

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

Amitav Ghosh did not expect to wind up in rural Egypt when he embarked on his path to a Ph.D. at Oxford. For some odd reason, though, he became obsessed with the story of a slave, Bomma, and his master, Ben Yiju. Next thing he knew he had enrolled in the University of Alexandria and was picking up different dialects of Arabic. Historians should admire Ghosh for his dedication to pursue such an obscure subject. He was especially brave, however, because the answers to the "is it true" and "so what" questions were both unclear at the outset. In general, the book reads like a good novel. Ghosh, as the detective, draws the reader in on each step that helps him get to the bottom of a medieval mystery.

Before reading Ghosh's book, I had assumed that historical fiction had to be fictional. George Orwell set the mark for this field. Like the others in the class, I'm not sure where the work fits. But why is it so important to classify works within specific genres anyway? "In An Antique Land" is a truly interdisciplinary work, combining current social commentary with historiographic insights. Interestingly, his primary task, "Going Back," doesn't get under way until the final fifty pages or so. The anthropological approach that guides his study serves him well. Unlike Clifford Geertz in the "Balinese Cockfight," I did not question his legitimacy, nor did I sense any obvious hints of cultural condescension. The Egyptians he comes across are not meant to come off as strange. In their society, Ghosh is the anomaly. (It was also refreshing to see anthropology done by someone non-Western/American). He mentions on several occasions that people were shocked at the idea of cremation, or wanted to know why all Hindus worshipped cows. Unlike most traveler's tales which are told solely from the point of view of the traveler, Ghosh tries to present daily life as it is to the inhabitants. The reader can grasp the frustration that comes with being in a foreign climate in a line such as: "...it was the first time that anyone in Latifa or Nashamy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine—to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me" (152). In general, I noticed that his identity as a Hindu always came before his identity as an elite scholar. The people were as intrigued with the peculiarities of his culture as he was with theirs. One village shopkeeper remarked: "What's the use of those languages (English)? They're the easiest languages in the world. Anyone can write those." He then proceeds to call him a savage for worshipping cows. Even in the end, the villagers don't understand the point of his project: "But you're not Jewish or Israeli—You're Indian. What connection do you have with the tomb of a Jewish holy man, here in Egypt" (339)?

Ghosh's discussion of slavery and the pre-European Indian Ocean trade extremely thought-provoking because based his observations on culture and context. There could hear echoes of Darnton and Kuhn, the microhistorians who had urged readers to first master the circumstances under which the

events unfolded. Ghosh underscores the difference between European slavery and slavery as it appeared to Bomma: “The medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conceptions” (259). The reader must try to understand that “in their poetry, it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds, as well as the possibility of transcendence” (261). In instances like these Ghosh’s wording suggests a certain degree of nostalgia for a past, before the arrival of the West. He writes about the continuing dynamics of the Indian Ocean trade that were destroyed by the arrival of the Europeans. The fact that the system was so effectively decimated should not discourage historians from seeking signs of human agency during its heyday: “Yet it is worth allowing for the possibility that the peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade may have been, in a quiet and inarticulate way, the product of a cultural choice” (287). Anthropology and microhistory may share a similar vision in some ways. Both thrive on cultural explanations. Both look for ways in which time impacted culture.

The notion of time is mentioned many times in the book. He makes a compelling observation about the inhabitants of one of the rural villages, noting that “they had constructed a certain ladder of ‘Development’ in their minds....their relationships 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.” (200-201). In the end, he asks himself what it means to belong to a “historical civilization” (201). Indeed, no civilization can stay unaffected by the outside world. Thus it is difficult to study the history of civilizations as pure and separate entities.

Also, I realized that history was vulnerable to human manipulation. History is, after all, what historians make of it; hence the need to preserve primary documents. It is unfortunate for Masr that the Geniza was emptied of all its documents after WW1, for “its removal only confirmed a particular vision of the past” (95). Later on in the book, he mentions a Hindu temple in Mangalore which, in the midst of political transition, had neglected to keep a record of the past. Instead of studying its history for accuracy’s sake, the people resorted to “discovering a History to replace the past” (273).

What is the distinction between history and fiction? Most would classify fiction under the “entertaining” category; history under the “academic”, i.e. boring). Ghosh mixes the two, using a prose style to write on a historical topic. Also, he uses his personal experiences to present a richer picture of Egyptian society in the past/present—not particularly “professional,” yet still substantive.

Does Ghosh have the tendency to romanticize his adventures? At times his book read like a memoir more than a work of history. I found it funny that he spent pages (246-250) explaining how he went from B-M-A to BMMA to Bamma, and finally, arrived at Bomma. after asking Professor Rai. His

energy is admirable, but wouldn't it have made more sense to seek the professor's help in the beginning?