Chapter Four

Tiny Threads, Gigantic Tapestries

In An Antique Land

There has since the beginning of human existence always been movement, migration and settlement in new areas; for as long as is known and in most parts of the world, individual places have been open to, and partly constituted by, their contacts with "outside". Interconnection is not new, and diasporas are certainly not only a feature of the recent past. — Doreen Massey and Pat Jess, *A Place in the World: Places, Cultures and Globalization*

Cultures are not impermeable; just as Western science borrowed from Arabs, they had borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm. — Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Amitav Ghosh's third novel, *In An Antique Land* (1992), is too protean to be pigeonholed. Hence, the novel's genre has triggered an intense controversy. Even Ghosh's innocuous claim that "it's not a novel. I didn't make up a single word of it" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 28) has been controverted. Homi Bhabha for one considers it "philosophically" as "a novel" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 28). Similarly Krishna Sen calls it a "large and complex novel" (vi). More forthright is Shyam S. Agarwalla who avers that *In An Antique Land* is an "epistolary fiction on the one hand, and, on the other, a contemporary novel" (164). John C. Hawley, on the contrary, believes that the "book is not recognizable as a novel". For him it is "a new genre, something that blends an anthropological record with a travelogue, a diary, and perhaps some imagined sections" (89). Padmini Mongia's contention that "*In An Antique Land* melds many genres" (74) is well supported by Claire Chambers who asserts that it is "a text that straddles the generic borderlines between fact, fiction, autobiography, history, anthropology, and travel book"

("Anthropology as Cultural Translation",1). As a braided narrative, *In An Antique Land* is too generically composite to be easily categorized.

Like its form, the novel's informing spirit too sharply divides its critics. While for Subha Tiwari the novel is "a comment on the growing trend of consumerism and its impact on the developing world"(48), for Sharmila Guha Majumdar "one of the predominant themes is religion"(184). Gauri Viswanathan believes that Ghosh's effort to recuperate the syncretic religious and cultural histories in Egypt and India has a "homogenizing" tendency which denies the historical reality of religious differences. For her, Ghosh's work "cannot get beyond nostalgia to offer ways of dealing with what is, after all, an intractable political problem" (1). As a counterblast to this Neelam Srivastava asserts that Ghosh's "retrieval of the syncretic history of the Indian Ocean is not merely nostalgic, and quite the opposite of a homogenizing multi-culturalism, as Viswanathan suggests" (46). Furthermore, "Ghosh's objective was not that of making a politically radical statement", continues Srivastava, "but rather of developing the ethnographic genre in the direction of a narrative and intersubjective cultural account" (46). This neatly polarized critical response to the same author and to the same book reflects upon the validity of literary criticism as such. While T.K.Ghosh hails *In An Antique Land* as a "close and extensive research work" (152), Leela Gandhi takes the novel down a peg or two on the grounds that the "somewhat unreadable book" "collapses under the cumulative weight of its three-hundred and forty-nine end notes" (192). Granted its controversiality, the profundity of *In An Antique Land* remains to be demonstrated.

The two parallel narratives in *In An Antique Land* create a dialectic between an idyllic, medieval Middle-East and a contemporary trouble-torn Arab world. While the primary narrative focuses on the narrator's fieldwork experiences with the fellaheen in contemporary Egypt, the secondary narrative reconstructs an obscure, fragile subaltern subject, the slave of MS H.6. The two narratives presenting parallel human experiences are intricately interwoven. Distant temporal epochs, modern and medieval histories are thus seamlessly fused in a rich tapestry. The Prologue strikes the keynote to the novel as the narrator-historian introduces the elusive object of his research – the identity of a medieval Indian slave to a Tunisian Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju: "The Slave of MS

H.6 first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942. His was a brief debut, in the obscurest of theatres, and he was scarcely out of the wings before he was gone again – more a prompter's whisper than a recognizable face in the cast" (*In An Antique Land*, 13). The slave is initially mentioned in a letter by a merchant Khalaf ibn Ishaq to his friend Ben Yiju in 1148 when the greatest European army of Crusaders assembled around Damascus. This medieval letter received scholarly attention in an article by E. Strauss in 1942, when another European armed congregation laid siege in the Middle-East. The past-present parallel cannot go unnoticed. The second medieval document in which the slave is mentioned was published thirty-one years later but in that the slave receives an elevated stature for "he has earned himself a footnote"(*IAAL*,18). The letter of Khalaf ibn Ishaq describes Ben Yiju's Indian slave as a "business agent, a respected member of his household" (*IAAL*, 18). Reflecting on the textual evidence of the slave's existence, the narrator is fascinated by the accident of history that "those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved. It is nothing less than a miracle that anything is known about him at all" (*IAAL*, 17).The slave of Ben Yiju belonged to a moment in history when

> the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual, existences are the literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests – the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. (*IAAL*, 16-17)

The slave is a paradigmatic subaltern whose experiences are to be reconstructed from the fragments available to the narrator-historian. An eclectic that he is, Ghosh, while recovering the subaltern consciousness, fuses the Derridean textual "traces" with the "properly human, individual, existences" (*IAAL*, 17). Robert Dixon explicitly formulates that Ghosh deploys "the lexicons of both liberal humanism and post-structuralism, though without allowing his writing to be affiliated with either" (27). The humanist Ghosh is sensitive to point out that though the medieval correspondence between Ishaq and Yiju is about merchandise "the letter's spirit is anything but mercenary: it is lit with a warmth that Goitein's translation renders still alive and glowing, in cold English print" (*IAAL*, 18). By piecing together the textual fragments, the narrator-historian imaginatively reconstructs a sub-culture of these modest, medieval traders providing an

alternative to the official history of statesmen and priests. The Prologue ends with an autobiographical note that gives a new dimension to the narrative:

> [...] the next year, 1980, I was in Egypt, installed in a village called Lataifa, a couple of hours journey to the south-east of Alexandria.
>
> I knew nothing then about the Slave of MSH.6 except that he had given me a right to be there, a sense of entitlement. (*IAAL*, 19)

The Oxford-trained Indian anthropologist's quest for the slave's trail in Egypt not only provides an edifice for cross-cultural dialogue, but also ties together the two threads of the book. By acknowledging the erased histories of the medieval oriental world, the narrator embarks on a project to affirm the existence of this Indian slave of antiquity who virtually becomes the narrator-historian's second self.

