

## Student B:

Prior to this week I thought that I'd read plenty of historical fiction in books like "All Quiet on the Western Front" and "The Grapes of Wrath". However, insofar as Ghosh's In An Antique Land is completely different. "The Grapes of Wrath" is a fictional story, set in a very specific historical context. Ghosh's book consists of two intertwined historical narratives, with some fictional aspects. In fact, there was very little 'fiction', defined as completely made-up elements, in Antique Land. Perhaps what made it fiction of some sort was that there was a plot and characters, albeit two different sets of them. Many fictional works have two interacting plots, sometimes separated by many centuries, but only in historical fiction are the plot and the characters supplied by history. Some authorial creativity was involved, but much of the plot was created through research, evidenced in 30+ pages of endnotes.

This book is eclectic enough that I hesitated at first to treat it as history, but its subtitle ("history in the guise of a traveler's tale") made me reconsider. As a work of history, it is methodologically the most diverse reading we've done so far. Both Ghosh's and Bomma's stories are historical narratives, and strong elements of cultural anthropology are present because Ghosh is an anthropologist in Egypt doing fieldwork in the modern narrative. Ghosh presents an extreme case of anthropologists constructing legitimacy through personal experience, as we saw Geertz do. The narrative about the Egyptian village is recent history, with its associated problems. An Indian educated at Oxford and writing in English about clashes of civilizations past and present, Ghosh is definitely writing in a postcolonial vein. Both his postcolonial and cultural historical sides are evidenced in a constant, necessary concern with language -- for example the need for many kinds of Arabic for living in and studying the near East and the problem of what language Ben Yiju spoke with his wife.

With so many different approaches present, does Ancient Land actually have any significant function as a work of history? Certainly Ghosh doesn't reach any conclusions, based on accumulated historical evidence, of the kind that we've seen in other works. But I think the book has other, more unique values because of its interdisciplinary nature. The reader is directly engaged with history in a way that cannot occur in a more traditional work. Ghosh structures the transitions between Bomma's world and his so that parallel incidents (such as the complications of marriage for love in Ben Yiju's India and Ghosh's Nashawy, ~270) occur in the two. By doing so, I found that Ghosh filled his characters of the past with vivid emotions of the present, and made the the past much more alive to me. In the modern Egyptian narrative, the reader is engaged with (recent) history because of Ghosh's personal role and relationships within the village. I sometimes find it hard to feel a 'narrative' in more mainstream historical work explicitly because history is done through documents, and there are necessarily gaps in any narrative. Because Ghosh is writing historical fiction, he can suggest an interpretation of a gap in the historical record using phrases like "we cannot be sure, but..." I found that my brain effectively ignored the qualifying phrases and formed continuous historical narratives, which I think is exactly the effect Ghosh wanted. Finally, the reader's

personal encounter with history is heightened by Ghosh's self-identification with Bomma. Ghosh never really says why he's so interested in information about Bomma, but it becomes fairly clear that he sees himself and Bomma as parallel travelers, separated in time. To whatever extent I could absorb Ghosh's personal investment in his search for information about Bomma, I was more engaged in history. I also thought it interesting that although Ghosh is far from offering any sort of theoretical treatment, the equivalent (in this kind of book) opinions that he throws out about time, history, Western imperialism, etc. end up being very convincing for the same reasons that a good novelist's opinions are convincing, despite a lack of well-presented and convincing historical evidence -- an advantage of the novel-like format.

I thought the most interesting aspect of this book was how Ghosh's experience with the past and present interacted. Besides what was mentioned above, this is apparent in his occasional, insightful comments on long-term patterns in history. Looking at the present, for example, Ghosh notes that violence and arms are ultimately what matter, both for state power and for the villager's opinions of where a country stands on the "development ladder". Looking at the past, he recreates a world where cooperation and negotiation were much more important than compulsion, and illustrates the moment (the Portuguese's visit to Mangalore) when that world's fate was sealed. This abrupt change is to some extent paralleled by the rapid modernization that takes place in the decade that Ghosh spends away from the village, radically altering how village life is structured. Ghosh is in general concerned with the nature of history and time, saying at one point that "it was precisely the absoluteness of time and the discreteness of epochs that I always had trouble imagining". He does his best to blur the line between past and present, noting the many ways in which history repeats itself. Stretching a bit, this is reminiscent of Annales history. Ghosh doesn't focus specifically on geographic features, but always emphasizes the forces and patterns that occur over and over in history, and is loathe to see an event as uniquely important -- even the Portuguese ships bombarding Mangalore seems paralleled in many ways by the beginning of the Gulf War (I) in the modern narrative.

Still, I wonder whether Antique Land is 'real' scholarship. It includes a lot of historical fact, but is not explicitly for one's historical enrichment. Then again, I'm not sure it matters whether it's real scholarship or not. I'll remember much more about the history of the medieval Near East from Antique Land than from the amazingly dry Goitein reading, not so much because Ghosh doesn't write 'pure' history as because he writes an engaging narrative. Ancient Land actually reminded me most of Richard Rhodes' The Making of the Atomic Bomb for this reason. The latter is a pure history book, but the historical actors are lovingly biographed and have their scientific pasts explored in depth, so that in Rhodes' capable hands the historical narrative is more engaging than most novels. While it's probably too much to ask for all historical work to be engaging and entertaining, I wonder how much would be lost if history were in general written in a looser style.

Does readability have to come at the expense of historical rigor?