

Cultural Confrontation in Amitav Ghosh's in *An Antique Land*: A Study of Translational Issues of Two Colonially Constructed Cultures

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Abstract

In this article, two cultures, namely, Indian and Egyptian as portrayed in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* have been analyzed. In this novel, the narrator, Amitav Ghosh, who stumbles upon the fragments, which bears the name Bomma, an Indian slave who was sent to Egypt to look after the business of his master, Ben Yiju goes to Egypt to trace his predecessor Bomma. During his stay in the Egyptian villages, he is dealt with in terms of his culture. He is unable to translate the word "circumcise", which means "purity". He is interrogated by the local people about his beliefs, customs, faiths, cremations etc, and he portrays India a culturally inferior nation to Egypt. In course of time he finds some cultural connections between the two nations. The Egyptians think that Indians are "uncircumcised" and stereotyped as impure. He is also questioned who his God is and what is done to the dead at dying. As far as the narrative technique is concerned, Ghosh questions the colonial ideology through post colonial narrative. His narrative throws light upon colonial ideology of India, which is encountered with post colonial narrative when the narrator has stayed for sometime in the new culturally different society. Therefore, it is analyzed whether the culture is really different, or it is only an issue of translation.

Introduction

Culture is loosely defined as acquired identity derived from society [aids]. The meaning of the very word culture has changed over time. It has, of course, evolved over the years, and it is evanescent in course of times. No country, community or sects has a staple culture. It changes along times. These is a lot of changes happened between 20th century and 21st century in terms of culture. What has been followed by our ancestor is no longer followed by the younger generations. They want to be updated/upgraded with the trends, not with the culture, culture can be said of whatever is proposed by a sound party in the congregation, which later became as a community, and followed by its members who take the sayings of the strong man of the community to the extent of divinity, breaking which is considered a sin. If anyone wants to be

trendy and sails against the current, they are out-casted. (Every group, irrespective of its size has a culture and wants to show their domination over others, or sometimes, among themselves). When the group expands, it becomes larger and stronger. Once they become strong, they want to establish their supremacy in their locality, particularly among the weaker sections. When the weaker sections accepts they are said to be in-caste, but, if they are not ready to submit themselves to them, they are suppressed, sabotaged, oppressed and in the end, tagged as untouchable, 'impure', 'uncivilized and barbarians'. Thus the stronger narrates the culture of the weaker sections. Likewise, in the novel 'In an Antique Land', the narrator, Amitav Ghosh depicts the two cultures; Egyptian and Indian. He elucidates how Indian culture is thought of through the colonial perspective narrative. India, though stronger than Egypt in terms of economy, military infrastructure and amenities, is perceived as impure in terms of its cultural practices. Amitav Ghosh being a single Indian in Egyptian settlements finds no help to counter argue that his country is culturally richer than that of Egypt.

Amitav Ghosh does not want to settle with the proclamation and ruminates the knowledge produced by structure of dominance, economic and clever strategies of imperialism, his main focus is the impact of western paradigms of knowledge have had and continue to have on his country India. He is crucially concerned with highlighting filiations and connections, which go beyond the (neo) colonial relationship, such as the persistence of pre colonial trade connections between the Indian sub continent and the Arabian Peninsula. Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Hindu in an Egyptian village is continually interrupted by the parallel description of a journey by Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader from Tunisia who in early 12th century settled on the Malabar coast, married a Nair lady, Ashu and then befriended a low caste slave, Bomma This clearly shows that relationship between men and women of different cultures has been trained by prejudice in the fact that India and Egypt may be formally free, but both are in mental bondage to the west.

He develops deep into life of a twelfth century Jewish slave and also relates his experiences of living in Nashawy, a small Egyptian village where he interacts with the locals and discovers the strong social affinity between two previously colonized nations. This book contains lively narrative of his travels between Egypt and India. Although they might be considered 'Third World' today, they are both antique lands. Therefore, they have been home to very advanced civilization in their long histories.

Stereotypically Constructed Civilization

Ghosh's construction of the modern inhabitants of Egypt as the object of study should be sufficiently clear to any reader of the book. In the novel, he is introduced to a family in the village of Nashawi, "I was student from India, and He told them a guest who had come to Egypt to do research". One may say that Ghosh in fact constructs a medieval and modern Egypt that is, despite their several differences, equally consigned to an absolute past. He gently undermines his own culture. He choose to include uncomfortable or even humiliating conversations ,when he

attends a local wedding and is harried by a group of attendees who relentlessly question him on everything, right from his reputed cow-worship to the Hindu burning of the dead to clitoridectomy. The line of questioning proves particularly annoying for the narrator because, there is no other go than submitting himself to the interrogators that women who have not undergone the removal of the clitoris are impure. Therefore, he is forced to concede the impurity of Indian women. There is no much difference between the ‘purity’ of men and women is this matter. It clearly shows the stereotypical notion of Indian culture, which is perceived and prevalent in Egyptian villages. He abruptly leaves the group in frustration.

Culture is not separated from religion and thus the sentiments related to the latter obviously gives rest to cultural varieties and conflicts too.

“Tell me are you Muslim?” No. I said, but he didn’t really need an answer since everyone in the hamlet knew that already. “So then what are you?”