The narrator-historian undertakes a daunting academic enterprise to track down the slave's traces. While unearthing the slave's and his master's origins the narrator discovers a vital medieval, cosmopolitan world that outdates contemporary notions of cosmopolitanism. The pre-colonial world is marked by a "greater freedom of movement" and inclusiveness unknown to the modern, exclusive, legally demarcated nation-states: "In the 12th century, people developed a much more sophisticated language of cultural negotiation than we know today. They were able to include different cultures in their lives, while maintaining what was distinct about themselves" (Ghosh, "Lessons From the 12th Century", 52). The fact that huge quantities of Chinese pottery and rich fragments of Indian textiles have been found in medieval Fustat lends credence to the thesis that culture transcends national boundaries. As the "entrepot" that linked the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, medieval Fustat occupied a "pivotal role in the global economy": "the juncture of some of the most important trade routes in the known world and the nucleus of one of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities on earth" (*IAAL*, 38). These vibrant movements are the reason why even the name of Egypt circulated in various countries giving it an alternate linguistic history. *Masr* is

> the name by which the country has been known, in its own language, for at least a millennium, and most of the cultures and civilizations with which it has old connections have accepted its own self-definition. The languages of India, for example, know Masr by variations of its Arabic name; 'Mishor' in Bengali, 'Misar' in Hindi and Urdu. (*IAAL*, 32)

While the peace-loving Asian countries were champions of cultural assimilation, Western cultural institutions maintained rigid boundaries by creating the "other" against which Europe could define itself: "Europe has always insisted on knowing the country not its own terms, but as a dark mirror for itself" (*IAAL*, 32). Phrases like "Egyptian darkness" and "Egyptian bondage" (*IAAL*, 32) recur in English language. Major European languages derive their name for Egypt from "the Greek Ægyptos", a term related to "the word 'Copt', the name generally used for Egypt's indigenous Christians" (*IAAL*, 32). Words like "gypsy" and "Gitano" are derived from the word "Egyptian" (*IAAL*, 33). The narrator caps it off with his assertion that "Europe's apparently innocent 'Egypt' [...] is almost as much a weapon as a word" (*IAAL*, 33). The demarcation between the Orient and the Occident is therefore, in the words of Said, "less a fact of nature than [...] a fact of human production" ("Orientalism reconsidered", 2). The cleavage between the pre-colonial East and the colonial West is thus gradually built up.

Ben Yiju followed a well-marked trail of medieval Jewish travellers and joined the Palestinian congregation in Babylon. These vibrant, flourishing traders formed a multicultural, mercantile civilization without any structures of power relationships. It is one of history's grim ironies that "unlike others of that time who have left their mark on history, the members of this community were not born to privilege and entitlement; they were neither aristocrats nor soldiers nor professional scholastics" (*IAAL*, 56). Hence, they are History's unrecognized heroes. The members of the "Ben Ezra" congregation created a "Geniza" or a storehouse to preserve all sorts of documents and "to prevent the accidental desecration of any written form of God's name" (*IAAL*, 56). By "largely fortuitous circumstances" (*IAAL*, 56) this geniza was undisturbed for more than seven hundred years. Hence it emerged as the greatest storehouse of medieval documents. The Geniza documents testify to medieval syncretism. The researcher learns that the Middle-Eastern Jews and the Muslims used the same name for God, "Allah". The language in which the documents were written is a hybrid one, Judaeo-Arabic, "a colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic, written in the Hebrew script" (*IAAL*, 101). This is the dialect in the Egyptian Delta villages of Lataifa and Nashawy in which the narrator lived. The Geniza documents reflect the multi-cultural spirit of the medieval transcontinental traders. In the late 17th century, a fever of Egyptomania gripped Europe by which "European culture was able to

manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (Said, *Orientalism*, 3). Egypt became a prey to the Enlightenment's concepts of knowledge and discovery and by the time when the Suez Canal was constructed in 1864, "the intercourse between power and the writing of history" (*IAAL*, 82) was complete. The Geniza was emptied of its manuscripts which were dispersed in various European libraries especially Cambridge. What coupled with scientifically advanced techniques of Western research is a subsidiary tale of greed and dishonesty which led to the drain of wealth. Even the native scholars failed to appreciate the ancient "Islamic high culture of Masr" (*IAAL*, 95). So complete was this uprooting that "not a single scrap or shred of paper" (*IAAL*, 95) remained in the Geniza to remind Masr of her hallowed past. Thus, "having come to Fustat from the far corners of the known world, a second history of travel carried the documents even further" (*IAAL*, 95). This was symptomatic of the colonizers who nourished "a view of the world in which the interests of the powerful defined necessity, while the demands of the poor appeared as greed" (*IAAL*, 95). The movement of the archives erased all evidences of Egypt's ancient heterogeneous culture and this historical amnesia determined the country's present: "It was as though the borders that were to divide Palestine several decades later had already been drawn, through time rather than territory, to allocate a choice of Histories" (*IAAL*, 95). The incompleteness of historical records and the manipulative nature of history to meet a particular interest are made explicit here.

Chance plays a great role in *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*. In *In An Antique Land* too, the narrator's research on the life and times of Abraham Ben Yiju hinges on a providential discovery of a crucial historical document: "By an extraordinary coincidence it so happens that the letter has survived and is currently lodged [...] in the University of Cambridge" (*IAAL*, 177). By working on the fragmentary evidences, the narrator learns that the Rabbi Ben Yiju was a respected scholar well versed in religious doctrines for whom the "opportunities offered by the eastern trade" (*IAAL*, 154) was irresistible. Ben Yiju started his career as an apprentice to Madmun who regarded him as a part of his family. The talented Jew soon established himself in Aden, yet "curiously enough", in "a deviation from the usual pattern of trader's travels" (*IAAL*, 159),

Ben Yiju migrated to the Malabar coast in 1132 and returned twenty years later. Pressing into service all his analytical skills, the narrator surmises from a "cryptic letter" (*IAAL*, 160) that Ben Yiju travelled to Mangalore to escape a blood feud arising from a matter of unpaid taxes. The dispute was of course amicably settled later. In Mangalore, Ben Yiju granted freedom to a slave girl named Ashu and later married her. She belonged to the matrilineal Nair community along the Malabar coast. Concubinage and sexual liaison were common practices in medieval times and India was "notable for the ease of its sexual relations" (*IAAL*, 228), but the researcher is convinced that the "overriding and more important consideration" (*IAAL*, 228) must have been love. Yet, this alternative history that the narrator creates is obfuscated by his own tongue-in-cheek observation that "[i]f I hesitate to call it love it is only because the documents offer no certain proof" (*IAAL*, 230). The demarcating line between history and fiction is confused with the plausibility of the narrator's own interpretation. Anyway, Ben Yiju's decision to marry a girl disregarding all distinctions of race, class, social position, and creed speaks of a liberal outlook far ahead of his times.

When medieval India proved to be a haven of multiculturalism, Europe was a seething cauldron. Triggered by "a frenzy of religious fervour" (*IAAL*, 300) because of widespread massacre of Jews, Europe was preparing for another Crusade. North Africa witnessed a brutal killing of a hundred thousand Christians and Jews by the Almohads. Many Jews converted to Christianity to save their lives. Ben Yiju's homeland Ifriqiya was demolished by the Christian Sicilian armies and the region was ravaged by disease and famine. His family had, however, escaped and settled in Sicily unknown to him in distant Mangalore. Consanguinity compelled Ben Yiju to reunite with his brothers and he urged them to join him in Aden. To strengthen his bonds with them Ben Yiju decided to marry his daughter off to one of his nephews. After many twists in fortune, his nephew Surur married his daughter Sitt al-Dar in 1156 in Fustat. After years of a miserable life in exile the "material and scholarly riches" of Egypt "shone like a beacon"(*IAAL*, 325) for Ben Yiju's family. Finally, Ben Yiju and his kins went back to their homeland; Ashu never left India. The narrator is confounded with the final years of Ben Yiju's life about which there are "many conceivable endings" (*IAAL*, 328). While the story goes that he died in Egypt after his daughter's marriage, "the most pleasing" (*IAAL*, 328) conjecture is that he returned to Ashu

in the Malabar. However, there are no historical documents to support the researcher's assumptions.

