

In an Antique Land: A Journey through Subaltern to Cosmopolitanism

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ABSTRACT

The worldview of Ghosh is cosmopolitan in nature and spirit. With the help of his cosmopolitan worldview, Ghosh is able to perceive the world in a holistic light. The world is fundamentally a unified unit and has been divided artificially into national boundaries. Ghosh's preoccupation with the lines and boundaries of nations substantially impacts his perception and it clearly manifests in his fiction as well as non-fiction. The writings of Ghosh predominantly raise the issue of the creation of nation-states, the division of the world into hundreds of nations and their overprotected borders resulting in distrust among nations and problems generated world over. In the view of the above idea-content, the objective of the present paper is to analyze *In an Antique Land* as an effort of Ghosh in the direction of delving into an unexplored region of history claiming a legitimate space for the subaltern consciousness that permeates an ethos of unity and wholeness. At this level of the subaltern, the cosmopolitan worldview of Ghosh is predominantly evident where human relationships transcend boundaries destroying self-centered and intolerant borders. At this level, all relate to each other and celebrate multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

The worldview of each writer plays a dominating characteristic in transforming the nature, shape, and scope of his writings. It determines the writer's responses to his family, fellow beings and society at large and this comprehension of life shape up his ideals and aspirations. For instance, an individual can have a theistic or atheistic worldview which secures a direct bearing on his thoughts and actions. Therefore, the worldview also signifies a broad plan of life which decisively affects one's overall attitude towards life. "The worldview", as Spirkin observes, "influences standards of behavior, a person's attitude to his work, to other people, the character of his aspiration in life, his everyday existence, tastes, and interests. It is a kind of spiritual prism through which everything around us is perceived, felt and transformed." (Spirkin)

2. The Cosmopolitanism of Ghosh:

The worldview of Ghosh is cosmopolitan in nature. In other words, while his creative, philosophical and historical perception notices the division of the world into nation-states, his worldview also discerns an underlying principle of unity. Thus, nationalism and national boundaries become artificial and imaginary and at the bottom and at a soul level, there runs a sense of unison. This is the worldview of Ghosh and is reflected and manifested in his most acclaimed work *In an Antique Land*. The present paper attempts to examine the subaltern interpretation of history, one of the main preoccupations of Ghosh, will be considered and in its view the cosmopolitanism of Ghosh will be understood and its impact on *In an Antique Land* be assessed.

3. Discussion:

In an Antique Land encompasses reflections on nationalism, regret at the loss of the world that once boasted of

true cosmopolitanism and yearning for not so irretrievable elements of that lost world at the present time. This novel is the right effort to explore the unexplored region of history. The objective is to claim a legitimate space for the subaltern consciousness that represents an ethos of unity and wholeness. The subaltern history reveals a remarkable unified world where ostensibly it seems divided but at the deeper level, the unity sustains. Thus, the cosmopolitan world view of the author emerges as the worldview of Ghosh. This is reflected at the personal level in the marriage between two persons belonging to different regions of the world without causing any disruptive currents in the social fabric. We come to know that Ben Yiju married an Indian girl, Ashu. Other documents bear testimony to the origin of the girl. She was a Nair and belonged to the matrilineal community of Nairs, "who still form a substantial section of the population of the southern part of the Malabar Coast" (IAAL 229). It is a marriage between a Jew who belongs to a patriarchal background and a Hindu girl with matrilineal family. In fact, it was the marriage that brings out into the open the world that dissolved differences of religion, culture and region, the factors that became the potent bases of nationality and nationhood.

In an Antique Land provides plenty of instances in this matter. For instance, Ghosh's visit to Nashawy and Lataifa in 1988 that coincided with the annual event of "mowliid" dedicated to the memory of a saint Sidi Abu-Hasira. Ghosh's visit to the event is seen with considerable suspicion by the policemen on account of the fact that the author is neither a Jew nor a Muslim to pay homage to the saint. Ghosh makes a note about his encounter with the official with the objective of bringing out the contrast **between the two worlds and times**:

He was not trying to intimidate me; I could tell he was genuinely puzzled. He seemed reasonable and intelligent, that for an instant I even thought of telling him the story of Bomma

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 [. . .]. I had been caught straddling a border [. . .]. (IAAL 339-340)

Ghosh presents a world without borders and boundary lines that take up the cause of the subaltern from history. In contrast to the “multicultural bazaar” of the past, the present is set forth as fragmented and incomplete. Nevertheless, despite all the perceptible divisions, his worldview perceives an inherent unity that runs deep and transcends all differences. The underline unity is dominant and a few flashes of it, however, never fail to emerge and catch attention of the author. It is through his worldview that Ghosh discerns “a world of accommodations” despite its conspicuous extermination which, the writer feels, is “still alive, and, in some tiny measure, still retrievable.” (IAAL 237) Nationalism, though shown to have taken its toll in drawing lines not only across the globe but also across minds, at deeper and subaltern level, the prior unity is perceived as still sustaining. Thus, he interprets the world primarily on cosmopolitan lines. There is a presence of borders but they are categorized as artificial and false by him.

