

Amitav Ghosh—*In An Antique Land*

I think I'm the only person in the class who chose to read this book, so I'll start with a quick synopsis... *In An Antique Land* defies literary and academic categories—it is a work of fiction, based loosely on biographical and historical events (the subtitle is “History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale”). Combining ethnography, historiography, and memoir, the author traces two stories—first, the experiences of Amitav, a young Indian anthropologist from Oxford, conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an Egyptian village (the character bears obvious similarities to the author, but is never explicitly identified with him). Secondly, the story of a 12th century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, and his slave. Their lives were reconstructed by Amitav using fragments of letters found in an Egyptian synagogue—Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jew, lived in Egypt for many years before moving to India, where he probably hired his slave, Bomma, who acted as an assistant, traveling and negotiating large trades for Ben Yiju.

Ghosh is a trained anthropologist and active member of the subaltern studies movement. His book reflects the postcolonial theory of Said and Bhabha, but in a much more creative (and readable) format. The primary concerns of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory emerge naturally from Ghosh’s narrative: he articulates the strained relationship between Egypt and India which, although very different countries, share a history of colonial violence and a desire for modernization. He fleshes out the networks of exchange which have circulated between Egypt and India (and throughout the rest of the Mediterranean and the Near East), describing in great detail the money, goods, and people which were traded between India and Egypt in the Middle Ages as in the twentieth century. Ghosh is also careful to examine the less visible exchanges which have linked Egypt and India throughout history—namely, etymological, cultural, and religious ones.

Ghosh’s historiographic question is also embedded in the structure of his narrative: How do you tell the story of those people who have traditionally occupied history’s margins? Ghosh reminds us that historiography is often limited to the history of the literate—those individuals who could write their way into posterity with journals, letters, ledgers, etc. What about the nameless masses that lived and died in obscurity, as Ben Yiju’s slave would have if one of Ben Yiju’s friends had not mentioned Bomma in a letter? Ghosh writes in his prologue: “the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, 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” (17). Certainly there is much more to history than the lives of the literate. Throughout history, as now, the literate are the privileged minority. Is historiography, then, doomed to recount only the tip of the iceberg of human experience, recounting only the lives of the “literate and the consequential”?

While Ghosh can piece together a bit about the life of Bomma from the letters he found in a cache of documents in a medieval Egyptian synagogue, much of what he knows about Bomma is based on inference and speculation—he can guess at the religion and birthplace of Bomma based on his name (although even his name is speculative; it is transliterated from Judeo-Arabic script), and can imagine that Bomma may have been witness to certain historical moments during his travels in the Middle East. However, Ghosh’s reconstruction of Bomma’s life is not rigorous enough to be labeled properly

historiographic. Is Ghosh's dreamy semi-fictional narrative the only way to tell the stories of the illiterate and inconsequential?

Thinking about earlier historiographic methods explored in this class, one of the ways historiographers have narrated the experiences of the historically marginalized is through historical demography, which roughly sketches the sharpest angles of life history—birth, marriage, and death. Alternatively, Laurel Ulrich in the *Age of Homespun* attempted to reconstruct the lives of Native Americans and Colonial women by examining the traces they have left behind as handicrafts and textiles. Despite Ghosh's insistence that the only way to leave your mark on history is by writing it down, much can be learned from the material possessions and handiwork of the illiterate and inconsequential. However, are these methods sufficient for reconstructing the “properly human, individual, existences” of the marginalized?

Is history told through fiction a legitimate historiographic method? Certainly it is not recognized as history by historians in the same way that more traditional historiographies are. Is it becoming a more or less acceptable method by historians?