CHAPTER-II

INDEFATIGABLE NARRATIVE RESEARCH

(Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma & In an Antique Land)

*Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma* gives a rather misleading impression to the reader who glances at its title. It seems that it is Ghosh’s narrative description of his travels through these two countries after this achieved independence from colonialism. However, as one progresses along, the first impression soon gives way to a serious realization that the book defies conventional literary classification of a ‘travelogue’ or ‘travel-writing.’ In fact, it is an imaginative rendering of complex responses of a scholarly researcher and sensitive writer of the agonizing process of the evolving of a nation for two South Asian Countries Cambodia and Burma in their postcolonial phase. These responses make, no doubt, a fascinating reading have been rendered in elegant and rhythmic prose revealing the harsh realities of the political, socio-cultural, economic and ethno-regional problems that these countries were confronted with after throwing off the yokes of slavery. In sooth, these countries are still grappling with the problematic of evolution of their distinct national identities; and the writer appears to hold a mirror to the other nation-states in the region and the continent. This thought-provoking and disturbing book is divided into three chapters with first and third chapters covered in about 50 pages each and the middle — one genuinely sandwiched into only eleven pages.

Chapter one titled ‘Dancing in Cambodia’ begins with an anthropological description of the sea-journey of King Sisowath along with his entourage of several dozen princes, courtiers, officials and most importantly a troupe of nearly hundred
classical dancers and musicians from the royal palace at Phnom Penh. For the king, the journey that started on 10 May 1906, at two in the afternoon, aboard a French liner called Amiral-Kersaint, was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream and desire to visit France. For others it was a cherished opportunity to step out of their own land and to stage the first ever performance of Cambodian classical dance in Europe, at the exposition colonial in Marseille, an immense fairyland of an exhibition centered on the theme of France’s colonial possessions. The ‘colonized’ situation of the dancers is sensitively portrayed in these tantalizing snippets of information of which the Marseille newspapers were often full: “it was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion ever after wards; that their lives revolved entirely around the royal family; that several were the king’s mistresses and had even borne him children; tha: some of them had never stepped out of the palace grounds until this trip to France.” (3)

However, *Dancing in Cambodia*, like other great narrative works, may be read from a variety of perspectives and thematic levels: it may be considered as the narration of a series of encounters, but also as a collection of old and contemporary travel accounts, and even as a narrative essay on the “victims of history” or as an anti-colonial manifesto. *Dancing in Cambodia* opens with a double encounter, fraught with consequences. It was the enthusiastic encounter of colonized ruler with the colonizer of his own country, during the acme of the Orientalist vogue, with the “lithe, athletic women” (Ghosh 4), whose androgynous beauty fascinated common people and even artists like “the great Rodin...into ecstasies over the little virgins of Phnom Penh,
whose immaterial silhouettes he drew with infinite love, recognizing in their spontaneity the “infancy of Europe” (Ghosh 37).

Accompanying these smart dancers, as their supervisor and head, was the eldest of the King’s daughters, Princess Soumphady, whose royal manners and style of dress had an electrifying effect on the Marseillais Crowd. Though she admired very enthusiastically the clothes and hats of the French women, yet she politely declined the suggestion to wear clothes like those. This was perhaps an indication of the sense of pride that she and other Cambodian women felt about their distinctive attire suited for their variety of dances. Ghosh learns the remaining story of King Sisowath and Princess Soumphady’s 1906 journey to France through Chea Samy, a sister-in-law of Pol Pot and a teacher at the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, in 1993. The car-journey with his friend Molyka who was a mid-level Civil servant and a poised, attractive woman in her early thirties was quite a hazardous one, as it was four months before the countrywide elections to be held under the auspices of United Nation’s Transitional Authority in Cambodia. The personal interview and encounter with Chea Samy reveals the latter’s connection with the royal palace as also with the renowned revolutionary Pol Pot who never showed any favours to his relatives during the period of his rule. Amitav Ghosh describes the situation thus:

Chea Samy was working in a communal Kitchen at the time, cooking and washing dishes. Late that year some party workers stuck a poster on the walls of the Kitchen: they said it was a picture of their leader, Pol Pot. She knew who it was the moment she set eyes on the picture. That was how she discovered that the leader of the terrifying,
inscrutable ‘Organization,’ Angkar, that ruled their lives, was none other than little Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) (14).

After ‘breaking’ of Cambodia by the Vietnamese in 1979, the country became “like a shattered slate: before you could think of drawing lines on it, you had to find the pieces and fit them together.” (16) In the post revolution period, when the ministry of culture launched an effort to locate the trained classical dancers and teachers who had survived, one of the well-known surviving dancers described their sensitive position in these words: “I was like a smoker who gives up smoking ...I would dream of dance when I was alone or at night. You could get through the day because of the hard work. It was the nights that were really difficult; we would lie awake wondering who was going to be called out next. That was when I would dance, in my head.” (17) As if to reinforce the significant role of culture and art in the process of national reconstruction even in the most trying circumstances, Amitav Ghosh tells the readers:

Like everyone around her, Chea Sarny too had started all over again—at the age of sixty, with her health shattered by the years of famine and hard labour. Working with quiet, dogged persistence, she and a handful of other dancers and musicians slowly brought together a ragged, half-starved lunch of orphans and castaways, and with the discipline of their long, rigorous years of training they began to resurrect the art that Princess Soumphady and Luk Khun Meak had passed on to them in that long-ago world, when King Sisowath reigned. Out of the ruins around them, they began to create the means of denying Pol Pot his victory. (18)
Shifting the narrative back and forth, Ghosh highlights the problems of Cambodia’s colonization by France as also the rise of Pol Pot, Khmer Rouge, other minority groups resorting to Guerrilla war-tactics, and attack by Vietnam, through the strategies of contrast and comparison. Thus the complexity of the political, social, economic, cultural and ethnic problems gets concretized with the help of analytical portrayals of Norodom Sihanouk, Minister Thiounn and his grandson Thiounn Mumm, Pol Pot and his brother Loth Sieri, King Sisowath, Son Sann, Hun Sen, Khieu Samphan, Rodin at all. In spite of all the political turmoil and chaotic-anarchic situations, one thing that kept the spirit of the ‘nation’ alive in Cambodia is its rich cultural heritage of music and dance. This becomes evident from the vivid description of the cultural festival that was held in Phnom Penh in 1988 amidst the destruction of social, economic, cultural and political fabric of the country:

But people flocked to the theatre the day the festival began. Onesta Caipene, a Catholic relief worker from Italy was one of the handful of foreigners then living in Phnom Penh. She was astonished at the response: the city was in a shambles; there was debris everywhere, spilling out of the houses on to the pavements, the streets were jammed with pillaged cars, there was no money and very little food—’I could not believe that in a situation like that people would be thinking music and dance.’ But still they came pouring in, and the theatre was filled far beyond its capacity.... When the first musicians came onstage, she [a relief worker] heard sobs all around her. Then, when the dancers appeared, in their shabby, hastily made costumes, suddenly, everyone was crying; old people, young people, soldiers, children—’you could have sailed out of there in a boat.’...
They could not stop crying; people went through the entire length of the performance. It was a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living. (52)

Thus, Amitav Ghosh cleverly documents the history of isolation by the Khmer Rouge and its consequences through the opening section of this book. Moreover, using examples from history, Ghosh shows that no previous regime had made such systematic and sustained attacks on the middle class. Ghosh also related Cambodia's civil war to contemporary politics. He too expresses the view that "Cambodia's was not a civil war in the same sense as Somalia's or the former Yugoslavia: it was a war on history itself, an experiment in the re-invention of society." (10)