4. In-depth Analysis:

The author’s cosmopolitanism is an ideal that attempts to overlook the political reality of divisions. His worldview, in fact, identifies the world that goes beyond nationalism and national boundaries. That is precisely why during his stay in Egypt, he never fails to notice those common threads that run through mankind despite their differences in creed, culture, and religion. People may react in a peculiar manner in relation to the beliefs of another culture depending upon their conditionings, but when it comes to the basic human emotions, instincts, and needs, their response is alike. In Lataifa, for instance, where his presence caused an awkward unease on account of the difference in beliefs and religious practices, it was quite normal to see some of the inhabitants giving him a discourse on the relative superiority of Islam. During one of the encounters that one day the author met Ustaz Mustafa who, after the discourse on the incomparability of his religion, advised him that he should convert and become a Muslim. He was of the belief that if his father had read the holy books of Islam he would surely have converted himself. While Ustaz Mustafa was arguing thus, a sudden thought struck his mind and he asked if it would upset his father if the writer changed his religion. When Ghosh replied that it might, he suddenly stopped and said, “Well, it would not be right for you to upset your father. That is true.” (IAAL 52)

Ghosh observes:

After that, the heart went out of his efforts to convert me: he had a son himself and it went against his deepest instincts to urge a man to turn against his father. And so, as the rival moralities of religion and kinship gradually played themselves to a standstill within him, Ustaz Mustafa and I came to an understanding. (IAAL 52)

Through the word “understanding”, Ghosh intends to imply, which relates to the domains of those basic human emotions that are common and shared by all mankind. On this level, the differences of belief simply dissolve and give way to the collective experience that unites human beings.

Ghosh intends to emphasize that despite the cultural differences among people, their living and reactions are almost similar. After a certain point, the differences dissolve and are replaced by the uniform pattern of behavior. This is the reason why Ghosh has been able to strike a lasting relationship of genuine friendship with many of them. They may be living with their own beliefs and creed, but when it comes to human relatedness they connect, relegating their said beliefs and creed to the insignificant background. Shaikh Musa, a devout and a staunch Muslim, is one of those whose friendship with the writer comprises one of the poignant aspects of the book. It is for him that Ghosh brings a pocket Quran as a gift when he goes to Cairo. Shaikh Musa keeps the Quran with loving to cherish. When Ghosh revisits him after a long span of eight years, Shaikh Musa shows the Quran to him that he has treasured with love as a tender gift from a dear friend. On learning that Shaikh Musa’s younger son has passed away, the writer’s sorrow at the news and his sharing of grief with his friend is an instance that touches the human chord. Ghosh illustrates a rare human bonding that transcends narrow nationalistic considerations.

Ghosh’s friendship with Nabeel transcends the restrictive border of cultures and he keeps track of him. On his visit to Nashawy and Lataifa after eight years, Ghosh learns that Nabeel had not come back from Iraq where he had gone a few years back in search of a job. He felt concerned and disappointed as there was no news of Nabeel. There was disturbance in Iraq because of the war between Iran and Iraq. The TV was flashing the news of the exodus of the Egyptians as thousands of them were heading towards the border. As his eyes searched in vain for any sign of Nabeel in the TV footage, his worry and anxiety increased for his safety. The depth of human relationship is revealed when Ghosh says: “There was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History” (IAAL 353). Ghosh’s friendship manifests itself in his concern for his friend. This closeness is based upon basic human relationship of love and transcends all types of national borders and limits.

5. Conclusion:

The subaltern level has an altogether different story to reveal. *In an Antique Land* like the other works of fiction and non-fiction focuses on the subaltern and highlights that national boundaries and artificial lines cannot impact the bonds and relationships. The world of Ghosh is united and his writings reiterate a unified and cosmopolitan nature. Here relationships transcend boundaries where human beings never cease to relate to each other. Thus, at the level of human relatedness, the artificial divisions evaporate and the nation-states and their borders acquire an imaginary status. *In an Antique Land* is the most representative example of Ghosh’s worldview that he reaches with the help of subaltern historical insight.

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