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BLURRING OF THE BORDERS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL, *IN AN ANTIQUE LAND*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh believes that all the borders are artificial in the world and he tries to illustrate this thesis in his novel, in *In An Antique Land*. He suggests that cultural and historical experiences constitute the common ground for people to establish a community and to enjoy the sense of belonging. Thus, shared cultural and historical experiences create a bond among people, not the borders, which are drawn artificially by the politicians. And in today's transnational world, Ghosh believes that people are global citizens. With all these assumptions in his mind, he studies history of Egypt and tells his memoirs as a PhD student there in his semi-biographical novel, *In An Antique Land*. As it is also given in the novel, both India and Egypt have had British colonial experience and they have witnessed to the change of their national borders and have gone through these tough historical experiences. After redrawing the borders in Africa and India, then the issues of the construction of identity or national identity and population exchange begin to emerge in these newly defined places with their newly established borders. Yet, it seems impossible to cut the cultural bonds all of a sudden among these people in the recently constructed nation-states all over the world. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze the concepts of trans/nationalism¹, globalization², b/orders, g/localization³, us&them attitude and how they are perceived through the eyes of Amitav Ghosh in his semi-biographical work, in *In An Antique Land*.

Key words: Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*, Global Citizenship, B/Orders. Trans/Nationalism.

I. Introduction:

Ghosh is a social anthropologist, who is trained in New Delhi and Oxford (Roy,2015: 66) and his being a social anthropologist affects the way, he writes his novels. Likewise, his style is unique in *In an Antique Land*, carrying traces of historical, sociological, psychological texts within the format of travel writing; half fictional, half autobiographical and in this eclectic style, Ghosh deals with the issues of trans/nationalism, globalization, g/localization, us&them attitude, cultural and territorial boundaries/borders in challenging ways. Meanwhile, he goes back and forth in time to help the readers grasp current hot debate topics. Therefore, in his novel, *In an Antique Land* "Ghosh's main concern is to restore a cultural, social, and economic map that stretched from Spain through the Middle East to India for many centuries until it was redrawn by European military superiority" (King, 2015: 430). Keeping all these in mind, not surprisingly, "*In an Antique Land* [becomes] a complex book, which uses for its narrative [the protagonist's] attempts to trace the lives of a twelfth-century Indian slave and his Jewish master" (King, 2015: 430). With the help of their life stories, the interconnectedness of cultures is shown and "[t]he story of the preservation and dispersal of the[ir] documents [becomes] ... a revelation of earlier Jewish customs and of the close former relationships between the Jewish, Indian, and Arab worlds which were disrupted by

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¹ In order more fully to comprehend these concepts given in the abstract, it might be helpful to give their definitions first:

Transnationalism may be defined "as [a] concept, theory and experience has nourished an important literature in social sciences. In practice transnationalism refers to increasing transborder relations of individuals, groups, firms and to mobilizations beyond state boundaries. Individuals, groups, institutions and states interact with each other in a new global space where cultural and political characteristic of national societies are combined with emerging multilevel and multinational activities. Transnationalism is a part of the process of globalization. For some it is "globalization". ("Transnationalism: Theory and Experience", *The New School for Social Research*. NSSR. Web. 20.04.2015).

² Globalization may simply be defined as "the integration of peoples and cultures" (Leiwei Li 275) and in detail as "[t]he worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade, and communications integration. Globalization implies the opening of local and nationalistic perspectives to a broader outlook of an interconnected and interdependent world with free transfer of capital, goods, and services across national frontiers. However, it does not include unhindered movement of labor and, as suggested by some economists, may hurt smaller or fragile economies if applied indiscriminately". (BUSINESSDICTIONARY.Web. 21 April 2015).

