



## In an Antique Land-The Study of an Anthropology

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### ***Abstract***

*Ghosh's frequent rendezvous with the medieval characters and places, a few contemporary characters, too, take the scene very often esp. Nabeel and Ismail. History that defines nations, cultures and people only in totality doesn't define the local or individual. Nabeel's dreams are fulfilled. His poverty is removed. His family members, like the entire middle class society of Egypt, are enjoying TV sets, food processors, calculator's etc. in their respective well-furnished drawing rooms but they have to compensate for it while watching helplessly the sad and moving culmination of Nabeel's tragedy during the gulf war: "We were crowded around the TV set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History.*

***Key words:*** landlord, alienation, younger generation

### **Narration**

Ghosh's frequent rendezvous with the medieval characters and places, a few contemporary characters, too, take the scene very often esp. Nabeel and Ismail. The narrator meets them in Nashawy, Egypt. These true representatives of the younger generation of the third world developing countries are passionate about achieving success in life to set themselves free from the clutches of poverty and to have a white collar, well-paying job. Nabeel's innermost feelings, that "He had always been treated as a poor relative by his more prosperous Badawy cousins, and he had responded by withdrawing into the defensive stillness of introspection" (120), ultimately uprooted him and his friend Ismail also to the then promising land of Iraq. Nabeel gets a job as an assistant in a photographer's store and Ismail works as a construction labourer. Both realise their dreams of acquiring material comforts but the hunger for it increases tremendously keeping at pace equally with their growing sense of rootlessness and

alienation from their homeland. Amitav, too, shares the same kind of alienation being away from his family and loved ones when he is in Egypt working on his research. During a telephonic conversation with Nabeel, working in Iraq, Amitav felt his intense suffering out of loneliness and hardships that he faced in Iraq: "I told him about his own family in Nashawy, and about my visit to their new house. He was eager to hear about them, asking question after question, but in a voice that seemed to grow progressively more quiet" (290).

As an anthropologist at his best, the human side of the narrator shows his deep concern for the unheroic static picture of immobile societies. How closely does the narrator feel the nerves of the younger generation migrated from Egypt for job to Iraq and then trapped in the cobweb of consumerism, facing the crisis of the war between Iraq and Iran and the hosts (Iraqis) turning hostile to Egyptians:



*They're wild ... they come back from the army for a few days at a time, and they go wild, fighting on the streets, drinking. Egyptians never go out on the streets there at night.... They (Iraqis) blame us, you see, they say: "you've taken our jobs and our money and grown rich while we're fighting and dying"* (295).

History that defines nations, cultures and people only in totality doesn't define the local or individual. Nabeel's dreams are fulfilled. His poverty is removed. His family members, like the entire middle class society of Egypt, are enjoying TV sets, food processors, calculator's etc. in their respective well-furnished drawing rooms but they have to compensate for it while watching helplessly the sad and moving culmination of Nabeel's tragedy during the gulf war: "We were crowded around the TV set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History" (296).

As a parallel to the story of his research, Amitav Ghosh relates anecdotes and musings about his life in a poor Egyptian village where he improves his colloquial Arabic necessary for deciphering old scripts and generally gets a better understanding of what the Middle East is all about. Fortunately, this makes up the bulk of the book and the academic bits can be skipped without missing much. Ghosh reveals himself to have an accomplished turn of phrase and a humble voice that lends itself to evoking the values and beliefs of a poor, peasant society. It makes the reader wonder why he attempted the dual narrative approach at all.

Ghosh comes into his own as a travel writer with his character descriptions that have the read grinning or scowling along with him as he paints his landlord, Abu-Ali, the richest and most influential man of the village. Faking a leg injury in his youth, Abu-Ali was allowed to go to school rather than work in the fields and, due to the contacts he made there, he was given a monopoly to sell all the essential goods in the area. Now he spends his days lounging on the porch, patting his enormous belly and watching the traffic go by.

Yet when he finally gets up it's to show off his wealth and his acquisition of a Japanese moped. Somehow the vehicle stands his enormous weight and: "... it was like watching a gargantuan lollipop carried away by its stick." Perhaps the funniest part of Amitav Ghosh's presence in the village is the continual pestering of the Egyptians who want to know is it true that in India they worship cows? And do they really burn their dead? And, in a hushed whisper, is it true that the men and women there are not pure (uncircumcised)? Ghosh portrays the primitive practices of his people who follow no prophet mentioned in the Koran and he takes it all with the humility of his calling. He allows himself to be thought a heretic or a simpleton and rarely takes it personally, instead looking beyond his own chagrin to understand the point of view of the Egyptians he studies.

So when the learned elders interrogate Ghosh at a wedding and refuse to believe that India could be as poor as Egypt, he realises that they see themselves as the bottom rung of the development ladder.



“were other places, other countries which did not have mud-walled houses and cattle-drawn ploughs, so that those... were insubstantial things, ghosts displaced in time, waiting to be exorcized and laid to rest (163). ... I understood that their relationship with the objects of their everyday lives was never innocent of the knowledge that there were other places, other countries which did not have mud-walled houses and cattle-drawn ploughs, so that those... were insubstantial things, ghosts displaced in time, waiting to be exorcized and laid to rest (163)”.

Still, for the average traveler it's fun to read about someone else being pestered, hassled and ridiculed on a day to day basis. Despite Ghosh's adamant denials, rumours spread that he bowed down to pray to the cows in the fields. No, no, I tripped, he protests but no one listens and then the final coup de grace is delivered with the declaration and they “burn their dead” (135) in India — a statement which invariably calls forth many supplicant prayers to “Allah” to protect them from such evil.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the time Amitav Ghosh spends in the Egyptian village is when he returns seven years later and sees the changes. The kids who used to pester him have now grown up and many are working in Iraq to send money back home. The Iraq-Iran War meant that while Iraqi men were at the front, young Egyptians were called to go and work in construction and make comparatively big bucks. The money they sent home means that most homes now have novelties like refrigerators and television sets. When Ghosh visits his former landlord Abu-Ali, trays of electronic calculators, transistor radios and lighters with a torch at one

end are paraded before him as a display of wealth. The mud huts have largely disappeared and bungalows have sprung up in their place.

Yet the young men working like dogs in Iraq pay the price. Seen as parasites by the locals, they hide away at night, sharing crowded rooms to cut costs and working only to send money back home.

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.

Thus Amitav Ghosh, the prominent writer as well as anthropologist studied enormously about various races at various times belong to various regions of various countries and presented them in his work, *An Antique Land* superbly.

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