Conversing with people who relate anecdotes about their family history, is another device used by Ghosh to convey his impressions. It also gives the discourse, for the form of a story. For instance, Ghosh learns the story of King Sisowoth and Princess Sounphady's journey to France in 1906 through Chea Samy, a sister-in-law of Pol Pot and a teacher at the school of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1993. The interview with Chea Samy reveals her connection with the royal palace and Pol Pot. And also, the French painter Rodin gives a human dimension to the unfurling of the socio-political history of Cambodia from May 1906 till 1993. The dates are significant, as in 1906 Sisowath and a hundred classical dancers set sail from Saigon to stage the first ever performance of Cambodian classical dance in Europe, at the exposition Coloniale in Marseille. The year 1993 is very significant as it was the year that countrywide elections were held under the auspices of the UN's Transitional
Authority in Cambodia known by its acronym, UNTAC. The elections, the willpower of the people during duress and their supreme love for music and dance represent the possible resurgence and redemption of Cambodia. Amitav Ghosh cleverly shows that despite the political turmoil and prevailing anarchy, the spirit of the nation is maintained by its rich cultural legacy. This is evident from a vivid description of a cultural festival held in Phnom Penh in 1988. That’s how, towards the end of the first section of his book, Amitav Ghosh shows that the passion for dance and music symbolized the politics of resurgence in Cambodia. The author sums up this mood as “a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living.” (52)

The theme of resurgence is also fully explored in the second chapter entitled ‘Stories in Stones’, Amitav Ghosh explores the significance of an important cultural symbol of the twelfth century temple ‘Angkor Wat’ in the cultural life and ethos of Cambodia. In this brief section, Amitav Ghosh shows how this architectural wonder became a unifying symbol for Cambodians, including politicians of different ideologies. Yet, as Ghosh shows, the five towered image of Angkor Wat is not a symbol of religious unity. Buddhism is the dominant religion of the majority of the Cambodians, so the shrine at the main temple of Angkor Wat attracts both believers and tourists. However, as Ghosh shows, Angkor Wat is not as the Golden Temple at Amritsar is to the Sikhs or the mosques at Mecca and Madina are to the Muslims or St. Peter Church at the Vatican to the Roman Catholics, a symbol of spiritual faith and renewal. Paradoxically, for the Cambodians. It is also not just a “uniquely powerful symbol of the romance of lost civilization; of ancient glory,
devoured by time” (56). Therefore, it is not just a religious symbol but also a symbol of national pride. Ghosh shows how images of Angkor Wat, “appear to be omnipresent” (56).

This is true in a perfectly literal sense: with every step, a visitor takes in the immense twelfth-century Cambodian temple he finds himself moving counters in a gigantic abacus of story telling. The device is a vast one—it is said to be the largest single religious edifice in the world—and it provides its own setting as well as a cast of galactic dimensions. The setting is Mt Meru, the sacred mountain of ancient Indian myth, whose seven carefully graded tiers provide the blueprint for the temple’s form. The cast is the entire pantheon of gods, deities, sages and prophets with which that cosmos is peopled. (54)

Angkor Wat is, for example undisputedly a temple, yet it never figures in anything to do with religion, or indeed in any context that might be called ‘traditional’ or old-fashioned. Its likeness appears instead on certain factory-produced commodities, like beer; it is stamped on uniforms, civil and military; it figures on the logos of large corporations, like banks; indeed, the erstwhile Kampuchea Airlines even succeeded in transforming this most earth bound of structures into a symbol of flight, by lending it a pair of wings. (56)

As an anthropologist, Ghosh found out that the legend of the accidental discovery of Angkor Wat by the nineteenth-century French explorer Henri Mohout is a kind of myth no more and no less true than any of the others inscribed upon the temple. Moreover, commenting on the story of the ‘restoration’ of the temple by
applying the most scientific methods available, with help from Indian archaeologists also, the writer reinforces the paradoxical stance of this central cultural symbol of Cambodia:

The story is a familiar one, for in his century many other parts of the world have seen their present being technologically and symbolically superseded by the relics of their past. However, in Cambodia the process went further than elsewhere. For an entire generation of Cambodians, including politicians as different in ideology as Prince Sihanouk, son Sann and Pol Pot, Angkor Wat becomes a symbol of the modernizing nation-state. It became the opposite of itself: an icon that represented a break with the past—a token of the country’s belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary world. Thus the beer, banks, airlines and of course, flays. (60)

The temple is thus used as a political symbol. As a symbol of resurgence, it is also woven into the flags of political parties, which contested the 1993 general elections. In this complex, brief but fascinating travelogue, Amitav Ghosh cleverly reveals how the magnificent edifice of Angkor Wat, which becomes a symbol of national pride hope for an entire population.

The third and concluding chapter of Amitav Ghosh’s book is titled ‘At Large in Burma;’ It is an attempt to explore the history of his ‘roots’ by listening to the stories of other countries: ‘places by his parents, and relatives had lived in or visited before the birth of the Republic of India, in 1947.’ He writes:
To me, the most intriguing of these stories were those that my family carried out of Burma. I suspect that this was partly because Burma had become a kind of lost world in the early '60s when I was old enough to listen to my relatives' stories. It was in 1962 that General Ne Win, the man who would be Burma's longtime dictator, seized power in a coup. Almost immediately, he slammed the shutters and switched off the lights: Burma became the dark house of the neighbourhood huddled behind an impenetrable, overgrown fence. It was to remain shuttered for almost three decades. (65)

Memories of Burma were mainly kept alive by Ghosh's family through an aunt and her husband nicknamed 'Prince' who left Burma for Calcutta in 1942, in the last, panic-stricken weeks before the Japanese Army marched into Rangoon. However, the Prince spoke nostalgically about the magnificence of Burma and called it 'the richest country in Asia except for Japan' where people were very generous and hospitable to the strangers. The author discovers that 'Burmese nationalism practically started with anti-Indian riots.' (67)

Amitav Ghosh then analyses like a true anthropologist as to what went wrong and how Burma was made, after fifty years, one of the United Nation's ten least developed nations on earth, and a byword for repression, xenophobia and civil abuse. The decline started, he was told with the assassination of Aung San on 19 July 1947, though he was the country's acknowledged leader and the hero of its independence movement. Suu Kyi, as an eminent human rights activist and a 1991 Noble Peace Prize Awardee, still living in
a kind of house arrest in Rangoon, is Aung San’s worthy daughter and she was only two at the time of her father’s assassination. Since it attained its independence in January 1948, Burma has seen civil wars, communist uprisings, military coups and continual fighting’s amongst its sizable minority groups—the Karen, the Rakhine, the Shan, the Mon, and several smaller groups. The Barman’s are otherwise predominantly Buddhist and form two-third of the country’s population.

During the colonial times, the British recounting policies favored minority groups over the ethnic Burman’s. The British Burma Army was thus formed largely of the units such as Karen Rifles and the Kachin Rifles. Consequently, after independence, civil war was inevitable with insurgents outnumbering the government troops who in any case were inexperienced. Interpreting the subsequent events of civil strife and political turmoil, Amitav Ghosh writes:

It takes a military dictator to believe that symbols are inert and can be manipulated at will. Forty years after his assassination, Aung San has his revenge. In a strange, secular reincarnation, his daughter, Suu Kyi, came back to haunt those who had sought to make use of his death. In 1988, when Burma’s decades of discontent culminated in an anti-military uprising, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged from obscurity as one of the country’s most powerful voices, the personification of Burma’s democratic resistance to military rule. (74)
Peaceful resistance to the rule of the military Junta still continues to be the mainstay of Suu Kyi’s non-confrontist struggle. She holds regular public meetings at her residence in the University Avenue. She answers questions from the public on all subjects ranging from food and health to politics and literature. But it appears to Ghosh that in spite of her mass appeal, SLORC (State Law and order Restoration Council) has succeeded in keeping its hold on power as they have succeeded in creating systems of surveillance that are unparalleled in the scope of their inclusiveness. In mustering resources and the expertise required to operate complex systems of social control, Burma’s military rulers are an exception and that appears to be the reason why they have been able to hold on so long to power in spite of Suu Kyi’s popular appeal and mass base. Suu Kyi is not even aggressively critical of Burma’s observer status at the ASEAN’, which seems to some an endorsement of the military regime. Her basic conciliatory approach and tone permeates through her response.

