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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**REMAPPING BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AMITAV GHOSH
AND MOURID BARGHOUTI**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Reem Yasser Zaki Abd El-Barr

Under the supervision of **Dr. Ferial Ghazoul**

December / 2011

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this work to my mother for whom I find no words to express my gratitude. Without her prayers, care, kindness and support, I would not have made it. I want to thank my father for his care, advice, encouragement and for comforting me whenever I needed it and my brother for being there for me whenever I wanted his opinion. I am very grateful to their care and support.

I would like to thank all my friends and special thanks to my best friend Sherine for her positive spirit and encouragement whenever I desperately needed that.

I am grateful to Dr. Noha Abou Sedera for sending me her work as soon as she knew I needed it. I want to thank her for her kindness and all her efforts to ensure that I receive her work as soon as possible.

I am indebted to my advisor Dr. Ferial Ghazoul for all her efforts, insightful advice, support, patience and her keenness on bringing out the best in me. I am proud to be her student and advisee. I also want to thank my readers Dr. Tahia Abdel Nasser and Dr. Ira Dworkin whose advice, feedback and efforts I deeply appreciate.

I am deeply grateful to all my professors, colleagues, friends and staff at AUC and Cairo University for the academic training, encouragement, advice and support they have given me over the years.

I want to thank all AUC staff at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, the library and university administration for their great efforts and help.

I am blessed to have you all in my life.

ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo
Remapping Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East:
Amitav Ghosh and Mourid Barghouti
Reem Yasser Zaki Abd El-Barr
Advisor: Dr. Ferial Ghazoul

The Middle East map has undergone a remarkable change since the rise of geopolitical borders in the early twentieth century. These borders constructed by colonial powers and maintained by postcolonial ones have not only divided the region into nation-states but have also entailed boundaries between people on the basis of national, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. This study examines how borders and boundaries are contested and subverted in two Third World narrative productions set in the Middle East: *In an Antique Land* (1992) by the Indian-Bengali writer Amitav Ghosh and *Ra'aytu Rām Allāh* (1997), a memoir by the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti (translated as *I Saw Ramallah* [2000] by the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif). In the light of Edward Said's recurrent reference to the interlink between narrative and geopolitics, this comparative study examines how histories in both works challenge spatial and temporal configurations interlocked with these boundaries—histories that are left out of mainstream narratives. Both works contest geopolitical maps enforced by power structures by foregrounding—what Joel Migdal calls—“people's mental maps.” This study examines Ghosh and Barghouti's shared subversive approach to this issue but also highlights instances where they depart in terms of worldview and stylistic approach. Moreover, it sheds light on the subversive role of literary and stylistic elements in both works thereby revealing the overlap between the two texts. This study crosses disciplinary boundaries and reveals how literature bears on geopolitics through two works that uncover multiple maps of the region.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh’s <i>In an Antique Land</i>	10
Chapter Two: Barghouti and the Borders of Palestine.....	24
Conclusion.....	37
Endnotes.....	48
Works Cited.....	52

Introduction

Who built the Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? (Brecht 1-3)

Brecht's poem draws attention to people's central role in shaping their histories – roles that are often overlooked or forgotten “in the books.” In fact, people are not only active agents in shaping their history but also in shaping geopolitical realities as well. History reveals how geopolitical maps are not merely determined by power structures but also by people who are equally capable of challenging and contesting these maps. History yields many examples, the most recent are the current uprisings sweeping across the Middle East region. In his article titled “A Middle East without Borders?” Mohammed Khan argues how at this particular moment in history, geopolitical boundaries in the region are being transcended through people's unified call and struggle for a common goal:

The nation state as we know it, as it was imposed on the region by colonial powers, is ripe for change. The unleashing of *people power* has now opened up new possibilities for mapping the Arab world's future. While protesters across the region have been waving their respective national flags, *the cause for which they are fighting and risking their lives extends well beyond their immediate borders.* (n. pag. emphasis mine)

At this critical juncture in the history of the region, people are united not only across borders but also beyond boundaries based on cultural, gender, class and religious differences.

At such critical moments, the porosity and constructed nature of borders are uncovered—an important point which many experts in the field of political science and cultural studies have stressed. Joel Migdal writes how “the status of borders has been contingent on varying historical circumstances, rather than being immutably rock-like. Borders shift; they leak; and they hold varying sorts of meaning for different people” (5).

