

Student A:

Real vs. Imagined Characters, Multiple Narratives, Present-Day and “Antique” Human Experiences

The back cover of my copy of Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* states that “[s]ome of these figures [the book's characters] are real, some only imagined, but all emerge as vividly as the characters in a great novel.” I kept waiting for the moment when Ghosh would reveal that Abraham Ben Yiju, or Nameel and Isma'il, were figments of his imagination, creative amalgamations of a number of different historical personages, or something like that. It made reading the book more anxiety-provoking than it should have been: I stayed in almost continual state of mistrust until the end, at which point I looked at the notes to see if I had missed any carefully placed disclaimers. Aside from the fact that the names of the villages and the people in them had been changed, I didn't find any. What I have to assume is that the author of the back-cover blurb simply meant to say that some of the characters (the “real” ones) were people Ghosh had actually met, while others (the “imagined” ones) were people he had only encountered in historical documents.

This “real” versus “imagined” distinction, if this is what was meant, is clearly untenable. First, all of the characters come into being, for us and for Ghosh, through Ghosh's interactions with them. The historical specificity of those interactions, whether in the form of a conversation in a field in Egypt or a stained fragment of a letter in an Oxford archive, inevitably shapes the author's impressions of them. For some Ghosh has more information than for others, but all are quasi-constructed, quasi-imaginary. Second, those impressions are filtered through the book's narrative form, which is a blend of several well-established genres: the travelogue, the detective novel, the history. Each of those forms of narrative, and the expectations that readers bring to them, imposes its own demands on the shape and structure of the narrative and thus on the identity of the characters. It is Ghosh's imagination, acting within a particular cultural and historical context and expressed in a particular artistic form, that gives the book its structure and the characters their personalities.

As for the actual structure of the book, I thought Ghosh quite skillfully weaved together the multiple strands of narrative: his time as a social anthropologist in Lataifa and Nashawy, his search through historical documents, and the history of Ben Yiju and the Jewish trade between northern Africa and India that the search helped him reconstruct. Ghosh would probably reject any attempt to identify a “mission statement” in his book, but I think a passage on p. 152 comes close to doing so, if only implicitly. In it, Ghosh describes his reaction to Nabeel's comment about what it must feel like to be far from his friends and family:

Nabeel's comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time than anyone in Lataifa or Nashawy had attempted an enterprise similar to mine--to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me.

This enterprise--entering another person's imagination and looking at their situation as it might appear to them--is what the novelistic form of *In an Antique Land* accomplishes more successfully than a traditional history could. I was reminded again of our readings in microhistory, particularly Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* and Philip Kuhn's *Soulstealers*. In these books, sparse sources about a particular historical event are combined with general information about a particular era and culture to create a vividly imagined sense of what it might have been like to be there. Ghosh adds another element, which I think is interesting but historically more questionable. He explicitly links present-day people--himself and the people he meets in Egypt--to people from almost 900 years earlier. On p. 152, for instance, Ghosh ends a section on Nashawy as follows:

‘Do you know why they [Nabeel and Isma'il] left?’ I asked. ‘Was there any specific reason?’ Shaikh Musa shrugged. ‘Why does anyone leave?’ he said. ‘The opportunity comes, and it has to be taken.’

The next section, which turns to Ben Yiju's story, begins as follows:

To the young Ben Yiju, journeying eastwards would have appeared as the simplest and most natural means of availing himself of the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer. (153)

Clearly we are meant to compare Nabeel and Isma'il's journey to Iraq with Ben Yiju's journey to Aden. Ghosh uses this strategy of linking the present-day and "antique" sections repeatedly and quite effectively; it allows him to tie together two narratives that might have otherwise seemed unrelated by using basic human experiences such as travel or love. The benefit is that history is humanized and the differences that do exist between the two eras are highlighted. The disadvantage is that it might give the reader a false sense of the continuity of human experience. Was Ben Yiju's motivation for traveling really similar to Nabeel and Isma'il's? Was 'Eid's love for a city girl really similar to Ben Yiju's love for Ashu?