³ Glocalization, which is a portmanteau of globalization and localization, may be defined in the following words: "the adaptation of a product or service specifically to each locality or culture in which it is sold. It is similar to internationalization. The term first appeared in the late 1980s in articles by Japanese economists in the *Harvard Business Review*" (Sharma, Chanchal Kumar (2009). "Emerging Dimensions of Decentralisation Debate in the Age of Globalisation". *Indian Journal of Federal Studies* 19 (1): 47-65). According to the sociologist Roland Robertson, who is credited with popularizing the term, glocalization describes a new outcome of local conditions toward global pressures. At a 1997 conference on "Globalization and Indigenous Culture," Robertson said that glocalization "means the simultaneity --- the co-presence --- of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies." ("What is glocalization?", WIKIPEDIA.Web, 21 April 2015).

European imperialism and scholarship” as is also underlined by Bruce King in his article. With the coming of the white men, that is Europeans, the seeds of nationalism is implemented into the minds of the indigenous people and the dynamics of very famous “divide and rule policy” begin to work. With regard to these historical changes and developments, *In An Antique Land* has

a concern with national identity, or the lack [of it], and travels in both space and time to explore this concept. Ghosh first becomes intrigued with the story of the [Indian] Slave of MS H.6 after having read E. Strauss' article on the Geniza documents, amongst which is the first letter mentioning the Slave. The story of the Slave, his life and times, and of the Geniza open up a new world for Ghosh different from, ... his present time. Two notions grasp his interest, so much so that he follows the trail of the Slave over several parts of the world. Primarily, he is fascinated by the accident of History that has allowed for the Slave to enter the chronicles⁴ of time” (Wassef, 2015: 85-86)... Bomma, as we later find out, is the Slave's name, and the people around him were certainly not of the company of "the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests -- the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time"(AL, 17). And there is no mention of such imposing "historical" events or people in the two letters which mention the Slave's name, thus signifying a sub-culture to which this "congregation of modest traders" belongs with their different concerns and priorities. Ghosh is therefore, [...] engaged in writing a personal history, one that provides an alternative to the world of statesmen and leaders and fills a gap in human knowledge, while also countering certain accepted notions about national and cultural boundaries and about history itself” (Wassef, 2015: 85-86).

As pointed out above, transnationalism, globalization and glocalization have nourished an important literature, in social sciences including postcolonial studies. Not surprisingly, Amitav Ghosh as an Indian, where the borders constantly keep changing from ancient times to the present and the influence of globalization is felt very tensely takes these issues into his hands and reflects his very own opininons in *In An Antique Land* relying on his memoirs as a PhD student, who has come to Egypt⁵ to do research.

II. Us&Them Attitude:

He suggests that many communities, who seem to be hostile to each other, actually used to have a common cultural background (see Erol, “How Other is the *Other?*”), they have forgotten for quite a while. If you dig deep enough you can find the common past and realize that the present day borders are very artificial and implement “the seeds of discrimination”, “us&them attitude” and “hatred” among people. Ironically enough, this process as explained in the quotation below was started by white men, who come to South Asia and to the Middle East to bring civilization:

In the constant movement in the novel back and forth between the modern and the Medieval world, the death of multi-ethnicity is mirrored in its very place of origin, that is in Ben Yiju's life. And here, both the European colonizer and "Islamic high culture" are held responsible. With the Portuguese discovery of India and the "aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. As far as the Portuguese were concerned, they had declared a proprietor right over the Indian Ocean: since none of the peoples, who lived around it had thought to claim ownership of it before their arrival, they could not expect the right of free passage in it now" (AL, 288). The author then views the demarcation of boundaries as a European colonial concept that invades a land founded upon co-existence and compromise. And the obsession with the artificial notion of national boundaries and identity that divides people today is therefore necessarily a descendent of this. With the trade routes monopolized in this way, the traders become exploited in ways that were alien to their lives before and it is at this point that Ben Yiju thinks about leaving India... (Wassef, 2015: 90-92).