Migdal’s definition of boundaries is inclusive in so far as it includes not only borders constructed by the states but also by people who construct what he calls “mental maps” (7). He writes: “I use the term ‘boundaries’ here to convey more than simple borders, lines dividing spaces as represented on maps; maps signify the point at which something becomes something else . . . at which ‘we’ end and ‘they’ begin” (5). In the light of this definition, boundaries are distinctions between the self and the other as well as state line borders.¹

The Middle East was a region where both forms of boundaries hardly existed. The rise of borders in the region is a relatively recent phenomenon; they emerged in the early twentieth century during the period of colonial rule after the two major colonial powers in the region, Britain and France, secretly signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 which carved up the borders of the region. Borders entail visas, passports, checkpoints and other procedures which make travel and movement a problematic issue. This was not the case in precolonial times. S. D. Goitein², a prominent medievalist, writes: “a person would refer to his travel to Palermo, Genova, Marseille or any other place in Spain, North Africa, Egypt or the Syrian coast . . . without ever alluding to any difficulties incurred because of political boundaries” (31). With the absence of “political boundaries”, diversity, heterogeneity and tolerance were the hallmark of the era. People of different

ethnicities and religious affiliations co-existed and interacted for centuries. The map was transformed when colonial rule enforced borders that divided up the Middle East region and have continued ever since. As “visible” borders became a geopolitical reality, a whole set of “invisible” boundaries were constructed on the basis of national, cultural, religious, linguistic and class differences. With the end of colonial rule, boundaries constructed between colonizer and colonizer were replaced by ones between people of formerly colonized nation-states; “In time, culture comes to be associated with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them’, almost always with some degree of xenophobia” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xii).

The rise of borders in the region has not only set people of the region apart. In the case of Palestine, borders have displaced people from their homeland. The era of colonial rule ended in the Middle East but there is one part in the region that is still trapped within the colonial context. The middle of the twentieth century marked the rise of postcolonial states in the region and the simultaneous rise of “colonial” borders in the land of Palestine. Colonialism in the history of the Arab region established boundaries that placed the indigenous in an inferior position to that of the colonizer. However, in the case of Palestine, colonial rule did not merely entail the construction of boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized; the rise of borders entailed a process of displacement that drove people out of their land. The result was disastrous; Palestinians were driven twice from their homeland, once in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel and again in 1967 with the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. At a time when people in the region gathered within the borders of their own newly independent postcolonial nation-states, Palestinians were scattered between those who remained within the 1948

borders, those who live within 1967 borders and those who live in the Diaspora within foreign borders.

Since the rise of borders in the region, travel between nation-states has become a complicated process; however, it is even far more problematic for Palestinians. Borders haunt Palestinians wherever they go. In fact, their physical displacement has borne on their fragmented identity so that now they are caught in a vicious circle. The rise of borders in their homeland has led to a fragmented identity which in turn makes the process of border crossing a painful experience. In this respect, Rashid Khalidi writes:

The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short at any one of those modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. . . . For it is at these borders and barriers that six million Palestinians are singled out for 'special treatment,' and forcefully reminded of their identity: of who they are, and of why they are different from others. (1)

Borders have not only led to displacement in Palestine. The year 1947 when the UN partition plan was issued to divide Palestine into two states, one for the Jews and another for Arabs also marked India's independence from British colonial rule and the rise of new postcolonial borders that divided the country into two nation-states: India for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims. A land long known for its ethnic and religious diversity was now divided along religious differences. This new division led to the displacement of millions from their homeland on both sides of the newly constructed borders as well as large scale violence causing the brutal death and injury of many.³ The

Partition led to two new nation-states founded on the basis of religious identity—a project similar to the Israeli one established on the basis of forming a state for the Jews.

In this study, I wish to focus on the issue of geopolitical borders and boundaries in two Third World narrative productions that move back and forth between the (pre)colonial and (post)colonial contexts of the Middle East. I wish to examine how subaltern (hi)stories in both narratives remap geopolitical boundaries. In Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992) and Mourid Barghouti's *Ra'aytu Rām Allāh* (1997) translated as *I Saw Ramallah* (2000) geopolitical boundaries enforced by power structures are challenged, contested and deconstructed.⁴

Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* incorporates two narrative strands: a medieval narrative and a contemporary one. In the medieval narrative, Ghosh attempts to reconstruct the lives of a medieval slave named Bomma and his patron, Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who lived in the twelfth century and moved between different parts of the Orient. His journey took him to Egypt and Aden then Mangalore before he finally settled in Egypt. As Ghosh reconstructs the lives of these two medieval characters, he conjures up a medieval, cosmopolitan world where people moved between different parts of the region without the troublesome procedures of visas and checkpoints. The region was not yet divided by borders that were later carved by colonialism. Also, people interacted regardless of cultural, religious, linguistic or class differences. For his historical research, Ghosh relies on translations of medieval letters and documents by the prominent medievalist scholar S. D. Goitein as well as his own decipherment of some manuscripts that are written in Judeo-Arabic⁵. These documents were housed at the Cairo Geniza⁶ and later transferred to libraries in the West where Ghosh gains access to them.