Having recovered the lost traces of Abraham Ben Yiju, the narrator-historian now tries to unravel the Slave's identity. The "slave of MS H.6" exists in the waste-bin of history when the narrator locates him in scattered fragments. Goitein's translated version of Khalaf ibn Ishaq's letter to Ben Yiju in 1139 renders the slave's name as "bama", a diminutive of "Brahma". Researching on other medieval documents, the narrator discovers that three characters "B-M-H" (or "B-M-A" since in Arabic 'H' is not a consonant but an open vowel) (*IAAL*,246), figure prominently in the slave's mysterious name. Desisting from Goitein's contention that "Bama" is derived from "Brahma", the narrator ultimately solves this pressing linguistic riddle:

> After puzzling over those three characters for a long time, one last possibility suggested itself to me. In Judæo-Arabic (as in Arabic) a doubled letter is often represented by a single character. It was possible then that the single'M' in the name was actually doing duty for two of its kind. If that were so, it would mean that there were actually four letters in the name 'B-M-M-A'. If I then filled in a short vowel after the first letter, the result was 'Bomma' or "Bamma', names which I knew to be common in certain parts of India. (*IAAL*, 249)

Discussing the slave's identity with an expert on local folklore the researcher learns that the slave belonged to a matrilineal community of Tulunad with an indigenous culture and local forms of worship, the Bhuta-cult. His contention that the Slave's name was not a derivative of "Brahma" is vindicated by the expert as "in all likelihood it was a dimunitive of 'Berme', the figure who stood at the pinnacle of the Tuluva pantheon of Bhuta-spirits" (*IAAL*, 254). The indigenous culture of Tulunad predates Brahminism, "the standard-bearers of the Pan-Indian Hindu tradition" (*IAAL*, 252). Later with the rise of the overarching Brahminical influence, the Tulu deity Berme was gradually assimilated to the Sanskritic deity "Brahma". With his elusive identity thus established Bomma "finally came of age and was ready at last to become a protagonist in his own story" (*IAAL*, 254).

The relationship between the matrilineally descended Tulu slave and his patriarchal Jewish master completely differed from the European conceptions of slavery. The medieval idea of slavery confounded "contemporary conceptions, both of servitude and of its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom" (*IAAL*, 259). In the medieval Middle-East and north India "slavery" was a career opening,

a mode of recruitment into the army and the bureaucracy. In the mercantile world too, the hierarchies were equally flexible. Beginning as an agent or an apprentice, a slave not only obtained manumission but also a share of the firm's profits. In the religious sphere, slavery was a spiritual metaphor for the devotee's quest for God. For the Vachanakara saint-poets and the Sufi mystics, slavery "the paradoxical embodiment of perfect freedom" (*IAAL*, 261) represented self-transcendence and the dissolving of all differences:

> through the transforming power of metaphor the poets became their Lord's servants and lovers, androgynous in their longing; slaves, searching for their master with a passion that dissolved selfhood, wealth, caste and gender, indeed, difference itself. (*IAAL*, 260-261)

The champions of perfect personal devotion and human commitment, spiritual movements such as Sufism and the Bhakti are "subversive counter-image[s]" (*IAAL*, 263) of orthodox Islam and Hinduism. They celebrated the possibility of human connections transcending cultural differences. Such was the impact of the Sufi conceptions of spiritual extinction in a transcendent power that even the bloodthirsty conqueror Sultan Mahmud of Ghazani underwent a "miraculous spiritual transformation" (*IAAL*, 262). In the medieval world, the relation between the slave and the master was not structured on any power relations but on a reciprocal recognition of each other. The relationship between Ben Yiju and Bomma was devoid of any colonial connotations of slavery. Their "arrangement was probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood" (*IAAL*, 259). Bomma, in course of time, grew in stature as Ben Yiju's business agent in Aden and assumed the title of "Shaikh".

In his academic explorations along the Malabar coast, the narrator-historian learns about the Magavira community and their connections with foreign merchants. Their deity, known as the Bobbariya –bhuta, is a prime example of religious syncretism. The deity is legendarily considered to be the spirit of a Muslim trader who died at sea. When the narrator visits a Bhuta-temple at Mangalore with a Jesuit friend he witnesses how a marginalized community, once relegated to the peripheries of the Hindu order but now completely transformed socially and economically, uses politics to lay "claim to the future, in the best tradition of liberalism, by discovering a History to replace the past" (*IAAL*, 273). Medieval religious hybridism is now replaced by the polemics of a fundamentalist

Hindu political organization, "an upper-caste group notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric" (*IAAL*, 273). True to the spirit of postmodernity the old structure of the temple is demolished and a new one is created in its place: "it had become a real Hindu temple, and the main place in it was now reserved for Vishnu, the most Brahminical of gods" (*IAAL*, 274). In an interesting parallel, the Synagogue in Egypt, originally built in the eleventh century, has been in need of constant renovation to be rescued "from the assaults of Time" (*IAAL*, 58). The difference, of course, lies elsewhere. While every trace of the past has been erased from the Geniza after the documents were dispersed, the past still makes its "presence" felt in the temple at Mangalore. The "spirit" of the Bobbariya-bhuta was placed beside the image of the Hindu god Vishnu albeit in a "wholly different guise" (*IAAL*, 274). The narrator discerns the medieval religious hybridism which has escaped the watchful eyes of the Hindu fundamentalists: "The past had revenged itself on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic pantheon" (*IAAL*,). The narrator puts a premium on the medieval tradition of personal devotion which has continuously confronted the "hierarchical ideology of caste with a critique of millenarian power" (*IAAL*, 274).

The mercantile world of Ben Yiju in medieval Mangalore dissolved social, religious and geographical divisions. Madmun endeavoured a joint venture between himself and three traders belonging to different social and geographical origins: "one a Muslim, one a Gujarati Vania, and the third a member of the landowning caste of Tulunad" (*IAAL*, 278). A mark of this multiculturalism is the creation of a "trading argot, or an elaborated pidgin language" (*IAAL*,) which circulated amongst the traders coming from diverse linguistic regions. But the cultural bonhomie that brought the Jewish Ben Yiju, his Nair wife Ashu and the Indian slave Bomma close to each other came to an abrupt end with the advent of the Portuguese trader Vasco da Gama in 1498:

> Within a few years of that day the knell had been struck for the world that had brought Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ashu together, and another age had begun in which the crossing of their paths would seem so unlikely that its very possibility would all but disappear from human history. (*IAAL*, 286)

The arrival of the Europeans on the Indian waters destroyed the pre-existing relations among the Arab and the Indian traders. Merchants had traded on the