III. Colonization vs. Cosmopolitan Gaiety:

Having done a good amount of research, Ghosh gives a brief history of European colonization and settlers in *In An Antique Land* and underlines the fact that instead of segregation, there was “cosmopolitan gaiety” (*In An Antique Land*, 15) once in the Middle East and “Alexandria was witness to the last, most

⁴ “[Ghosh] calls it both a miracle and an accident, two notions on opposite sides of the spectrum of human activity, because in either case it is certainly an exceptional occurrence” that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved” (*In An Antique Land*, 17)”(Wassef:2015, 85-86).

⁵ Though forgotten by the young generations in both countries, one of the common historical experience btw Egypt and India is their having gone through the yoke of British colonial experience and Ghosh underlines this historical fact from time to time in his novel, *In An Antique Land* and suggests that after the colonial experience, in fact, Egyptians and Indians may have empathy for the other party much more easier than the other members of the countries in the world.

spectacular, burst of cosmopolitan gaiety for which the city was once famous" (*In An Antique Land*, 15). For instance, languages may be taken witnesses to this multicultural common past, like it does in the case of Jewish and Muslim relations. The two antagonistic forces in the Middle East today have expressed themselves in similar ways in the past:

[Ben Yiju] and his friends were all orthodox, observant Jews, strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity. But they were also part of the Arabic-speaking world, and the everyday language⁶ of their religious life was one they shared with the Muslims of that region: when they invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah, and more often than not their invocations were in Arabic forms, such as *insha'allah* and *al-hamdul-illah*. Distinct though their faith was, it was still a part of religious world of the Middle East - ... (261). (Wassef, 2015: 87)

Wassef, the critic continues to articulate on this point in the following passage below and he suggests that *In An Antique Land*, Ghosh uses literature

as the complement to history and ethnography... The different [yet united] worlds that Ghosh depicts in his novel come to comment on one another in light of their differences and similarities. Before introducing Ben Yiju and his world, the author goes into the history of Cairo and how it happened that the Jewish trader found himself there. The different names given to Cairo by the various conquerors and peoples who have inhabited it throughout the centuries, from Babylon to al-Fustat in the Islamic era to al-Qahira in the tenth century, attests to the vibrant movement that characterizes human history.

Thus, the very same city, place becomes homes for different communities and cultures throughout the centuries. Especially trading facilities there give people the chance to come together and to know each other.

In this way Ben Yiju found himself engaged in the flourishing trade between the Mediterranean and India for "Jews figured prominently among these migrants and those amongst them who moved to Masr generally chose to join the 'Palestinian' congregation in Babylon. Ben Yiju was thus following a well-marked trail." (AL, 55) No national boundaries, in the sense we have today, restricted such movement. And when he went to live in Aden and Mangalore, there too no question of nationality arose that made him an outsider or refugee in the modern sense. (Wassef, 2015: 87)

In other words, "the us and them attitude" or "yuck response" in Professor Shweder's words (*When Cultures Collide Course Notes*, the University of Chicago, Winter 2011) was very rare to be seen in Ben Yiju's life-time. Another anecdote to illustrate how past and common values and culture forgotten by the contemporary residents of Egypt is given below. Interrogator asks our protagonist, "'But you're not Jewish or Israeli,' he said 'You're Indian - what connection could you have with the tomb of a Jewish holy man, here in Egypt?'" (*In An Antique Land*, 342). The protagonist further explains that,

He was not trying to intimidate me; I could tell he was genuinely puzzled. He seemed so reasonable and intelligent, that for an instant I even thought of telling him the story of Bomman and Ben Yiju. But then it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story - the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago. Nothing remained in Egypt now to effectively challenge his disbelief: not a single one, for instance, of the documents of the Geniza. It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved; that I was sitting at that desk now because the mowlid of Sidi Abu-Hasira was an anomaly within the categories of knowledge represented by those divisions. (King, 2015: 339-340)