I don’t quite understand why one talks about constructive engagement as being such a problem. Each government has its own policy, and we accept that this is the policy of the ASEAN nations. I sometimes think that this problem is made out to be much bigger than it really is ... Just because (these governments) have decided on a policy of constructive engagement; there is no need for us to think of them as our enemies. I don’t think this is a case of us and them. (112)
This Gandhian approach of Suu Kyi, it seems, equips her with much needed moral strength to weigh things objectively. Her optimism reflected in an answer to Ghosh's question epitomizes the philosophy of a leader committed whole-heartedly to the ideals of peace, non-violence and achievement of objectives through noble means, however delayed these may be: 'I have always told you... that we will win.... That we will establish a democracy in Burma, and I stand by that. However, as to when, I cannot predict. I've always said that to you.'(113-14)

In the perceptive analysis of the socio-politico-cultural crises in Cambodia and Burma, presented in extremely readable and elegant prose, Amitav Ghosh has presented, by implication, a prophetic vision for India also in the context of the complex process of national reconstruction. The use of history, which interfaces fiction by a work of art, is familiar territory for Amitav Ghosh. He has blended both history and politics in his earlier novels like *Shadow Lines* (1988) and *In an Antique Land* (1992). In his travelogue, Ghosh has made the past and present merge effortlessly into each other, a technique he has used very effectively in his third novel, *In an Antique Land*. However, it is a work in which there is a blending of fact and fiction and a coalescing of many areas of human knowledge such as history, anthropology, philology, sociology and religion. K.C.Belliappa in his learned essay shows that in this novel, Ghosh demonstrates, "how an excursion into the past is no escape from the present, but a coming to grips with the present realities of living."(65)(K.C.Belliappa, "Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*: An
excursion into Time Past and Time present," *The Postmodern Indian English Novel*, ed. (1996: 65). Here Ghosh uses the technique of juxtaposing the medieval and modern worlds of the twelfth and twentieth centuries in two different civilizations of India and Cambodia or Burma or Egypt, with their diverse cultures of Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. Through this clever fictional discourse, Ghosh illustrates the need for human understanding and religious tolerance, which he considers as imperative in a world full of strife due to religious obscurantism and fanaticism. As Belliappa shows, the reconstruction of history by Ghosh has made *In an Antique Land* "a brilliant metaphor of our times."(65)

The trend of blending history and politics in travel writings was set by V.S.Naipaul, over three decades ago. Ghosh has emulated this trend in *Dancing in Cambodia; At Large in Burma*. Which is a sensitive insight into the postcolonial experiences and politics of isolation, violence and hatred in two volatile South-East Asian nations, Cambodia and Burma (now Myanmar).

This small book is a collection of three essays previously published in journals: "*Dancing in Cambodia*," from *Granta* 44 (Summer of 1993), "Stories in Stones," from *The Observer Magazine*, 16 January, 1994, and "*At Large in Burma*," previously published in *The New Yorker* on 12 August, 1996. The first essay contains several illustrations by the French artist Auguste Rodin from his encounter with the dancers who are the subject of Ghosh's essay. It
typifies the writer's tendency to illustrate bold historical themes through simple individual meetings.

In fact, "Dancing in Cambodia" interweaves two historical encounters. The first is the visit to Marseilles in June of 1906 of King Sisowath of Cambodia and a troupe of nearly a hundred classical dancers and musicians from the royal palace at Phnom Penh. The Second is Amitav Ghosh's visit to Cambodia in January of 1993 in search of Pol Pot's sister-in-law, who was said to be one of the country's greatest dancers— in fact, a national treasure.

Contemporary newspaper accounts suggest that the French were entranced by the exotic King and even more so by the dancers. Their emotional and curious response is perhaps a classic example of orientalisation: "For weeks now," writes Ghosh,

the Marseilles newspapers had been full of tantalizing snippets of information: it was said that the dancers entered the palace as children and spent their lives in seclusion ever afterwards; that their lives revolved entirely around the royal family; that several were the King's mistresses and had even borne him children; that some of them had never stepped out of the palace grounds until this trip to France. (3)

In fact, whereas "they had expected perhaps a troop of heavily-veiled, voluptuous Salomes, they were not quite prepared for the lithe, athletic women they encountered.... nor indeed, was the rest of Europe" (4).
Interestingly, so indescribable did they appear, so far outside the expected boundaries of categorization, that one observer later wrote that, "they seem to belong to no definite sex" (4). The visit to France by the troupe was Cambodia’s contribution to the "Exposition Colonial," which celebrated France’s colonial possessions. They were simply one of the many wonders that fascinated the French who took the occasion to reflect on their global empire. As Ghosh notes, "there was little by way of exotic and opulent fantasy that the exhibition did not offer, from Tunisian palaces to timber-studded West African mosques and Indo-Chinese pavilions" (2).

Ghosh goes on, however, to describe King Sisowath as a neo-colonial collaborator who sought to imitate the French, whereas the brother whom he succeeded to the throne, Norodom, had been for forty years an annoyance to the French. Sisowath’s intermediary with the French was his interpreter, minister Thiounn. His grandson, Thiounn Mumm, later became immensely influential among the Cambodian elite who studied in France. Ghosh sees his complex intermediary role as "immediately recognizable to any one who has ever inhabited the turbulent limbo of the Asian or African student in Europe – that curious circumstance of social dislocation and emotional turmoil that for more than a century now has provided the site for some of the globe’s most explosive political encounters" (24). Note how Ghosh sets the stage, peoples it with fascinating characters, and then rather broadly interprets the play as paradigmatic of many similar events throughout history. Among those who came under Thiounn Mumm’s sway was one Saloth Sar. In 1952, Thiounn
Mumm apparently inducted Saloth Sar into the French Communist party, with hideous future consequences.

As Ghosh recounts his tale of past events, he returns us to the time in which he personally enters the historical chain of events. He hopes to speak with Chea Sarny because she is old enough to have known King Sisowath—and, more importantly, Princess Soumphady. Princess Soumphady had been in charge of the dancers, and in fact had been a surrogate mother for them; thus, Chea Sarny would be a direct connection to the country’s terpsichorean tradition. A woman named Molyka is Ghosh’s friend, and it is she who will escort him to Chea Sarny. Molyka is a thirty-one-year-old mid-level civil servant who had braved a great deal in her own life: in 1975, when she was thirteen, the Khmer Rouge had taken Phnom Penh and she and her extended family of fourteen people were evacuated to a labour camp in the province of Kompong Thom. Three years later, ten of these were dead, including her father, two brothers, and a sister. Her mother was now a terrified woman; her brother was guilt-ridden for having accidentally betrayed their father. Understandably, Molyka was quite hesitant to meet Chea Sarny, since the dancer, after all, was Pol Pot’s sister-in-law.

When Chea Sarny was a child, dance was one of the few means by which a commoner could gain entry into the palace. She was taken there in 1925 when she was six. When King Sisowath died two years later, his son’s favourite mistress, Luk Khun Meak, who was also a dancer, brought to the palace several of her own villagers, including Chea Sarny’s future husband.
and his brother, known as Saloth Sar. He was later to be known only as Pol Pot. Because of these palace connections, Saloth Sar was given a scholarship to study electronics in Paris in 1949. While there, he was heavily influenced by several well-known leftists and communists, and upon his return three years later to Cambodia, he began working for the Indochina Communist Party. In 1963, he disappeared, and “emerged” in 1975 as Pol Pot, when the Khmer Rouge seized power. Again, notice how Ghosh weaves individual lives, often of characters whom traditional history has overlooked, into an intricate tapestry of connections.

In 1979, the Vietnamese brought about the collapse of Pol Pot’s regime, and the many evacuees began straggling back to their villages. During the intense period of his reign, however, as many as 90 per cent of the country’s pre-revolution artists were killed. As Ghosh puts it: “it was a war on history itself, an experiment in the re-invention of society. No regime in history had ever before made so systematic and sustained an attack on the middle class. Yet, if the experiment was proof of anything at all, it was ultimately of the indestructibility of the middle class, of its extraordinary tenacity and resilience; its capacity to preserve its forms of knowledge and expression through the most extreme kinds of adversity” (10). Why does he draw this conclusion? Since many of the survivors had to invent imaginary histories for themselves during the Pol Pot years (in order to avoid extermination), the time after wards was one of personals struggle to remember who, in fact, they were. At the same time, it was a period of
reconstruction of the artistry and culture of the nation. In Ghosh’s words, “they had to start from the beginning, literally, like ragpickers, piecing their families their roofs, their lives together from the little that was left” (18). In reinventing Cambodia’s culture, “they began to create the means of denying Pol Pot his Victory” (18).