Indian Ocean respecting the laws of peace uninfluenced by the terrestrial military ambitions. The Portuguese brought with them a completely different language of dominance and autonomy based on racial and religious superciliousness. The military superiority of the Portuguese altered the peaceful ambience of the Indian Ocean just as the British gunboats destroyed the quiet, cosmopolitan world of al-Ghazira in *The Circle of Reason*. Interestingly, the European historians regarded the peaceful co-existence of the Indians and the Egyptians as "a lack, or failure, one that invited the intervention of Europe" (*IAAL*, 287). Far from conceding to Western representations the narrator rewrites it, underlining the cultural distinctions between the Occident and the Orient: "the peaceful traditions of the oceanic trade may have been, in a quite inarticulate way, the product of a rare cultural choice – one that may have owed a great deal to the pacifist customs and beliefs of the Gujarati Jains and Vanias who played such an important part in it" (*IAAL*, 287). Anyway the "unquenchable, demonic thirst" (*IAAL*, 288) of European colonialism erased the intertwined histories of India and Egypt. But Mangalore does not treat its "lost history" with "crippling melancholy" (*IAAL*, 245) because its connections with the Arabs have not been severed:

> Its ancient connections with the Arab world have bequeathed it a more useful legacy than a mere collection of artifacts: thousands of its residents are now employed in the Persian Gulf, and its suburbs are awash with evidence of the extravagant spending of its expatriates. (*IAAL*, 245)

The continuities between the past and the present have remained unabated and the vestiges of that rich cosmopolitan world still survive albeit in a different dimension: "throughout north India, crystallized sugar is still known as misri in commemoration of traders like Ben Yiju and the tastes they imported from Masr" (*IAAL*, 269). The narrator thus completely demolishes the cliché that cosmopolitanism is the exclusive fruit of European expansionism. The schema of historicism which puts the West at the centre of everything – "first in Europe, then elsewhere" (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7) – is thus deconstructed.

While the narrator is a subversive historian in search of an elusive historical figure, he is also an Oxford-trained Indian anthropologist engaged in fieldwork in an Egyptian village. In Egypt, he researches the slave's life in the Alexandrian archives; leaving Egypt, he reconstructs his own research experiences and seamlessly interweaves the two. The present shapes his perspective from

which he looks at the past. By forging a tenuous connection between the 12th century Indian slave in Egypt and himself, the narrator, in the words of James Clifford, maps "older connections between India and Egypt, trade and travel relations which preceded and partly bypassed the world's violent polarization into West and East, empire and colony, developed and backward" (*Routes*, 5). To achieve this, the narrator conflates within himself the roles of the ethnographer as a "describer-translator of custom" and the anthropologist as a "builder of general theories about humanity" (Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 28), and demolishes traditional assumptions about them. Amitav Ghosh repudiates anthropology as "a kind of hegemonic voice", "an authoritative" and "authoritarian voice" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 29). Despite his training in it, anthropology disenchants him because it reduces people "into abstractions and makes them into [...] statistical irregularities" (Aldama, 86). His "real interest is in the predicament of individuals" (Aldama, 86-87). Hence, far from rewriting the local culture of the Egyptian fellaheen from a narrative distance and observing his native informants as a homogenized "they", the narrator, Amitab, relates to them with a profound ease and intimacy that conduces to his narrative's lifelikeness. In his interview with Claire Chambers, Ghosh acknowledges "the absolute essentialness of conversations to any kind of narrative" ("The Absolute Essentialnes of Conversations", 28). Dismantling the self/other dialectic, the narrator relinquishes his superior epistemological position as the central observing and narrating authority and is in turn questioned and condemned about his own religious and cultural practices by the villagers. The narrative thus becomes dialogic in form.

Deviating from the tropes of traditional ethnography, the narrative begins *in media res* with the narrator already a lodger in a Lataifa household. Descriptions of the narrator's journey to Egypt or the initial feelings of unfamiliarity are consciously eschewed. On the contrary, there is already a feeling of comradeship. Abu Ali, a small businessman with a bullying personality, "on his own initiative, had assumed the role of surrogate father as well as landlord" (*IAAL*, 24), but the narrator feels somewhat unhappy in his house. He feels "secure" (*IAAL*, 39) in his friendship with Shaikh Musa. Such is the feeling of camaraderie that the narrator feels with Shaikh Musa that after sharing a meal with his family from a single tray he feels that he has "just crossed an invisible

barrier" (*IAAL*, 40). But the researcher in Amitab already discerns complexities within this "labyrinth of relationships" (*IAAL*, 53). Although Shaikh Musa obliquely cautions the narrator about Abu Ali, he never voices his criticism directly. Descending from the same genealogy Abu Ali and Shaikh Musa are bound by consanguinity. Within the latter's own family, education created "an unbridgeable gap" (*IAAL*, 42) between his two sons, Ahmed and Hasan. An educated man and hence a "mowazzaf" (*IAAL*, 42), Ahmed worked as a clerk in a factory near Damanhour. Hasan, an educated fellah, worked on his father's land. His strong resemblance to his father and their shared world-view created "a special bond" (*IAAL*, 42) between the father and the son. Travelling around Lataifa and Nashawy, the narrator observes a cleavage between the salaried people, the mowazzafeen and the farmers, the fellaheen. While the former is "absorbed in a concern which, despite its plural appearance, was actually single and indivisible – religion and politics" (*IAAL*, 50), the latter is interested in questions about the soil and the crops. When Ustaz Mustafa, a former law-student at the University of Alexandria, apologizes to the narrator for some fellaheen and peremptorily dismisses them as people uninterested in religion, the narrator promptly identifies with them: "I am just like that myself" (*IAAL*, 51). Having distinguished between the interests of the two classes of people, the narrator associates himself with the lower one. In modern Egypt, the narrator faces a world much different from the medieval world of Ben Yiju and Bomma where cultural, ethnic and religious borders were completely porous.

In his bid to relate to the Egyptian villagers, the narrator engages in discussions with them about their beliefs and customs. To his dismay, he experiences a post-colonial Third World where the spirit of camaraderie is displaced by a celebration of differences. Perplexed about the narrator's "Hindu" religion, a "religious identity" which he had by "default" (*IAAL*, 47), Ustaz Mustafa questions him about "this 'Hinduki' thing? I have heard of it before and I don't understand it" (*IAAL*, 47). His primary objective is to try to convert the narrator into Islam:

> 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. (*IAAL*, 48-51)

Far from playing a passive role in his discussions with the ethnographic narrator, Mustafa simply reverses the gaze. Hinduism is perceived as a completely different and strange system of values. Evident here is Mustafa's bold assertion of his own cultural and religious superiority over the narrator's, albeit in an amicable spirit. The self tries to mould the "other" into its own image. When it can't, it makes the "other" aware of its difference and exclusion. In Lataifa during Ramadan, when almost the entire village is on fast, the narrator wants to join as well. But his spirit of empathy is not appreciated by them because "only Muslims fast at Ramadan" (*IAAL*, 75). The narrator understands that Muslims in all parts of the world are practicing the same ritual. They form a special global community from which the narrator is barred because "to belong to that immense community was a privilege which they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries" (*IAAL*, 76). It dawns on the narrator, like his counterpart in *The Shadow Lines*, that boundaries are etched both on maps as well as in minds.

