity (with Ghosh, notably history, medicine, anthropology and ethnography) are inter-woven together with fictional representation.

Moreover, Ghosh's works usually contain meta-fictional and meta-scientific issues that comment on the nature of discourse in general or on the writing of fictional or scientific text. In *In an Antique Land*, he makes this technique an integral part of his argument. Ghosh has a close relationship both to the ideology and the writing of *The Subaltern Studies III* as well as to many of the scholars affiliated with it. He has also published in the group's series, *Subaltern Studies IV*. The many years he spent with other members of the group in St Stephen's college in Delhi, as well as the general intellectual climate in the Subcontinent of 1980s are clearly evident in Amitav Ghosh's thinking.

Widespread concern with the crisis of nationalism and the general confusion of the era welcomed the assimilation of postmodernist tenets and opposed the modernist legacy. It seems that Ghosh's manner of constructing subjectivities in his narratives is quite close to the strategic essentialism as coined by Spivak. Although she did deconstruct the subaltern subject as it had been built by many of the Subaltern Studies group members, she was not too concerned about its essentialist and positivist characteristics. But she saw them as an asset in so far as they were used strategically for political purposes. In her research the subject in the end appears as a politically functional mixture of deconstructive (postmodern) and essentializing or positivising (modernist) ideas.

Rosalind O'Hanlon is another critic who has examined the group's writings. In her view, the reconstructions of subaltern histories by some representatives of the group allow the traditional Western subject to enter their discourse:

At the very moment of this assault upon Western historicism, the classic figure of Western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom—is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself. (O'Hanlon 191)

O'Hanlon ends up by arguing that the writing of subaltern history requires great skill and subtlety if slippage into essentialist humanism is to be avoided. Narrative subtlety and skill are usually recognized as the characteristics of the writer of fiction, not historiography. But given the fact that they are both narration, O'Hanlon's argument supports the adoption of the traditional techniques of historiography when writing fiction and vice versa, as Ghosh does in *In an Antique Land*.

In O'Hanlon's view, the most important thing in these constructions of subaltern subjectivity is to forget the myth of origins as a means of legitimation. The Cartesian ideas that the subject is self-constituting and that a being which has its origin outside itself is not a proper being to begin with has to be discarded. Only then is it possible to move on to the idea that histories and subjectivities are constructed from fragments that do not contain the signs of any essential belonging inscribed in them. O'Hanlon further argues for this kind of skill, "the ability to argue for a distinctiveness of practice without slipping into a metaphysics of presence' is difficult to develop" (197).

The ability of Ghosh to navigate along the fine line between essentialism and total dispersal in his textual constructions of subaltern subjects has been noted by Robert Dixon, who argues that “Ghosh develops a style of writing that is sufficiently nuanced and elusive to sustain the theoretical fiction of a recovery of presence without actually falling back to essentialism” (16). In his critique of postmodernism, Rajgopal Radhakrishnan lists the ways in which the identity problematic has been “brought to the third world on the postmodern platter” (14). In his view, the question of identity has come across to the subaltern people as a backward, unfashionable, quest through postmodernism. In a sense, the subaltern is forced to choose between a relevant but reactionary (modernist) project and a fashionable subjectivity that is hollow and devoid of any experiential basis. Further, among the subaltern groups, the subjectivity problematic is both urgent and morbid: “These people have to adopt an alien (colonial, or Western) epistemology to develop self-understanding. And this adoption of alien epistemology results in a situation, where identity is divorced from the agential authority of specific narrative projects and their hegemonizing strategies” (14). As a result, subaltern identity and its discourse are epistemically evacuated. They are alienated from their prerogative to make truth claims: the truth claims would come “from the Self of the dominant West” (14).

Thus, Western construct, deconstruction totally misunderstands the burden of the idea of essence as it affects those disempowered by colonialism. It also fails to understand the need for ‘strategic essentialism,’ as discussed by Spivak. She further observes that essentialism is actually very much a modernist phenomenon and “propounds a link, or a continuum, with modernism and its preoccupation with history and origins” (16). Reiterating Spivak’s idea of the subaltern subject as something that

cannot be regarded as having an a priori essence, waiting to become activated into agency after discovery can readily be applied to the character of Ghosh's slave, Bomma, in *In an Antique Land*. The narrator constructs the subjectivity of Bomma as a two-dimensional narrative process. On the one hand, he combines and imaginatively interprets and interweaves the textual traces from the scraps of manuscripts he has found in museums and institutions around the world through his narrative process; on the other hand, he relates his search for these documents. He also includes an erudite Notes-section, which bears witness to the empirical philological and linguistic research he has also conducted on the documents. In this sense, Amitav Ghosh has rewritten, questioned and countered the official Western histories revealing the perspective of subaltern or marginalized community in *In an Antique Land*.

This research paper has traced that rewriting, re-creating or retelling the history is a new historical standpoint of the post-modern author who by their new form of narration question or counter the official history created by power holders. Thus, this kind of historiography, unlike the history, is able to raise voices from marginal or subaltern people and community. Amitav Ghosh in his *In an Antique Land* has countered the official colonized history by trailing back to ancient Egypt and bringing the hidden facts of commoners which were properly excluded by the official history.

In doing so, Ghosh has shaped his novel as a mix genre. *In an Antique Land* is a complex text which bears the quality of partially history, partially fiction and partially travel writing in which Ghosh trails back to twelfth century and brings the issues how India came into the contact with Egypt at that time with the story of Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia and his Indian slave Bomma. Bringing the story from antique past and revealing the history of commoners, Ghosh has not only written

historical novel rather he has evoked the history of marginal people who have been abandoned by mainstream history. Ghosh's New Historicist standpoint while writing this historical fictional writing by overlaps time and presents the societies of two centuries separated from one another by eight hundred years by combines fiction, history, travel and anthropology as if it is an anthropological history. Thus, motif of Ghosh's historiography is to give the voice of margin or place in history as a counter against the official history.

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