Ghosh blames the French for a good bit of Pol Pot’s extremis, starting with the racism the madman may have picked up from them. In any case, Ghosh describes the Khmer Rouge agenda as racist nationalism aimed at Cambodia’s Vietnamese minority. He quotes the dictator’s brother as believing that the troubles began when Saloth Sar (soon to become “Pol Pot”) went off to Paris. The author then makes an interesting comparison between Pol Pot and King Sisowath – and broadens his observation still further. “The trip to France,” he writes,

‘the dream of his whole life,’ evidently cast King Sisowath’s mind into the same kind of turmoil, the same tumult of shock and bewilderment that has provoked generations of displaced students – the Gandhi’s, the Senghor’s, and the Kenyatta’s, amongst thousands of their less illustrious countrymen – to close their doors upon the cold unfamiliarity of wintry Western cities and lock themselves into their rooms to pour their hearts out in letters, recording their impressions for those they had left at home.”(39)
The émigrés he mentions are strikingly different from Saloth Sar, are they not? In fact, Pol Pot may have locked himself away in his Parisian garret and spent a lot of his time thinking and writing, but he shared very few of his thoughts with his family. His mind turned inward, towards a fundamentalist apocalyptic vision of social change. He admired the French Revolution's Robespierre, and Ghosh quotes the playwright who had that madman announce that "Terror is an emanation of virtue" (50).

King Sisowath chose the opposite path toward social transformation: rather than burning his culture to the ground, he offered an exhortation to his countrymen to imitate French technology. The King's choice seems to have been the one that is now more influential in former colonies, but Ghosh, while clearly repulsed by Pol Pot, nonetheless concludes that "no one is likely to thank" Sisowath for his accommodating attitude toward the colonizer (42).

Happily, Ghosh ends his essay on an upbeat note, recording that the dance tradition that King Sisowath had brought to Marseilles and that Pol Pot had nearly succeeded in obliterating, was restored to its former glory in 1988. Chea Samy and a few others like her had managed to pass along what they knew, and in that year, classical Cambodian dance was once again performed in Phnom Penh. Thus, the storyteller shows his knack for leading us back in time, through various overgrown footpaths, demonstrating interesting forgotten incidents that daily intersect, and then bringing us comfortably back to the spot where we began.
The second essay in the book, "stories in Stone," is prompted by Ghosh's visit to Angkor Wat, the twelfth Century Cambodian temple. He provocatively describes this building, the largest single religious edifice in the world, as "a monument to the power of the story" (54) – Principally because it is encrusted with religious iconography, and because its own history as a building is heavily overlain with the biographies of kings and other potentates. Ghosh is also fascinated by the paradoxical use to which the image of the building is put: the West sees it as stereotypical of the romance of lost civilizations, "of lost glory, devoured by time" (56), whereas in Cambodia itself it seems to represent modernity, of all things. At least, its image is reproduced on representations of such unlikely products as beer, flags, airlines, military uniforms, banks etc. Most striking to the author is the fact that the building is still used for religious purposes, though this less "modern" activity is tucked inconspicuously into a corner of the central courtyard and has been there, functioning in that capacity, for centuries. What was "discovered" by the French explorer Henri Mouhot in the nineteenth century was not this on going religious structure, but a mirror... of the Imperial State... For an entire generation of Cambodians..., it became the opposite of itself: an icon that represented a break with the past – a token of the country's belonging, not within the medieval, but rather the contemporary World. (60)

The third essay in the book, "At Large in Burma" is a reflection on the author's three meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi. In fact, the first encounter
was more than a meeting: in 1980, Ghosh and Aung San Suu Kyi were students at Oxford, and Ghosh remembers her as being a 35-year-old "leading a life of quiet, exiled domesticity on a leafy street in North Oxford, bringing up two sons, then aged seven and three, and writing occasional articles for scholarly journals" (75). He was surprised, therefore, to see her photograph in a magazine eight years later, speaking into a microphone in Rangoon. His second and third meetings with her were in late 1995, when he attended two of her weekend public meetings that she conducted from her gateside. These were first conducted during the house arrest that had been imposed in 1989 and then lifted in July of 1995. She had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, in absentia, in 1991. During his meeting with her in December of 1995, he had been struck by her public manner, which had none of the solemnity of demeanour that he had expected. In fact, she laughed a great deal. Ghosh’s third meeting with her, however, in July of 1996, suggested that something had changed. He found her animated, but no longer light-hearted. She seemed more guarded in her response to his questions, as if anticipating a future role outside her house, in the world of Politics.

Her involvement in the politics of her troubled country had been somewhat serendipitous, despite her lineage. Her mother had been Burma’s ambassador to India for some years; her father, General Aung San, had led the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League to a great victory in the 1947 election – but had been assassinated before he could take office. She, though, had
only been two years old at the time. She had returned to Rangoon in 1988 principally because her mother had suffered a stroke there. Events overtook her during the visit, and she seemed tailormade to stand as a connection to the last legitimate election in the country before the military had taken draconian control. In passing, one might notice once again Ghosh’s interest in tracing connections through history. After several riots against SLORC ("the State Law and Order Restoration Council"), she stepped forward for election, and was quickly put under house arrest.

Reflecting on the way that history can call unsuspecting people into roles of prominence, Ghosh uses the occasion of his visits to reflect on Burma’s recent unfortunate history. He begins with General Ne Win’s assumption of power in 1962, which closed the country to the outside world for three decades. During this time, it slipped into inaccessibility and its people lost touch with the passage of time. Burma had been the most developed country in the region, but fifty years later, on the eve of Ghosh’s visit to the country, it had become one of the United Nations’s ten least developed nations on earth. In the view of many, this tragic downward spiral was brought about by the civil strife that was waiting to erupt after the British pulled out (it had been British policy to favour minority groups over the ethnic Burmese). Many felt that General Aung San, who had negotiated the Panglong Agreement that offered a quasi-federal union to minority groups, was the only public figure who could avert a war. Upon his assassination and
the imposition of military rule, therefore, the country began tearing itself apart.

While in Burma Ghosh also decided to visit the Karenni, one of the small groups who had been seeking some form of independence all this time, and who had been chased into ever-diminishing nomadic lives by the military. "There are," he writes, "five major Karenni refugee camps and together they form a minuscule, tight-knit nation-on-the move, consisting of some six thousand people" (95). He asks himself this question: "What does it take... to sustain an insurgency for fifty years, to go on fighting a war that the rest of the world has almost forgotten?" (93). It is the sort of question that many ask these days, when some groups in unlikely places resist apparently overwhelming forces. Why do they do it?

It must be said that Ghosh does not offer a fully satisfying answer to the query, but he suggests that many of those involved in the conflict have by now forgotten the source of their grievance. They have simply accepted their current lives as the definition of themselves as a people. Others remember promises made to them (in this case, by the British) that subsequent Burmese governments refused to honour. However, perhaps surprisingly, Ghosh draws a rather pragmatic overall conclusion in the matter, a conclusion that has implications in conflicts elsewhere and, indeed, in several of the author’s novels: “Buma’s borders are undeniably arbitrary,” he writes,
...the product of a capricious colonial history. But colonial officials cannot reasonably be blamed for the arbitrariness of the lines they drew. All boundaries are artificial: there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ nation, which has journeyed through history with its boundaries and ethnic composition intact. In a region as heterogeneous as South-East Asia, any boundary is sure to be arbitrary. On balance, Burma’s best hopes for peace lie in maintaining intact the larger and more inclusive entity that history, albeit absent mindedly, bequeathed to its population almost half a century ago.

Some may be disappointed by such an apparently conservative reading of insurgency; others will respond favorably to its simple honesty. Meanwhile, in his reflections on Aung San Suu Kyi, Ghosh comes face to face with her ordinariness as a human being. She is not super-human in any sense, and that is where her challenge lies. He notes that he is like many of the tourists and those from the foreign press who attend her gateside meetings.