As a third-world anthropologist the narrator occupies a rather ambiguous position, "neither 'inside' nor 'outside', but occupying a 'between' always open on both sides to contestation" (Scott, 80-1). As an Indian in Egypt he is promptly welcomed as "one of us" (*IAAL*, 46). The long history of intercultural relations between India and Egypt, connections defined without any reference to the West, gets a Himalayan lift in the hands of a village-woman when she welcomes the narrator: "the people of Egypt and India have been like brothers for centuries. You must consider yourself one of our family" (*IAAL*, 186). Introducing the narrator to his peers, Ustaz Sabry enunciates the identical predicaments of the two countries, how both have been "ransacked by imperialists" (*IAAL*, 134), and are trying to cope with poverty, agricultural deficiencies and other problems "bequeathed to them by their troubled histories" (*IAAL*, 134). At times the narrator's foreignness gives him an extra privilege as when Khamees explains to him that the normally condescending Imam would comply with him because "he knows you're a foreigner. He'll listen to you" (*IAAL*, 233). At other times the narrator's foreignness also leads him to trouble. While his rusty Arabic and "halting explanations" (*IAAL*, 112) rouses the suspicions of the taxi driver en route to Nashawy, his interest in a Jewish saint gets him involved in interrogations by a local police officer.

The narrator's deviation from the Eurocentric rational, realist ethnographic discourse lies in his empathic identification with and compassion for the local peasants. He is sometimes the scholar from India and at other times the butt of Jabir's jokes who "doesn't know a thing, [...] not religion, not politics, not sex, just like a child" (*IAAL*, 63). When the narrator congratulates Khamees on a child he mistakenly identifies to be the latter's son, the astonished Khamees exclaims: "The Indian knows, [...] he understands that people are happy when they have children: he's not as upside down as we thought" (*IAAL*, 172). Khamees's rhetoric reminds the reader of Thamma in *The Shadow Lines* and her remark about her ancestral house in Dhanmundi: "Nothing's upside down" (*TSL*, 212). A shared cultural practice turns the self-other dialectic on its head. Nabeel's attempt to enter the mind of the narrator and to see and feel things as he did touches the narrator deeply because "it was the first time that 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" (*IAAL*, 152). This insightful ability to look at the world from the other's perspective is the narrator's ethnographic enterprise. This perfectly accords with Malinowski's credo that the ethnographer should try to "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* life" (25).

The narrator presents a wealth of detail about the socio-cultural life of the Egyptian villagers, albeit unobtrusively. The over-enthusiastic Jabir, out of sheer exhibitionism, relates to the narrator the incident of a murder, veritably an accident, and concludes that there is going to be a blood feud. Jabir's narrative posture — "drawing himself up to his full height" (*IAAL*, 69) — conveys his pride in the ancient Arab custom. The narrator explains the sequence of events that lead up to the blood feud — the dead man's family had the licence to kill the murderer's male kin on the paternal side as revenge. Then the two lineages would negotiate a blood-money payment in their elders' presence: "That was thâr, the law of feud; damn, the law of blood; the ancient, immutable law of the Arabs" (*IAAL*, 69). But what was once a sacred custom of the Arabs is now a trivialized ritual, shorn off its medieval splendour. Since the killer belonged to "a big and powerful family", the envisaged feud did not transpire and the "token payment' appeased the wronged family: "Feuds and vengeance killings were things of the past; nowadays it was the government's job to deal with crimes and murders"

(*IAAL*, 136). Amitav Ghosh presents a similar episode in his D.Phil thesis. The relevant section may be quoted for clarity's sake:

> On that instance the men of the killer's lineage did not leave the area, for his lineage was the "dominant lineage" (asl al balad) of the village and very powerful, while the dead man's relatives were poor and few. They presented no real threat to the killer's lineage who saw no reason to leave the area. (*Kinship*, 178)

The criminal's power and wealth help him to avoid both the feud and the legal prosecutions. This explicates the discontinuity between the much haloed feud of the past and its present distortion. The solidarity of the wronged, self-respecting lineage is based on the self's immersion in the spirit of the community which is well enunciated by Scheler:

> the vengeful impulses of a member of the family or tribal unit in respect of any insult or injury towards a fellow-member of the same unit, is not due to fellow-feeling [...], but to an immediate awareness of this insult or injury as affecting himself; a phenomenon which is directly based upon the fact that the individual begins by living in the community to a much greater extent than he does in himself. (248)

Interestingly, it is the spirit of communal solidarity during medieval times that forced Ben Yiju to leave his native country because the "implicit suggestion" of the medieval document is that he "may have fled to India in order to escape a blood feud" (*IAAL*, 162). This accentuates the gulf between the past and the present.

The narrator discerns that differences in power and wealth, class and sex permeate every aspect of life in the Egyptian villages. The two founding families of Nashawy, the Badawy and the Abu-Kanaka lineages, assumed the roles of the landowners and the Imams respectively. The lineage of the Jammal, comprising the labourers and sharecroppers, formed the poorest class, below the dominating duo. Despite the "deliverance from forced labour" (*IAAL*, 195) and the financial gains that the Revolution of 1952 ensured for the Jammal, they "still fell outside the boundaries of respectability" (*IAAL*, 164). Young men who have not experienced the past equate history with myth. The sporadic clashes between the Jammal and the Badawy parallel the Hindu-Muslim riots in India. The fact that class and wealth determine the outlook of a community is evident from Zaghloul's word of caution for the romantic Eid:

> "love" is not for people like us. [...] For us it only leads to trouble. [...] Love is for students and mowazzafeen and city

> people; they think about it all the time, just like they think of football. For us it's different; it's better not to think of it. (*IAAL*, 217)

The naïve Eid's conception of love is moulded by the presentation of urban life on television: "they all fall in love — in Cairo and Alexandria and Damanhour. You can see it on TV" (*IAAL*, 219). Television has created a cuckoo-land for Eid culminating in the loss of distinction between the real and the imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of "hyperreality", in which distinctions between these are eroded. This marks the second stage in Baudrillard's four-fold strategy of simulacrum, masking and perverting a basic reality thereby inaugurating "an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognize his own, nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance" (153). It is Zaghloul who tries to illuminate Eid about the commodification of women's bodies in big cities. The narrator presents the plight of a separated woman through Khamees's sister, Busaina, who has left her husband and come back to her parents' house with her child. Resolute and independent, she gradually progresses from a vendor of vegetables to a "seasoned businesswoman"(*IAAL*, 225). Busaina sets store by education and her two sons perform exceptionally well at school. Unfortunately, the narrator does not present Busaina's life in detail which makes Claire Chambers observe that "the female sex is an Other whose story is not greatly illuminated here" ("Anthropology as Cultural Translation", 14).

Each vignette that the narrator sketches in the novel has its peculiarities which mark it off from the others. Amm Taha, for instance, is an unconventional trader who sells vegetables and milk products. But the prime reason for his success is his knowledge of women's secrets. He almost assumes a legendary status in rural folklore as a person who "keeps an eye on everything [...] because one of his eyes looks to the left, while the other watches the right" (*IAAL*, 128). The portrait of Amm Taha brings to mind the equally unconventional, dyspeptic Nury in *The Circle of Reason* who is painfully cross-eyed, one of his eyes half-shut as well. Zaghloul, the weaver, is a master story-teller who could weave stories in his yarn: "he had a manner of telling them that was marvellously faithful to the metaphorical resonances of his chosen craft" (*IAAL*, 137). Zaghloul's

stories resemble the narrative power of Zindi in *The Circle of Reason* which organizes the experiences of the individuals and the community and restores continuity and identity. The narrator extols the power of narrative creating a meaningful and coherent order on life. He himself experiences the reconstructive power of narrative in his conversations with Shaikh Musa: "Thinking back later, it often seemed to me that we had created a village of our own during those conversations, between the two of us" (*IAAL*, 117).