In this passage, the old days before partition were looked at with a kind of feeling like nostalgia, when the people were taking parts in others' religious rituals without any investigation or suspicion. Though, the borders are drawn artificially by the politicians, still in terms of culture they manage to make an impact in people's mind as it is illustrated in the text above in the novel. In regard to this, Wassef expresses that

[t]he second vestige [...] that links Judaism to Islam in the shape of the tomb of Sidi Abu Hasira, or Ya'akov Abou Hadzeira. Both Jews and Muslims alike visit this shrine and when the author

⁶ For example, [the protagonist] learns that the hybrid language, Judeo-Arabic, was in fact very close to Arabic, the dialect used in the Egyptian Delta villages the author lived in, to be precise, except that it was transcribed in Hebrew characters. (AL, 103-4) Also, the Middle Eastern Jews used the same name for God as do the Muslims, Allah. Thus people of different backgrounds lived in unison rather than in the forced uniformity we know today, indeed they created their own crossbred cultures as a product of such commingling. (Wassef:2015, 87)

looks up his history, again under "folklore" rather than "religion," he learns that the festivities associated with his pilgrimage resemble the Moulids, or popular festivals celebrating birthdays of saints in Islamic communities (AL, 342). These two connections form a triumvirate between Judaism, India, and Islam, in other words joining together Ben Yiju, Bomma and Ghosh, and present day Damanhour, Egypt. Bomma's world has in fact triumphed and the fact that people will continue to be connected by virtue of their being human. It remains to be said, however, that the dominant ideology and activity in our world today is to assert difference and uniqueness in identity, something which Ghosh attempts to provide an alternative to in his writing. In [some of his works], this interconnectedness between people, unbeknownst to them, is most definitely a prominent theme. (Wassef, 2015: 92)

As parallel to the themes in the book, even the genre of the book itself is blurred, which is very functional; "The genre of *In an Antique Land* is unique. The publisher's blurb suggests that the book is history in the form of a traveler's tale... *In an Antique Land* is also fiction, as most of the history and characterization is imagined or assumed and based on few certain facts" (430) says Bruce King. And the ambiguity in reference to the genre of the book contributes themewise to the ambiguity of borders in the novel. Thus, Ghosh's suggestion in the novel is that despite everything,

this [common] past has not really been lost. Besides traces found in southern Indian temples and Egyptian shrines of a time when the histories of India and Egypt, Muslim, Jew, and Hindu were intertwined, modern India and Egypt still retain many of the ways of the past, social customs that are now being threatened by modernization, Europeanization, and the rigidities of recent nationalism. As a student in Egypt, he feels at home among the uneducated in the villages and finds associations with the culture of the past, unlike in the cities. (King, 2015: 430)

IV. Cultural Boundaries:

Yet, from time to time he also comes face to face with cultural boundaries during his stay in Egypt. In some scenes, the reader is reminded that cultural boundaries are used for separation rather than unification of the people. Ghosh, in doing so, criticizes "the political divisiveness" of modern times (Smith, 2007: 454). To exemplify, in one scene in *In An Antique Land*,

[i]n a spirit of humility, [the narrator] attempts to gain the friendship of the villagers and come[s] to know them and their beliefs and customs as well as tell them about his. The exchange, however, is not on equal footing and the reader is soon reminded that the setting is now the post-colonial Third World replete with boundaries, where what human beings have in common is suppressed in favour of what separates them. In Lataifa he engages in a discussion on religious custom and informs the inhabitants, to their utter perplexity, that his religion is Hinduism. Not knowing what it is, they attempt to introduce him to Islam, [they say] "Now that you are here among us you can understand and learn about Islam, and then you can make up your mind whether you want to stay within that religion of yours.... You will see then how much better Islam is than this 'Hinduki' of yours" (AL, 48-51). Although this may contradict the notion of cultural relativism which is such a valued concept for intellectuals, the spirit is not offensive or aggressive. What is actually at play is the attempt to mould the other into an image of one's self, particularly when that other is seen as amicable and "one of us." (Wassef, 2015: 88-89)