They were people like me; members of the World’s vast, newspaper-reading middle class, people who took it for granted that there are no heroes among us. But Suu Kyi had proved us wrong. She lived the same kind of life, attended the same classes, read the same books and magazines, and got into the same arguments. Moreover, she had shown us that the apparently soft and yielding world of books and words could sometimes forge a very fine kind of steel. (81-82)
There is nothing conservative in that conclusion. Typically Ghosh recognizes that the "subaltern" in the world and in history, is inevitably ignored-unless someone like Suu Kyi comes along.

In the post-modern world, politics is everywhere a matter of symbols, and the truth is that Suu Kyi is her own greatest political asset. It is only because Burma’s 1988-democracy movement had a symbol, personified in Suu Kyi that the world remembers it and continues to exert pressure on the current regime. (83)

Taken together, the three essays in this little book can be seen as the reporter’s notebook, the anthropologist’s series of observations, and the historian’s musings, which issue forth as *The Glass Palace* three years later. In that novel, the obvious political commitment of the essays is replaced by a richly imagined immersion in several generations of Indians and Burmese who live out their lives against the backdrop of history. As with so much of Ghosh’s writing, these two books demonstrate his mind dividing itself into two types of analysis and narration.

*In an Antique land* is an unusually constructed book that deals with themes of historical and cultural displacement, alienation, something we might call “subaltern Cosmopolitanism,” and the complexities of imagining another person’s view of reality. The book is not recognizable as a novel, nor is it simply an historical investigation: it is a new genre, something that blends an anthropological record with a travelogue, a diary, and perhaps some imagined sections. The effect that this has on the reader is
to force us to question whether particular events and characters are literally factual.

*In an Antique Land* shows that he is not a mere fictionist but an indefatigable researcher, a social anthropologist and a keen traveler as well. It bears testimony to Ghosh's interaction with at least four languages and cultures spread over three continents and across several countries unlike some of the other contemporary writer's his canvas keeps on conquering new images, giving expressions to new ideas and themes. In an interview, Ghosh talks about the book's theme and form: No this time I am not writing a novel. Not even sociology, history or Belles letters based on historical research. My new book cannot be described as any one of these. It's a strange sort of work within the parameters of history. "I have tried to capture a story, a narrative, without attempting to write a historical novel. You may say, as a writer I have ventured on a technical innovation" (Dhawan, 1999; 24).

Further complicating the categorization is the fact that the narrative is set in two time periods; the first is roughly the present, and the second is the twelfth century. The book is based on the investigative work, which Amitav Ghosh conducted during his studies at Oxford University, in the course of which he lived in northern Egypt and tracked down the history of Abraham Ben Yiju, a mid-twelth century trader, and his slave, to whom a few letters from the time refer. The first of these letters were written in 1148A.D. in Aden, by one Khalaf ibn Ishaq. It is also addressed to Ben Yiju in Mangalore in South-western India. 1148A.D was the same year that a large
Crusader army had assembled outside Damascus, so this was a time of heightened political tensions. The letter came to scholarly attention in 1942, when E. Strauss wrote about it. The slave is next mentioned in another of Khalaf ibn Ishaq’s Aden letters, actually a letter written nine years earlier but not written about until thirty-one years after Strauss’s first article. In both articles, there seems little concern about the serious political conflicts of the age, and all attention is instead focused on commerce. Ben Yiju is a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who had become wealthy through commerce with India, and who had died in Egypt. His various papers were discovered centuries later in a synagogue in Cairo. His slave is simply described in the letter as Ben Yiju’s Indian “slave and business agent, a respected member of his household” (18).

As it happens with many graduate students who are hunting for a topic for their thesis or dissertation, Ghosh chanced upon these letters in a library at Oxford in 1978 when he was working on social anthropology. As he describes them, they are “tiny threads, woven into the borders of a gigantic tapestry” (95). I think it is according to their suggestion Amitav Ghosh might have decided this name for this Novel as In an Antique Land; a demonstration of the manner in which the strands of the past connect to the present day. The threads become all consuming to the graduate student, though, offering themselves as a possible Rosetta Stone that will be a key to the unraveling of the “weave” of particular culture. Before he knew it, Ghosh had left the ivied walls of Oxford and was off to Tunisia for learning Arabic.
Then he was off to Lataifa, an Egyptian village a couple of hours south-east of Alexandria—little knowing at the time that this book, published some twelve years later.

Those who have undertaken a similar academic "journey" will quickly identify with the structure of this book, which begins with the actual journey to Egypt and an account of the author's response to his immediate surroundings, and then soon plunges into libraries, books, documents, and the imagined voyage back in time to the interlocking worlds of twelfth-century trade between Egypt and India. Much information in this book has to be speculation that raises as many questions as it answers. Ghosh's conclusions, like those of any researcher has to look into antiquities, remain tentative, but unlike many such researchers, his conclusions are richly imagined and engagingly described. Here one must understand how a graduate student might devote so much energy to two obscure individuals. I think in the course of human progress, after all, Ben Yiju and his slave are nobodies. Something about the process of their discovery, though, prompts Ghosh had brought his findings before a much larger audience than his dissertation committee.

This may involve the new sense of self that Ghosh develops as he experiences himself as an outsider. Like most immigrants, he felt alienated when he went to Britain for his studies, but I think that was nothing compared to the alienation that besets him in the Egyptian village of Nashawy. At one point, for example, Abu-Ali offers him some money to tide him over, but Ghosh is suspicious of the motivations;
I stared at the wallet, mesmerized, wondering whether custom demanded that I touch it or make some other symbolic gesture of acceptance obeisance, like falling at his feet. I saw myself shrinking, dwindling away into one of those tiny, terrified foreigners whom Pharaohs hold up by their hair in New Kingdom bas-reliefs. (30)

He imagines himself from outside and sees himself "shrinking, dwindling away", and this certainly rings true for anyone who is traveling in another country and has to negotiate another language and set of customs; it can be infantilizing. That may explain his further statement, in which he projects onto his hosts the image of a meanspirited Pharaoh. Ghosh as the student, in other words, seems as capable of Western tourist might be, finding the occasion to enact his learned images of ancient times in his encounters with presentday Egyptians. In such a projected scenario, the people of Nashawy are not simply insensitive to his different customs I think. In such circumstances, he experiences himself as someone almost without a voice, someone who cannot adequately represent himself in the greater society of the powerful "Pharaohs."

In Nashawy, Ghosh had “soon discovered that salaried people like Mustapha, rural mowazzafeen, were almost without exception absorbed in a concern which, despite its plural appearance, was actually single and individual religion and politics-so that the mention of the one always led to the other” (50). At one point, Mustapha goes so far as to apologise for some of his relatives who were working in a vegetable patch: ‘They are fellaheen,’
he said apologetically. “They don’t have much interest in religion or anything important” (51). Ghosh concludes that there is a kind of caste system in this regard: based upon Mustapha’s comments, at any rate, the poor are less interested in blending religion and politics than are the bourgeoisie Muslims. Thus, the anthropologist in Ghosh begins to distinguish between the interests of upper and lower castes in the Egyptian community—and seems to align himself with the lower caste that does not seek to oppress him with their religious beliefs.

As a “non-Muslim”, he becomes increasingly aware of and uncomfortable about the “exclusion” he feels. This is, of course, especially the case during Ramadan, when he is not called upon to fast, as are the others around him. He realizes that Muslims all over the world are undergoing the same ritual, and he is struck by the attraction of that global community. “A phenomenon on that scale was beyond my imagining,” he admits, “but the exercise helped me understand why so many people in the hamlet had told me not to fast: to belong to that immense community was a privilege they had to re-earn every year, and the effort made them doubly conscious of the value of its boundaries” (76).

On his return visit to Nashawy in 1988, Ghosh is again struck by the sense of exclusion that quickly overtakes him, prompted by questions about the customs of Indians: did they bury their dead, or cremate them? Was he circumcised? Did they worship cows? Is there military service for all in India, as there is in Egypt? How can you not purify your women? He tries his best to patiently answer the repeated questions. Typical of the responses to his
answers is that from one female acquaintance, who tells him "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" (169).