The description of the dancer at a wedding ceremony in Nashawy is a word for word repetition of the presentation of Zaghloul's dance in al-Ghazira in Ghosh's first novel. Zaghloul's dance is described thus: "*Khadnáhá min wasat ad-dar*, he chanted; we took her from her father's house. *Wa abúha gá'id záalán*, the crowd shouted back; while her father sat there bereft. Then Zaghloul again — *Khadnáhá bis-saif il-mádi*; we took her with our sharpest sword. And the refrain, *Wa abúha makánsh rádi*; because her father wouldn't consent" (*The Circle of Reason*, 336). The interesting parallel in *In An Antique Land* can be quoted for the sake of comparison: "somebody called out the first line of a chant, *Khadnáhá min wasat ad-dâr*, 'we took her from her father's house', and the crowd shouted back, *Wa abûha gâ'id záalân*, 'while her father sat there bereft'. Then the single voice again, *Khadnâha bi al-saif al-mâdi*, 'we took her with a sharpened sword', followed by the massed refrain, *Wa abûha makânsh râdi*, 'because her father wouldn't consent'" (*IAAL*, 201-202). The novelist attributes this overlap to his habit of keeping extensive diaries while doing fieldwork in Egypt. He acknowledges the influence of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* which made him realize the vital importance of conversations to narrative of any kind: "After Boswell I began to write down every conversation in meticulous detail, so these scenes, the dancing scenes and so on, came straight out of my diaries; in *The Circle of Reason* as well" (Chambers, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations", 28).

In Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason*, the multitudes of characters in al-Ghazira are individualized through their stories. In *In An Antique Land*, the Egyptian fellaheen are given distinctive identities through their interrogations which put the narrator in an awkward position. They are characterized not by their temperament but by their ideas and the way they are expressed. Ghosh draws on Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and constructs the villagers as "free people who are capable of standing beside their creator, of disagreeing with him, and even of

rebelling against him" (37). Multiple registers as they are, they even create a collision of wills with the narrator. The narrator's authority as an ethnographer and gatherer of information is undermined in a sort of counter-ethnography. He is as much a subject position as an object of study to the Egyptians. Ustaz Mustafa's proud assertion that "I have read all about India" (*IAAL*, 46) proves that the ethnographer's culture has been both studied and interpreted. When the teenaged Jabir questions the narrator about the Indians' attitude towards circumcision, he reflects on the problems of translating from one language to another:

> 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.

Confronted with the barriers of language, the narrator cannot express himself properly because in Arabic even the innocuous word "uncircumcised" becomes overwrought with connotations of irreligiousness. Failing to answer Jabir's questions, the narrator, in a complete reversal, becomes an object of fun and "remained a child in Jabir's eyes" (*IAAL*, 65). The narrator faces this linguistic obstacle again when he fails to provide a satisfactory answer to Khamees' question about Indians "burning" their dead bodies: "since I had not succeeded in finding a word such as 'cremate' in Arabic, I knew I would have to give my assent to the term that Khamees had used" (*IAAL*, 168). The narrator's failure in translation provokes Khamees' ingenious interpretation of the former's culture: "They do it so their bodies can't be punished upon the Day of Judgement" (*IAAL*, 169). Busaina, a village woman, urges the narrator to refrain from these customs and extols "our ways and how we do these things" (*IAAL*, 169). Her presumed clincher that "[e]verything's upside down in that country" (*IAAL*,) demonstrates how the self, in an act of homogenization, projects the other as its mirror image. The observer-observed relationship is thus replaced by a cross-cultural dialogue with the narrator and the interlocutors on an equal footing. Nabeel rams home this point to the narrator when invited as an honoured guest in a wedding ceremony, he becomes an easy target to a series of questions related to Indian culture:

> They were only asking questions [...] just like you do; they didn't mean any harm. Why do you let this talk of cows and burning and circumcision worry you so much? These are just customs; it's natural that people should be curious. These are not things to be upset about. (*IAAL*, 204)

The narrator's uneasiness to the fellaheen's repeated questions about the Indians' cultural practices results from a traumatizing communal experience in the subcontinent. His childhood experience of the 1964 communal riots in Dhaka moulds and determines his sensitivity to the Hindu-Muslim relations. Under the pull of his discomfiting experiences amongst the fellahen, the horrible memories of his past soar out of their respective temporal grooves and become contemporaneous with the present. Hence his memories still "possess a life" (*IAAL*, 205) and are "very vivid" (*IAAL*, 208). As he recollects those harrowing experiences he "can see the enraged mob and the dancing flames with a vivid, burning clarity, yet all of it happens in utter silence; my memory, in act of benign protection, has excised every single sound" (*IAAL*, 208). Like his counterpart in *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator's memory is an archaeology of silences. The riot, the memory of which is indelibly engraved in his mind, is the same one which kills Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* and is described in a similar manner in the two novels. Communal discord is defeated by cultural solidarity as the riot's madness, "a pathological inversion", reminds one "of that indivisible sanity binds people to each other independently of their governments" (*TSL*, 230): "it is the incantation that redeems our sanity — in both Dhaka and Calcutta, there were exactly mirrored stories of Hindus and Muslims coming to each others' rescue, so that many more people were saved than killed" (*IAAL*, 209-210). For the narrator, questions about circumcision or worship of cows are always tinged with the heavy memory of communal tension. The Nashawy fellaheen would never be able to comprehend their implications for the narrator because "theirs was a world that was far gentler, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine" (*IAAL*, 210).The trauma of communal frenzy forbids him to accompany Ustaz Mustafa to the mosque. The medieval world of religious and cultural syncretism is dislodged by a world fraught with disharmony as the narrator underlines this cultural difference amongst the Orientals:

> The stories of those riots are always the same: tales that grow out of an explosive barrier of symbols — of 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 disembowelled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. (*IAAL*, 210)

The ethnographer thus reveals as much about his own self as the objects of his research.