I was born a Hindu, I said reluctantly for if I had religious identity at all, it was largely by default. In a troubled voice, Ustaz Mustafa said, “What is this Hinduki thing..? if it is not Christianity or Judaism nor Islam, what can it be? Who are its prophets?” Again, when Ustaz Mustafa asks him regarding the Hindu deities, he hardly feels guilty to banter. I know its cow you worship, isn’t that also?”

The question of cultural identifies goes into seriously vein when the writer feels utterly annoyed by repeated queries on his culture and religion that re poles apart from theirs. There are more barbs of innuendo than curiosity, during his stay in “Nashawy”, the conversation is quite edgy and obnoxious.

“Tell us then, said someone in your country, amongst your people, what do you do with the dead?” they are burned, I said, puffing stoically on my shusha as they recoiled in shock. “And the ashes?” another voice asked. Do you save the ashes so that you can remember them by something?

‘No, I said, not, even the ashes are scattered in the rivers’.

So, are they all unbelievers in your country?” someone asked at last.

“So what about circumcision?” a voice demanded, and was being followed immediately by another, even louder one, which wanted know, whether women in my country were ‘purified’ as they were in Egypt.

No, I said, “women are not purified in my country”

“So you mean you let clitoris just grow and grow? A man asked hoarse voiced. (IAAL.235)

Issues of Translation

The young Jabir questions “ya Amitab” about his knowledge of sex. Observing the baffled amusement with which Ghosh regards a pair of copulating ducks. Jabir assumes that he is

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ignorant in all matters of sex. This conversation leads to questions of cultural comparison regarding circumcision. Jabir:

“You mean,” he said in rising disbelief, “that there are people in your country who are not circumcised?” In Arabic, the word, “circumcise” derives from a root that means. “to purify”: to say of someone that they are “uncircumcised” is more or less to call them ‘impure’. Yes, “I answered, “yes, many people in my country are ‘impure’”. I had no alternative; I was trapped by language. (62)

Amitav-Ghosh: In-between

Ghosh is self conscious about the ambiguity of his standing among the villagers, acknowledging his privileged position as an anthropologist from the center of western academy Oxford academy, Oxford University, as well as his low status as Hindu in Egypt. His Indian nationality provokes particularly complex and often contradictory reactions from the community in which he lives as he is at once seen as an insider fellow inhabitant of a third world country and an outsider as a cow-worshipping, uncircumcised infidel. As David Scott writes on the peculiar position of the third world anthropologist, “the post colonial intellectuals stand in an ambiguous place neither inside nor outside but occupying a between always open on both sides to contestation (scott.80-1)

A further example of Ghosh not occupying the privileged position of the western traveler is in his defensive response to the Imam’s charges of backwardness in Ghosh’s Hindu culture. The Imam attacks Ghosh for being one that he is a Hindu, Ustaz Mustafa says “what is this Hinduki thing? If it is neither Christianity nor Judaism not Islam what can it be? Who are its prophets?”

The Egyptians in reaction to exert influence on the other culture “you must put an end to this burning business ... when you go back you should tell them about our ways and how we do these things” [IAAL 169] one of them laughing tries to explain the strange custom by supposing that, obviously the Indians burn their dead to save their bodies from punishment at the day of judgment, a cunning explanation that actually meets with the Egyptians administration. This helps to appease the conflict in a humorous and ironic manner.

There remains however, the ubiquitous difference from Europe; “you have been to Europe; you have seen how advanced they are. Now tell me; have you ever seen them burning the dead [IAAL 235]. The Indian has to answer affirmative; “yes, they have special electric furnaces meant just for that”. The Egyptians, laughing and dubbing him a liar, claim that this is impossible, because the Europeans are advanced, they are educated they have science, and they have guns and tanks and bombs” [IAAL 235]. Amitav Ghosh retorts that Indians have also weapons and bombs and he is counter argued that Egyptians do have them. Thus there is again an Intercultural competition, this time from the perspective of minorities. He says “in my country

we've even had a nuclear explosion. You won't be able to match that even in a hundred years" [IAAL 236]. With ironic exaggeration a competition is carried out between two superseded civilizations vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence (236).

At this point the cultural conflicts culminate and yet prove to be productive, for the real difference at the background of this conflict refers to, and dissociation from, the west. "At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between them, they have understood each other perfectly. They are travelling, Imam and Ghosh in the west in order to set their own cultural self image against western standards of modernization and internalization.

Ghosh fails to present himself and his cultural identity in mundane everyday terms. His country, India becomes the fabulous faraway place not far removed from the fairy tale land of Nam Nam whose inhabitants eat their dead. He also uses the voice of the real but only when he talks of India and Egypt as modern nation states. India is articulated through technological symbols such as the diesel water pumps known as the 'Indian Machine' among his informants as well as through exotic practices like 'cow worship', 'Sati' and cremation.

Conclusion

Ghosh makes explicit the tedium and frustration of having to explain the particulars of one's culture to those who have already made up their minds about it based on selective presentation of one's culture. Thus, he provides an occasion for complicated and different discussions about ethnographic representation, religion and culture. All the while India is presented largely as a refracted image. The hidden meaning of religious tolerance lies in the sense of a common or even national identity engendered by the mythos of the people as the real nation before the nation. In other words, national identity is construed less on the idea of cultural homogeneity than on the fact of religious difference characterizing the people. The forging of national unity requires the submission to a politics of cultural identity.

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