He becomes increasingly upset over the repeated onslaught of the same series of questions, and confines to the reader a personal memory that he wishes he had shared with his Egyptian friends. It was as follows: when Ghosh was six years old, his father was working in the Indian diplomatic mission in East Pakistan. His ancestral roots, in fact, were in this region, but recent ancestors had migrated westward and the Ghosh family now identified themselves as Indians. As time went by, he noticed there were occasionally groups of Indians that would gather within the high-walled compound of his family's home. At this juncture, Ghosh remembered his childhood days as it has followed the history, which interfaces fiction by his own experiences. On one particular day in January of 1964—that momentous year—his father told him to stay upstairs with their cook, with the shutters closed and the door firmly shut. Then young Ghosh could see, beyond the walls, a swelling mob:

I 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 an act of begin protection, has excised every single sound.(208)

At one point, his father returns briefly and retrieves a revolver. Later, Ghosh learns that on this same night there had been riots in Calcutta; as well, but in that city the mob was of Hindus attacking Muslims. This scene around his house then left an indelible mark on young Ghosh's memory:
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 disemboweled for wearing veils or vermilion, of men dismembered for the state of their foreskins. But I was never able to explain very much of this to Nabeel or anyone else in Nashawy... theirs was a world that was far gentle, far less violent, very much more humane and innocent than mine. I could not have expected them to understand an Indian's terror of symbols. (210)

In this perspective, here one can understand why Ghosh might wish to keep quiet about this experience, especially if he knows that his hosts already think poorly of Indians. But Gauri Viswanathan (Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge'. Stanford Humanities Review. (1995:19-34) offers an intriguing interpretation of his silence;

The interrogator is interrogated for the bizarre practices of his own culture, and the frustration of being unable to explain either himself or his culture causes the narrator to veer off into another project, another narrative, this time of a twelfth-century Jewish merchant and his Indian slave. Onto this tale is displaced the impossibility of
the ethnographic pursuit; tracing the genealogy of an anonymous slave restores the familiarity of an historical quest in which questions about origins, development, history, purpose, and teleology can be safely asked without the embarrassing dialectical intrusiveness of counterquestions posed by the very people who are being studied by the anthropologist. (Viswanathan; 20-21)

Here from this point of view, Robert Dixon (Travelling in the west: The writing of Amitav Ghosh 'The journal of commonwealth Literature'. (1996:3-24) raises a point that parallels Viswanathan’s concerns, but approaches it from the viewpoint of the ephemeral object of Ghosh’s anthropological investigation:

'Bomma' is the subaltern consciousness, writes Dixon, "Whose recovery justifies Ghosh’s allegorical reading of the destruction of a polyglot trading culture by western influence. Unlike some contributors to subaltern studies, Ghosh develops a style of writing that is sufficiently nuanced and elusive to sustain the ‘theoretical fiction’ of a recovery of presence without actually falling back into essentialism". (Robert Dixon, 1996; 18)

Thus, since Bomma remains really very elusive and finally a pretty speculative figure, Ghosh can limit his outlines without over-interpreting his "content." He is not only a subaltern who cannot speak, but also one that
Ghosh uncovers/discovers and thereby owns. However, this provides, perhaps, a certain amount of comfort when one is surrounded by hostile Pharaohs! Notice, as well, the proliferation of names in the contemporary sections of the book.

The fate of the many historically invaluable documents in the Ben Ezra synagogue's Geniza, drawing Ghosh's attention so early in his creative life, possibly underscores the source of a theme that follows through in most of his writings. In Dancing in Cambodia, At large in Burma, Ghosh recounts his tale of past events. He returns to the time in which he personally enters the historical chain of events. In The Imam and the Indian, the narrator reads the rest of his life through the single experience of his insistent themes. The Glass Palace spans several generations and is partially based upon the experiences Ghosh's uncle, Jagat Chandra Dutta, who had been a timber merchant in Burma. In The Hungry Tide, Piya lives for the dolphins she studies; kanai finds meaning in translation. In Sea of Poppies, Deeti lives for her daughter even though she was absolutely deceived by her own mother-in-law and brother-in-law. In an Antique Land, of course, documents Ghosh's own "obsession" with a very, very obscure slave from hundreds of years ago.

However, in the gradual removal of the properties to Europe, Ghosh also sees a symbol of the actions of colonizers everywhere, whether for commercial, religious, or intellectual purposes: "a view of the world in which the interests of the powerful defined necessity, while the demands of the poor appeared as a greed" (94). Among many of the Egyptians whom Ghosh met,
there was a long tradition of members of the family traveling “outside” and making money for the family. He was struck that they almost uniformly found this a marvelous adventure. But the longer he stays the more eccentric he is made to feel.

Again, much like Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh the graduate anthropology student seems to yearn for a type of syncretism—if not of religions, then of epochs. Surely, his writing tries to read the past in the present. Samir Dayal (*The Emergence of the Fragile Subject: Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land* (1998:103-33) who is very much appreciates what Ghosh is trying to do, writing that “the author, presenting himself as a traveller in the intercultural border zones, interstitially between the west and the non-west but also in-between modernity and other times, compels us to rethink diaspora, cultural mixture or cultural intercourse, and indeed ‘hybridity’ itself—which is a key concept in this volume” (131).

But Gauri Viswanathan asks a more pointed question, having to do with the practical implications of the type of syncretism that Ghosh may be advocating in *In an Antique Land*: “no matter how moving Ghosh’s book might be,” writes Viswanathan, “and no matter how appealing his humanist call for dissolving barriers between nations, peoples, and communities on the grounds that world civilizations were syncretic long before the divisions introduced by the territorial boundaries of nation-states, the work cannot get beyond nostalgia to offer ways of dealing with what is, after all, an intractable political problem” (32). Ghosh is not writing a political treatise here, and really
cannot be expected to set out an agenda for correcting a problem that he accurately observes. The question Viswanathan asks, though, is one worth pondering: can syncretism issuing as a fiction of the state bear the burden of people’s perceptions of themselves? (33).

While in Mangalore, Ghosh learns a good deal about the history of the mercantile trade in the Indian Ocean before the Europeans arrived, and he finds that it had apparently been remarkably peaceful. But in 1509, the Portuguese changed all that. Thus, Ghosh concludes that “soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has regard ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf” (288).

As a cosmopolitan Indian studying at Oxford, he must have experienced a certain sense of agency and control over his life, but after his studies and his conversation with Imam Ibrahim and others, he appears to have identified more closely with the “delegates of two superseded civilization.” In a sense, he has come to identify himself in this border historic and geographic context as a member of this vast “subaltern” class.

Critical response to this unusual book has been generally positive, though probing questions have been raised by some readers. On the one hand, as we have seen, Gauri Viswanathan can read it in a negative manner, suggesting that
...the mercurial connotations of syncretism encode a set of relativised, partial, and often conflicting perspectives: what Hindus would call syncretic coexistence of religious faith when they refer to “the Hindu way of life” might be termed “forced assimilation” by Muslims...Thus, the use of the word syncretism effaces not only the aspect of domination but also the specific position from which certain interests are advanced, presumably in the name of a larger comity of universal brotherhood. (31)

But others can read the same text and make a completely different judgement. Samir Dayal, for some times, praises it as “a tale about the connections amog non-western Cultures,” that can leap over Eurocentric notions of identity; the book, in Dayal's words:

...a pretext for an approach to understanding subject formation in regions specifically, Egypt and India whose ‘antique’ cultures seem to disappear under the powerful spotlight of ‘postcolonial’ and even ‘colonial’ studies, as if these ancient cultures began to have an ontology only when Europeans discovered them.(104)

But this does bring us back to the genre question. Here we have an Oxford-trained anthropologist writing about two individuals who lived hundreds of years ago, and about whom there is little public record. Why does he do so and, having made the decision, how can do so? We have reason to believe. In this perspective, I think that Ghosh has decided to read the present through the past, and vice versa- he comes to understand Bomma by coming to understand the people with whom he is living in Nashawy. But how, otherwise,
is Bomma or for all that matter, all the villagers of Nashawy to speak to Ghosh’s typical readers? Pointing to the author’s strikingly un-scientific speculation about Ben Yiju’s sexual interest in Ashu, and speculation of her possible conversion, etc., However, Samir Dayal notes that “this almost polemical and subversive unraveling of scientific methodology is one of the remarkable features of Ghosh’s genre-bending text.” Dayal goes so far as to suggest that it is this very inability of science to find a way for the subaltern to speak that has led Ghosh to give up anthropology in favour of fiction: “I think it is one of the reasons, one surmises, that for Ghosh’s having undertaking to construct such a hybrid artifact, suggesting that the author is somewhat disillusioned with the capacity of a scientific pure social anthropology to capture the full -lived truth about the slave” (Samir Dayal: 130).