The medieval narrative runs parallel to a contemporary narrative based on Ghosh's anthropological fieldwork (for his PhD research) in two Egyptian villages, Lataifa and Nashawy back in the early 1980s. His journey leads to a world that is different from that of Ben Yiju—a postcolonial world fraught with boundaries that run across national, cultural, linguistic, religious and class differences. Unlike Ben Yiju, Ghosh feels out of place in Egypt as the *fellaheen* (villagers) constantly ask him questions that reflect a monolithic, stereotyped notion of India and Indians. These boundaries are contested in the light of the heterogeneity and tolerance of the medieval world. During Ghosh's second visit to Egypt in 1988, there is a reference to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the travel of many villagers to work in Iraq. The narrative ends prior to the outbreak of the Gulf War (1991) during his next visit to Egypt in 1990. This is a world torn by war and strife that divide people and nations yet one that still holds a possibility for cross-cultural communications; affinities and bonds develop between Ghosh and the Egyptians despite their national, religious and cultural differences.⁷

In his memoir, *Ra'aytu Rām Allāh*, Barghouti revisits his homeland after his exile for thirty years. The 1967 War broke out when Barghouti was still a student in Cairo and since then he was unable to return to his occupied homeland, Palestine. In the meantime, he lives in Egypt with his wife Radwa Ashour, an Egyptian academic and writer, and their son Tamim before he experiences a second displacement. He gets deported by the Egyptian authorities and lives in Hungary for years away from his family before he is allowed to come back to Egypt once again. The memoir starts with Barghouti crossing the bridge from Amman into the West Bank. His return takes place after the Oslo Accords of 1993 which basically decreed that Palestinians would be granted the right to

self-autonomous rule in the West Bank and Gaza and that Israel would withdraw its troops from certain areas in the West Bank.⁸ As Israel continued to control international borders (within the framework of the Agreement), to build settlements and restrict Palestinians' movement in the territories through checkpoints, the situation hardly changed. Palestinians have to experience daily humiliation as they wait for Israeli permission to enter. As Barghouti revisits his homeland, he revisits the past; he recalls his past memories in exile (memories of his family and friends), the suffering they endured under Occupation in addition to memories of a precolonial past when life was still harmonious and peaceful.

Barghouti's return also brings to his mind memories of his late elder brother Mounif whose image is a recurrent one throughout the narrative. At the border, Mounif was twice denied entry into his homeland and died in exile before going back. Barghouti's return is a moment where he reunites with his family, friends and many Palestinians he had not seen for years. The narrative ends with his preparations to cross back the bridge (after a visit of twelve days) and a future plan to return next time in the company of his son Tamim (for whom he issues a reunion permit during his visit). Barghouti's memoir keeps moving between the past and the present recording stories not only of Palestinian dispossession but also of resistance and endurance.

Geopolitical boundaries are interlocked with narratives that maintain and are maintained by them. This interlink between geography and narrative has been noted throughout Edward Said's theoretical productions. Ghosh and Barghouti's texts challenge these boundaries by retrieving (hi)stories that are left out or forgotten in mainstream or official history. Histories incorporated in the text contest these borders by challenging

spatial and temporal configurations confined within these boundaries. Both texts constitute sites of resistance where geopolitical maps, histories and identities are remapped.

Several critics and historians have noted the dearth of scholarly work on Middle East subaltern history pointing out the importance of foregrounding Middle Eastern people as agents of their own will and as important players in shaping their own history.⁹ Stephanie Cronin refers to the central space elites are given in historical productions on the Middle East region as well as North Africa and attributes this to their literacy and influence. She compares their dominant presence with the scant space subalterns are given (1). Like Cronin, Burke and Yaghoubian are critical of perspectives whereby the Middle East is viewed as subject to “impersonal historical force[s]”, they write: “[t]hese views. . . portray Middle Easterners as marionettes in a historical drama, rather than as flesh and blood individuals with some capacity to affect their own life chances” (1).

In the light of the above, both texts by Ghosh and Barghouti are important interventions in so far as they foreground histories of those who are denied access to the realm of mainstream historiography. Moreover, the Middle East portrayed in both narratives belongs not to the elite or the powerful but to the powerless and/or the minority. Both writers travel in space and time in order to juxtapose the precolonial map of the region with the postcolonial one. However, whereas Ghosh’s text focuses on boundaries constructed on the basis of differences between people namely “invisible” boundaries, Barghouti’s text deals with the traumatizing experience of “visible” borders which led to the fragmentation of the Palestinian nation. In Ghosh’s work, borders

construct nations, in Barghouti's memoir, borders deconstruct the nation. However, in both cases people are set apart.