Here, both parties claim the superiority of their own culture and Egyptians try to convert the narrator into the cultural or religious beliefs of themselves (of the majority or the dominant group). In reference to this issue, Wassef further states that

In the case that the other does not yield to transformation, the alternative is to uphold and re-affirm the barriers that make him different. Also in Lataifa, during the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast, the author wanted to join them in sympathy but was met with the protest that "only Muslims fast at Ramadan" (AL, 75). He then attempts to understand their behaviour, "to belong to that immense community [of Muslims] was a privilege which they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries" (AL, 76)... With it the author points [out]... that people carry boundaries in their minds as well as those that appear on maps (Wassef, 2015: 88-89)

Interestingly enough, these cultural boundaries are used as a kind of measuring instrument in order to make evaluation of somebody/something in comparison with others. Cultural theorician, Stuart Hall brings another dimension to the theme of identity construction by arguing that one can find his identity by comparing and contrasting himself with the other and claims that "[o]nly when there is an Other can you know who you are" (1996, 345). It can be deduced that the categorizations, classifications and comparisons such as insider, outsider, we and others help people to navigate, where they do stand and who they are.

Hence, in most cases, people define themselves in relation to others. As in line with these assumptions, in the following passage, we see a comparison of Hindu and Muslim customs:

A similar discussion takes place in Nashawy, the second village the author visits, in this case about the Hindu custom of cremation and veneration of cows. Again he is met with the intolerant, but not self-righteous, response that "[you] should try to civilize your people. You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead" (AL, 126). It becomes apparent that the boundaries in question are not national but more deeply religious and posing under the guise of national identity... (Wassef, 2015: 89-90).

V. Symbols of National, Religious and Ethnic Identity:

In addition to all these, what is more significant in the novel is the link between the symbols and national, religious or ethnic identity in terms of dividing/uniting people by categorizations or sense of dis/belonging:

[In another scene in the novel], the author [also] recalls [some] riots and reflects upon the explosive power of symbols, religious or national, in shaping identity: "cities going up in flames because of a cow found dead in a temple or a pig in a mosque; of people killed for wearing a lungi or a dhoti, depending on where they find themselves; of women disemboweled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins.... But I was never able to explain very much of this to Nabeel or anyone else in Nashawy... I could not have expected them to understand an Indian's terror of symbols." (AL, 210). Such incidents sound all too familiar in the world we have come to inhabit today, a world neatly divided up, or so people seem to wish, that is intolerant of deviation and of difference. Ghosh exposes the nation as a myth,... [which]... is built on symbols with such potent signifying powers that they have the ability to unite and divide people largely by de-humanizing them... (Wassef, 2015: 90)

VI. Conclusion:

Under the light of all the examples and theories given so far, it can be suggested that "it is the statesmen,[who] draw [the] borders⁷, but, [it is the] people, [who] leave the human imprint by creating the melting pot of sub-cultures [in order] to subvert these borders" (Wassef,2015: 90) as people are connected by virtue of their being human all over the world. Thus, within the mindset of Ghosh and his beliefs as expressed in *In An Antique Land*, humanitarian values go beyond borders as our similarities are much more than our differences. Therefore, this might pave the way for a transnational world for the future generations. In other words, what is constantly emphasized throughout the adventures the protagonist has gone through in the novel is that instead of a homogenous, Eurocentric world, a transnational world, which is full of cosmopolitan gaiety/multiculturalism might offer the opportunity to the people to be global citizens and to enjoy the sense of belonging to the whole world regardless of religious, racial/ethnic or political borders as it used to be once as shown in *In An Antique Land*.

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⁷ Eric Smith explains that sees nation-state is seen as the source of all evil in the world (2007: 464-465) by some theoreticians. For further information see his article entitled "Caught Straddling a Border: A Novelistic Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*".