It is the technical novelty as well as the unique art of construction that marks the book as a distinctive work. There are three parallel stories in In an Antique Land. First, the story of a Jewish Merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred Years ago, with his Indian slave called Bomma. He married a slave girl named Ashu, who belonged to the matrilineal community of Nairs, and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades.

Second, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates from first-hand experience in two Egyptian Villages. The third story is about Amitav Ghosh’s search for a story, i.e., his search for the antique world of Ben Yiju and his Slave and the story he builds up from the disconnected and
fragmentary medieval documents including the letters exchanged between Ben yiju and his friends and correspondents in the twelfth century.

The book is divided into four sections, “Lataifa”, “Nashawy”, “Mangalore,” and “Going back,” beginning with a prologue and rounded off with an Epilogue. To a large extent, the narrative is based on history. Thus, the historical dimension of the book excels all the others. All the characters and events are viewed from the perspective of historical research. Here Amitav Ghosh has unveiled the multiple strata of the interrelationships between the Indian, Egyptian, Jewish and Islamic Cultures and their histories.

Ghosh begins his account in Lataifa, the little Egyptian village where he stationed himself as an Oxford University graduate student in anthropology. Doctor Aly Issa, a Professor at the University of Alexandria, has brought Ghosh to the home of Abu-Ali, and it is there that he rents a room during his stay in Egypt. Ghosh does not especially relish living there, since Abu-Ali, in his mid-fifties, is a somewhat overbearing small-businessman. In fact, Ghosh describes him as “profoundly unlovable” (23), but recognizes him as someone who prompts a rather fearful respect from the villagers. After a while, Dr. Issa arranges for Ghosh to move out of Lataifa to Nashawy, a larger town.

Another of the major players in the village is Shaikh Musa, also in his mid-fifties, who runs a government-subsidised shop for retailing essential commodities at controlled prices. Ahmed and Jabir are his sons; Skkina, their age, is Shaikh Musa’s second Wife. She is the daughter of Ustaz who was
a teacher. Mustapha, and is Abu-Ali’s great grandniece. The names begin to proliferate, and the reader begins to experience the disorientation that must have been Ghosh’s, as well. As things develop, Mustapha-and a good many other people-seems to be interested in converting Ghosh to Islam. Most of the people that he meets, in fact, have atleast a mild interest in welcoming him into their religious fold.

Ghosh left Egypt in 1981, and it was not for another seven years that he could again turn his attention with any seriousness to investigating Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. He had learned some Arabic to communicate with his hosts, but that would not have been very helpful in his investigations. He had also spent time learning Judaeo-Arabic, a Colloquial dialect of medieval Arabic written in Hebrew script that Ben Yiju had used. To his surprise and relief, he found that the dialect spoken in Lataifa and Nashaway in the twentieth century were not that remote from “sounds” he was reading on Ben Yiju’s pages. He learns that Ben yiju had apparently lived in a Roman fortress nicknamed “Babylon” situated in the southern section of Cairo referred to as Old Cairo or Masr, called by some “the mother of the world” (80). It also known as Masr al-Qadima, Masr al-Atiya, Mari Gargis, Fustat Masr, and Fustat—the inclusion of such arcane details shows Ghosh the student-researcher hard at work, but readers may sometimes wonder why he insists on giving us this forgotten set of titles. We should remain patient, though, and read on, trusting that he knows what he is doing. Fustat served as Egypt’s capital for more than three centuries. Cairo took its place, and Fustat
today is attached to the metropolis as an immense rubbish-dump. The Ottoman Empire had reduced it in importance, and then the Indian Ocean trade that had made Fustat significant was supplanted in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European navies.

The Synagogue to which Ben Yiju belonged to the Jewish, who was made up of some very cosmopolitan individuals who had close ties with the Indian trade. Here is where the story begins to sound a bit like an Umberto Eco novel. This “Ben Ezra” congregation had a storehouse, as was customary, called a “Geniza”, in which all sorts of documents were stored. By a strange set of circumstances, the contents of this particular geniza were left undisturbed for more than seven hundred years, so that, upon its discovery, it was described as being “the greatest single collection of medieval documents ever discovered” (59). In the late 1600’s, a fever of Egyptomania swept across Europe, but it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that the first report of Ben Ezra geniza was published in Europe. Surprisingly, it was not until the next century that a scholarly visit to the geniza brought it significant attention. “By this time,” writes Ghosh, “the indigenous Jews of Cairo, those whose relationship with the Synagogue of Ben Ezra was most direct, were a small and impoverished minority within the community” (85).

Ghosh traces the history of the various scholars, some obscure, who only very gradually succeeded in bringing the world’s attention to the vast intellectual treasures that were secretly held in this out-of-the-way store room; Simon Van Geldern, Jacob Saphir, Abraham, Firkowitch, Paul Kahle,
Elkan N. Adler, the cattoui family, Solomon Schechter, Solomon Wertheimer, Agnes S. Lews and Margaret D. Gibson, Charles Taylor, and others. The string that ties one to the next is tenuous but fascinating, and we also hear the wonder in Ghosh's voice—the voice of an academic researcher like Ghosh—that is exited by the facticity of historical materials; "By an extraordinary coincidence," he writes,

> it so happens that a particularly significant letter which has survived and is currently lodged ...in the library of the University of Cambridge. It is written on a fragment of paper of good, if not the best, quality, more than a foot in the length, and about four inches wide. The paper is considerably weathered and discoloured; it is torn at the top, and there is a small hole in it that looks as though it has been caused by a burn. But the writing, which extends all the way down both sides, is clear and can be read without difficulty. (177-78)

Meanwhile, while studying these documents and following their lead back into the ins-and-outs of Ben Yiju's travels, Ghosh was also reacquainting himself with Shaikh Musa and the others who had befriended him on his first visit. He notices that there are now many more Egyptians working outside their country, principally in Iraq. In fact, of his younger friends from Lataifsa, only Jabir has remained in Egypt. He also makes new acquaintances, and the narrator expands the list of names that he asks readers to learn. Among the most important is Imam Ibrahim, who belonged to one of the two founding families of Nashawy. The other locally important family is the Badawy, far
wealthier than the other group. In the course of his historical research, Ghosh also meets Ustaz Sabri, a young teacher who was writing a thesis on medieval Egyptian history. Two of Sabri’s students, Nabeel and Ismail, are cousins. Ali, Nabeel’s older brother, had worked in the fields to raise enough money to send Nabeel to school. Later, however, he makes a great deal of money overseas and is there by enabled to marry Ismail’s sister, Fawzia. In another family Ghosh makes friends with Khamees, Eid, and Busaina; these three pools all their resources at just the right moment purchase land they had been working on as tenant farmers. In just a few years, they became among the wealthiest landowners in the village. Eid in fact, manages to marry into wealthy Badawy clan.