The narrator witnesses in rural Egypt the effects of globalization fostering rapid social and economic changes. The creation of a hybridized culture notwithstanding, the fellaheen have embraced a crass consumerism. The result is a competition for one-upmanship conducted according to the hegemony of Western modernity. The point is established very early in the novel when the narrator observes that it was a matter of great pride for Abu-'Ali that he "possessed more — more gadgets, especially — than anyone else in Lataifa" (*IAAL*, 26). The account of the acquisition of a brand-new Indian diesel water-pump by Mabrouk's father is another case in point. A proud possessor of this rare machine, Mabrouk's father invites the narrator to comment on it. The narrator is put on trial by the encircling villagers who eagerly await "the outcome of my silent communion with this product of my native soil" (*IAAL*, 73). When he comments positively on the machine "a joyful hubbub broke out in the courtyard"(*IAAL*, 73). The "makana Hindi" (*IAAL*, 73) is a means of moving forward along the lines of modernity for the peasant and a counter-opportunity to impress. The subaltern peasant, by "converting differences into sets of preferences" (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 48), draws level with the modern world by attaining a capitalist lifestyle. It piques the narrator, however, that what redeems him in the eyes of some fellaheen is his expertise on an imported Indian machine;

> I stayed up a long time that night, marvelling at the respect the water-pump had earned me; I tried to imagine where I would have stood in Jabir's eyes if mine had been a country that exported machines that were even bigger, a better and more impressive — cars and tractors perhaps, not to speak of ships and planes and tanks. (*IAAL*,74)

Firm in their conviction that the narrator is a representative of the elite, "modern", "outside" world, the Egyptian fellaheen constantly bamboozle him about the state of technology and agriculture back home in India, whether Indians "cook on gas stoves or [...] still burn straw and wood" (*IAAL*, 200) as they themselves do. The narrator is astonished that his answer that the Indians still use cattle-drawn ploughs and donkey-carts and not advanced technology and that there are millions still languishing in unimaginable poverty fails to assure his Egyptian interlocutors. Reflecting on his experiences the narrator concludes that the Egyptians had

conceived a fixed notion of the situation in the world outside which was completely different from the reality that the narrator presented to them: "they had constructed a certain ladder of 'Development' in their minds, and because all their images of material life were of those who stood in the rungs above, the circumstances of those below had become more or less unimaginable" (*IAAL*, 200). The narrator then expatiates upon the relation between tradition and modernity which is at the heart of the matter;

> I had an inkling then of the real and desperate seriousness of their engagement with modernism, because I realized that the fellaheen saw the material circumstances of their lives in exactly the same way that a university economist would: as a situation that was shamefully anachronistic, a warp upon time; I understood that 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 and cattle-drawn ploughs, so that those objects, those houses and ploughs, were insubstantial things, ghosts displaced in time, waiting to be exorcized and laid to rest. (*IAAL*, 200-201)

Modernity, as the narrator conceptualizes it, is not a fissure or a radical break with the past but a sense of accommodation — of the new incorporating the old, the past existing within the present. Modernity is an evolving process, bringing together diverse strands of experience: "It was thus that I had my first suspicion of what it might mean to belong to an 'historical civilization', and it left me bewildered because, for my own part, it was precisely the absoluteness of time and the discreteness of epochs that I always had trouble in imagining" (*IAAL*, 201). The narrator's belief in flowing time and continuous history aligns him with T.S. Eliot who pontificates that "[i]n an ideal state of society, one might imagine the good New growing naturally out of the good Old, without the need for polemic and theory, this would be a society with a living tradition" (184). The narrator's modernity is thus one of synthesis and reconciliation.

Colonialism wins its great victories not only because of its military and technological prowess but also because of its cultural appropriation. It creates secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order. By passing colonialism off as a civilizing mission, the colonizers dupe the colonized. Carrying a certain cultural baggage, the colonial system perpetuates itself by inducing the colonized to accept new social norms and cognitive categories. Unnoticed and hence unchallenged, these are instruments of oppression and dominance. Under the

cloak of a civilizing mission, the colonial system persuades the colonized to internalize its logic and absorb its values. By responding to the fresh opportunities provided by the colonizer, the colonized actively participates in his own oppression, thereby, corroding his own self. The colonized is thus a participant in a "moral and cognitive venture against oppression" (Nandy, xiv). By making choices, he becomes a self-destructive co-victim. This is "the intimate enemy" position — that which moulds one's interiority also corrodes him from within, resulting in the loss of his self. "This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all"(Nandy, xi). The inevitable result is the thorough Westernization and modernization of the colonized. Complete surrender to the technological superiority of Western modernity and wholesale rejection of local cultures piques the anthropologist narrator. The Imam, one of the last repositories of traditional medical lore, is now convinced that his own healing powers are worthless in the face of modern Western knowledge. Such is the unquestioning acceptance of his own inferiority that his indigenous medicines are "even more discredited in his own eyes than they were in everyone else's" (*IAAL*, 193). He bitterly regrets his inherited association with the relics of the past. He is now learning "the art of mixing and giving injections" (*IAAL*, 192). A cool, calculating individual, the Imam is fully aware of the material benefits of his new practice: "There was a good living in it; it was where the future lay" (*IAAL*, 192). The self-abnegated Imam locates the West's superiority in its destructive power: "They're not an ignorant people. They're advanced, they're educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs" (*IAAL*, 235). The provoked narrator retorts: "we have guns and tanks and bombs [...]. We've even had a nuclear explosion. You won't be able to match that even in a hundred years" (*IAAL*, 235-236). Recognizing the irony of the situation, he sees himself and the Imam as "delegates from two superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence" (*IAAL*, 236). The two between them show in action the ubiquity of the Eurocentrism of the colonized. Such is the universality of the language of power that even for "an old-fashioned village Imam" (*IAAL*, 237) and the narrator, "a student of the 'humane' sciences" (*IAAL*, 237), "demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences" (*IAAL*, 236). Ethics

and divine sanction for it are extinct. While "non-Western" and sometimes "anti-Western" views "involve an emphatic seeking of independence from colonial dominance", explains Amartya Sen, "they are, in fact, thoroughly foreign-dependent — in a negative and contrary form. The dialectics of the captivated mind can lead to a deeply biased and parasitically reactive self-perception"(91). Thus the colonial masters of yesterday, continues Sen, continue to exert an enormous influence on the postcolonial mind today leading to the "dissolution of the centuries of dialogue" (*IAAL*, 236) that had linked two Oriental civilizations.

The narrator discovers in Nashawy a palimpsest of migration and inter-cultural crossing since medieval times:

> The area around Nashawy had never been a rooted kind of place; at times it seemed to be possessed of all the busy restlessness of an airport's transit lounge. Indeed, a long history of travel was recorded in the very names of the area's 'families': they spoke of links with distant parts of the Arab world — cities in the Levant, the Sudan and the Maghreb. That legacy of transience had not ended with their ancestors either: in Zaghloul's own generation dozens of men had been 'outside', working in the sheikhdoms of the Gulf, or Libya, while many others had been to Saudi Arabia on the Hajj, or to the Yemen, as soldiers — some men had passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas. (*IAAL*, 174)