Ghosh continues his research and learns that Ben Yuij’s father had been a Rabby. Two of his brothers, Yusuf and Mubashshir, are also mentioned correspondance, as is a sister, Berakha. His mentor in business was the Chief Representative of merchants in Aden, Madmun ibin al-Hasan ibin Bundar. Without a definitive explanation available to him, Ghosh records that Ben Yiju apparently moved from Aden to the Malabar Coast sometime before 1132, and did not return for nearly two decades. Ghosh surmises that he had left in order to escape some sort blood feud. According to the Moroccan traveller Ibin Battuta, who visited Mangalore some two hundred years after Ben Yiju, the expatriate community of merchants from northern Africa and the Middle East lived very sumptuously. Ben Yiju likely associated more easily with the Muslim traders who were fellow expatriats in Mangalore, and they all probably
used a pidgin language to conduct business with the locals. Soon after his arrival in Mangalore, he frees a slave-girl named Asshu and they marry. Here Ghosh notes that India, at the time had a reputation as a place "notable for the ease of its sexual relations" (228). He speculates that Ben Yiju may have converted her to Judaism before the marriage, or that they had entered into "a kind of marital union that was widely practiced by expatriate Iranian traders"—that is the "temporary marriage" (230).

Ghosh also learns that, from 1143 onwards, Ben Yiju's homeland of Ifriqiya had come under successive attacks from Christians, and was ravaged by disease and famine. Most of his family, in fact, had relocated Sicily without his knowledge. In 1149, he finally makes the trip back to Aden, now accompanied by his two adolescent children Surur (a son who dies) and Sitt al-Dar (a daughter, who marries her cousin in Sicily in 1156). Three years after his arrival in Aden, he had apparently moved to Egypt, and at that point disappears from further historical records.

Ghosh travels to Mangalore in the summer of 1990 to see if he can learn any more about the slave mentioned in several of the Ben Yiju's letters. He speaks with Professor Viveka Rai, an expert of the folklore of the area, and with a Jesuit priest named father D'Souza. By a circuitous route, he concludes that the slave's name was probably Bomma and that he "had been born into one of the several matrilineal communities which played a part in the Bhutacult of Tulunad" (254). He further concludes that the relationship between Ben Yiju and Bomma was
...probably more that of patron and client than master and slave....[because] in the Middle East northern India....slavery was the principal means of recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up through that route, 'slavery' was thus often a kind of career opening a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government. (259-60)

In fact, the abundance of verified facts reinforces the historical dimension of Amitav Ghosh’s book. For instance, in the first section of the book (“Lataifa”), one finds an introduction of historical facts about “the Egyptian Babylon” and a description of Ben Ezra’s synagogue and it’s Geniza in Cairo, a mentioned by the British historian A.J.Butler. The tenth chapter of this section (that details the loot of the Geniza documents by European scholars from eighteenth century on wards) is pure history.

The two novels under consideration of similarities here under Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma and In an Antique Land deal with history. World War II, our Independence and the partition of the country have provided Amitav Ghosh with raw material against which he studies the historical truth-the meaning nationalism and political freedom in the modern world-in Dancing in Cambodia at Large in Burma. Ghosh’s knowledge of war was not gained from books but from the experience of his uncle in the British army who exercised the greatest influence upon the adolescent storyteller. Tridib taught him how to use imagination and by using this faculty, he conjured up certain vivid pictures, which by imperceptible degrees merged into
a perception of history. In the subsequent sections, the author uses the same method to exercise historical imagination through these two novels i.e., *Dancing In Cambodia at Large in Burma* and *In an Antique Land*.

Amitav Ghosh titled *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma*, which a rather misleading impression to the reader who glances at its title. It seems that it is Ghosh’s narrative description of his travels through these two countries after achieved independence from their colonial rulers. This book, the first impression soon gives way to serious realization that this book defies conventional literary classification of a ‘travelogue’ or travel writing’. In fact, it is an imaginative rendering of complex responses of a scholarly researcher and sensitive writer of the agonizing process of the evolving of a nation for two south Asian countries like Cambodia and Burma in their postcolonial phase.

*In an Antique Land* Ghosh has used the made of the autobiographical traveler’s take to study the past thousand years history in the context of two continents- Asia and Africa Naturally the scope of this book is much larger than the former one in both chronological and geographical distribution. However, one thing becomes very clear that in both these books, Ghosh’s aim is to bring out the unity of human experience not with standing the diversity of context.

This thought provoking and disturbing book *Dancing in Cambodia at Large In Burma* is divided into three chapters, as the *In an Antique Land*, the book, which is also divided into four sections and three parallel stories chapter one titled ‘*Dancing in Cambodia,*’ starts with an anthropological
description of the Sea-Journey, of King Sisowath along with his entourage of several dozen princess courtiers, officials and most important a troupe of nearly a hundred classical dancers and musicians from royal palace at Phnom penh. For the King, the journey that started on 10 May 1906. This is the original history, which took place in the year 1906. With this Ghosh learns the remaining story of King Sisowath and princess Soumphady’s 1906 journey to France through Chea Samy a sister-in-law of Pol Pot and a teacher at the school of fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1993, this is nothing but history interface fiction through the current affairs characters.

In this book also there are three parallel stories and the book is also divided into four sections like “Lataifa,” “Nashawy,” “Mangalore,” and “Going Back.” First, the story of Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju, who came from Aden to Mangalore for trade eight hundred years ago, with his Indian slave MS.H.6 called Bomma. He marries a slave girl names Ashu, belonging to the matrilineal community of Nairs, and lived in Mangalore for nearly two decades. This is the purely history, just as it is the history of Dancing Cambodia's King Sisowath's history. That is how Amitav Ghosh always constructs the story from historical background.

Secondly, the story of modern Egypt that Amitav Ghosh relates in, *In an Antique Land*, from first-hand experience in two Egyptian villages like Lataifa, Nashawy and in Mangalore. Just like Amitav Ghosh explores the significance of an important cultural symbol of the twelfth century temple “Angkar Wat” in the cultural life and ethos of Cambodia, in the second chapter
of *Dancing in Cambodia, At Large in Burma*, that entitled “Stories in stones”. In this connection Ghosh then tells us about a discovery that he made in Lataifa, Nashawy and Mangalore and as well as that he made about the paradoxical character of Angkar Wat, being a uniquely powerful symbol of the romance of lost civilizations and ancient glory in both novels of historical stories. Amitav Ghosh as an anthropologist, he found out that the legend of the accidental discovery of ancient Cairo’s villages, which were filled with superstitions and all *In an Antique Land* points of view. Like wise Angkar Wat by the nineteenth century. In these two novels stories are a familiar ones.

The third story is about Amitav Ghosh’s search for a story, i.e., his search for the antique world of Ben Yiju and his slave. He constructs the theme from the disconnected and fragmentary medieval documents, which include the letters exchanged between Ben Yiju and his friends and correspondents in the twelfth century. History forms the backdrop of these novels. They delineate the history of 12th Century.

However, the third chapters of the two novels are concerned with histories, which mean history-interface fiction. The third and concluding chapters of Amitav Ghosh’s two books are of same background of history, which conveys that it is interface fiction. It is an attempt to explore the history of these roots by considering the stories of other countries. Just on the lines of the memories, of Burma were mainly kept alive by Ghosh’s family, who left Burma for Calcutta in 1942. In the last, Panic-stricken weeks before the
Japanese Army' Marched into Rangoon, where people were very generous and hospitable, like the people of Lataifa and of Nashawy in *In an Antique Land*.

The two novels abound in many thematic similarities. In both the novels, Ghosh has conveyed the history of twelfth century. However, to a large extent, the both narratives of two novels are based on history, thus the historical dimension of the two books excels all the other novels. All the characters and events are viewed from the perspectives of historical research mutely, and with a remarkable single-mindedness, that Amitav Ghosh has unveiled the multiple strata of the interrelationships between India, Burma, (Rangoon) India, Egypt, Jewish and Islamic cultures and their histories.

On the other hand, there are the sketches of the antique civilization of the twelfth centuries of both novels. They are the accounts of the fast changing twentieth century world-but there is a bridgeable gulf between the two novels history and events. Both the novels reveal the same human relationships that efface the distance between the middle Ages and the modern times, between Antiquity and modernity. This remains unchanged in the eternal tensions, between the old and the new. Indeed, it is the success of the author in conveying to the readers a valuable insight into some abiding aspects of human lives and human characters, which are never carried away by the flowing currents of history and civilization. This relative comparision makes these two novels a remarkable achievement.