The conflation of the village of Nashawy with an airline transit lounge, believes James Clifford, is an ideal image of postmodernity: "Everyone is on the move, and they have been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel"("The Transit Lounge of Culture", 8). What the passage highlights is that border-crossings and cosmopolitanism are not simply postmodern phenomena. Even during the twelfth century, a small town named Qus was, in Ben Yiju's estimation, "admirably cosmopolitan" (*IAAL*, 174). The pressure of cosmopolitan business negotiations compelled the Indian and the Arab traders in medieval Malabar to forge a pidgin language that they could all understand. Amitav Ghosh himself observes in his essay "The Slave of MS H.6" that globality was first experienced in the periphery and refuses "to ascribe to European intervention a phenomenon that almost certainly preceded it. Considering the volume and extent of trade in the Indian Ocean, it would seem likely that a trade language was already in use there since long before the arrival of the Portuguese" (*II*, 226).The difference between medieval cosmopolitanism and its postmodern legacy lies in volume, a point explicitly stated by Said: "the difference between earlier exiles and those of our

own times is, it bears stressing, scale: our age — with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers — is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" ("Reflections on Exile", 357). The narrator experiences this large rate of mass migration and the fruits of global capitalism in rural Egypt. The war between Iraq and Iran in the late 1970s and early 1980s initiated this large rate of mass immigration from Egypt dissolving the two nations: "People had left in truckloads: it was said at one time that there were maybe two or three million Egyptian workers in Iraq, as much as a sixth of that country's population" (*IAAL*, 293). Abu Ali, presented as a capitalist machine, "the image of an engorged python" (*IAAL*, 297), utilizes the opportunity of the economic prospects in Iraq during the Gulf War to the fullest. While the father is a capitalist, the sons are the abstract labour. Such are "his gleanings from that distinct war" (*IAAL*, 299) that when the narrator moves from the ground floor to the newly constructed top floor of Abu Ali's residence, he "was assaulted by a sudden sensation of dislocation, as though I had vaulted between different epochs" (*IAAL*, 298). The winds of change have blown over the entire village of Nashawy rearranging the relations between different kinds of people. Families, once considered the poorest in the village, have prospered the most inverting the power dynamics in the village. Shaikh Musa once explained the phenomenon of leaving to the narrator: "'Why does anyone leave? [...] The opportunity comes and it has to be taken'"(*IAAL*,298). The past-present parallel in respect of migration is established by the narrator in his observation that Ben Yiju journeyed eastwards to avail himself of "the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer" (*IAAL*, 153). As a person who could not migrate to war-time Iraq and make a fortune, the once energetic Jabir now hopelessly laments: "'I missed the best opportunities'" (*IAAL*, 311). Such is the irony of life that while the Iraqis are dying on the war-front, the Egyptians are amassing a great profit at the expense of their blood. As Ustaz Sabry philosophically comments that this wealth is "tainted, 'forbidden' money, and its price will be paid later, some day" (*IAAL*, 321).

Nabeel and Ismail are a study in contrast. While the former was quiet, thoughtful and reflective, the latter was spontaneous and jocular. Even in physical features, they sharply differed from each other. The narrator discerns in them a "kind of complementarity" and "a close-stitched seam of differences" (*IAAL*, 148). Nabeel and Ismail have migrated to Iraq, leaving behind their lineage, Ali

and Hussein who "like Nabeel and Ismail before them, were best friends, and were studying at the same college as their brothers had" (*IAAL*, 324). Walking with them, the narrator experiences a sense of timelessness as the past merges with the present:

> It was eerie crossing the village with the two of them beside me. It was as though a moment in time had somehow escaped the hurricane of change that had swept Nabeel and Ismail away to Iraq: the two cousins so much resembled their brothers that I could have been walking with ghosts. (*IAAL*, 324)

It is Ismail who returns home from Iraq narrating incidents about the animosity between the Iraqis and the Egyptians. In a world much different from medieval cultural assimilation, the Iraqis nurture a grudge against the Egyptians because they "have taken our jobs and our money and grown rich while we're fighting and dying" (*IAAL*, 352). The Egyptians' celebration of the victory of their national football team over Algeria is viewed by the Iraqis as a deviation from normal life and "they responded by attacking them on the streets, often with firearms — well-trained in war, they fell upon the jubilant, unarmed crowds of Egyptian workers" (*IAAL*, 353). In this seething cauldron when the Egyptian immigrants set sail for their homeland, Nabeel decides to stay on a bit longer, so that the modernization of his house in Nashawy could be completed, a decision which proves quite costly. Reflecting on Nabeel's predicament in his essay "An Egyptian in Baghdad" which formed "the basis of the epilogue of *In An Antique Land*", Amitav Ghosh sighs that "many of my friends had been trapped on the shores of the Red Sea" (*II*, viii). At the end of the essay, he observes that "we were crowded around the television set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every face we could see. But there was nothing to be seen except crowds: Nabeel had vanished into the pages of the epic exodus" (*II*, 45). The novel concludes on a slightly different note: "Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History" (*IAAL*, 353). The emphasis on "History" signifies the narrator's concern about how the broad sweep of historical incidents engulfs the lives of ordinary individuals, the anonymous subalterns, who are untraceable. This is a neat encapsulation of the paradox of History — it not only records into permanence but also dissolves into anonymity.

When the medieval temper of cultural assimilation is replaced by cultural segregation, the narrator perceives the continuity between the past and the present

still unabated in the sphere of religion and legends. The legend about the miracle surrounding the Bhuta shrine in Mangalore reminds the narrator about "a very similar story" (*IAAL*, 266) about the shrine of Sidi Abu-Kanaka in Nashawy. The mowlid or event of Sidi Abu-Hasira is also a mark of religious syncretism because he was venerated by both Jews and Muslims. When interrogated by a police officer about his visit to the tomb of Sidi Abu-Hasira on the outskirts of Damanhour the narrator is suddenly confronted with the evanescence of a great event in human civilization:

> 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; [...] I had been caught straddling a border, unaware that the writing of History had predicated its own self-fulfilment. (*IAAL*, 339-340)

The bewildered narrator is ruthlessly reminded about the separatist stance of Western academic methodology and modern ethos. The police officer who interrogates the narrator and emphasizes the difference between religion and superstition champions the epistemological apparatus of Western modernity: "I discovered that his understanding of the map of modern knowledge was much more thorough than mine" (*IAAL*, 341-342). The site of interrogation itself signifies that although power has been transferred from the colonial West to the post-colonial bourgeois, the legacy of Western modernity still continues undiminished: "the building seemed very much in the style of colonial offices in India with high ceilings and arched windows: it took no great prescience to tell that it had probably been initiated into its current uses during the British occupation of Egypt" (*IAAL*, 338). When the narrator researches in American libraries on Sidi Abu-Hasira and looks for information about him under categories like "religion" and "Judaism", he discovers how information about this syncretic medieval culture "had long been wished away" by the material realities of "the process of shaping them to suit the patterns of the Western academy" (*IAAL*, 342). Sidi Abu-Hasira finds a place on the shelves of "anthropology" and "folklore"and not mainstream "religion". He learns that Sidi Abu-Hasira belongs to a famous "Zeddikim — the Jewish counterparts of Islamic marabouts and Sufi saints"

(*IAAL*, 342), respected equally by Jews and Muslims. Uncannily, the narrator "had never known all those years that in defiance of the enforcers of History, a small remnant of Bomma's world had survived, not far from where I had been living" (*IAAL*, 342). Pressing forward with his research in Philadelphia, the indefatigable researcher comes across a medieval document, in Ben Yiju's distinctive handwriting, amidst a store of Geniza documents. This document proves that Bomma accompanied Ben Yiju to Egypt in the last years of his life. The anonymity of History had claimed Bomma just as it claims Nabeel. The humanist anthropologist retrieves "the last testament to the life of Bomma, the toddy-loving fisherman from Tulunad" (*IAAL*, 349) and captures the full-lived truth about the Slave, underlining the limitations of a scientifically pure social anthropology. The reader nourishes the idea that just as the narrator could trace the alternative history of Bomma, Nabeel's too can be retrived from anonymity.