Chapter One

Boundaries in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*

Survival in fact is about the connection between things; in Eliot's phrase reality cannot be deprived of the 'other echoes in the garden'. It is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about 'us'. (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 408)

Geopolitical and historical forces may drive people and nations apart—people who used to co-exist on the same land. However, there are moments in history that recover affinities and bonds, challenging these separating forces. One contemporary example can be found in Palestine which used to embrace people of different ethnicities and religions including Jews. With the rise of Israel as a state for Jews, conflict has replaced co-existence and led to a rift that confounds national with religious identities. This rigid framework, adopted by Israel—where the law of return privileges Jewish immigration to historical Palestine while denying the Right of Return for Palestinians (as UN resolution 194 upholds)—is contested even by Jews. Rabbi Michael Lerner underscores the support of many Jews for the January 25th Egyptian Revolution (2011) thereby undermining the view of the conflict as Arab versus Jewish: “We hope that Egyptians will hear the news that they have the strong support from many in the Jewish world” (n.pag). Earlier in the article, Rabbi Lerner employs history to compare the plight of the Jewish people in the past to that of Egyptians in the present:

Yet it is impossible for Jews to forget our heritage as victims of another Egyptian tyrant – the Pharaoh whose reliance on brute force was overthrown

when the Israelite slaves managed to escape from Egypt some 3,000 years ago. That story of freedom retold each year at our Passover "Seder" celebration, and read in synagogues in the past month, has often predisposed the majority of Jews to side with those struggling for freedom around the world. (n. pag.)

This "story" stands as a counter-narrative to official narratives. The identities of Jews in the previous citation are shaped by their resistance to tyranny and it is not only a matter of race and ethnicity. Thus, it is a story where continuities between the past of one group and the present of the other are joined, affinities are highlighted, boundaries are contested, stereotypes are deconstructed and eventually "mental maps" (to borrow Migdal's term) are redrawn.

Seeking affinities and continuities between the past and the present is at the heart of Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*. Inderpal Grewal writes: "[i]nstead of the break with the past that diaspora theories suggest, Ghosh's text produced continuities of many kinds, especially of the precolonial past with the transnational present" (184). The medieval, precolonial world Ghosh conjures up—through reconstructing the lives of the medieval Ben Yiju and Bomma—is one where travel was smooth and where people intermingled with one another regardless of differences. As this world comes to life in the text, the postcolonial world is subverted—a world where common grounds and mutual understandings hardly exist. Cross-cultural understandings of the past are replaced with barriers that separate people and create stereotypes of the other.

Ghosh's text constitutes an important intervention in so far as it incorporates histories that challenge contemporary geopolitical boundaries. The work of subaltern

scholars highlight subalterns' central role in shaping history and politics. Their work critiques official mainstream narratives for leaving them out, Guha writes:

What clearly is left out of this un-historical historiography is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of labouring population and the intermediate strata in town—that is, the people. (Italics in original 40)

Unlike mainstream historiography, Ghosh's text represents subalterns as active agents in shaping their world and gives them a voice. In the opening pages of his book, Ghosh inverts the structure of official history—first introducing the medieval subalterns, the slave and his patron, who become the protagonists of his narrative and then moves on to give an account of figures and events that would usually form the subject matter of mainstream historiography (*Antique Land* 13-15). Here and throughout the text, they merely serve as a backdrop to the history of the medieval subalterns.

In this chapter, I wish to focus on the process whereby subaltern histories in the text subvert geopolitical boundaries. Nationalism, as Edward Said notes, entails boundaries that are not unlike those embedded within the colonial enterprise: “to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of Imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by Imperialism itself” (*Culture and Imperialism* 276). In other words, boundaries within the nationalist context are constructed between members of postcolonial nation-states. In order to examine how peoples' histories in Ghosh's text

subvert these boundaries, it is important to understand the spatial and temporal configurations associated with postcolonial geopolitical boundaries in the contemporary era. These boundaries—initially constructed by Western colonial powers—do not only entail spatial divisions but also a Eurocentric conception of history where the East as a “geographical space” “temporally” lags behind in relation to the more modern and advanced West.¹⁰

Histories in Ghosh’s text present an alternative configuration of space and time to that embedded within contemporary boundaries. His travel in time conjures up a precolonial world that is more progressive and advanced than the postcolonial contemporary world that he visits.¹¹ Contemporary boundaries are subverted through Ghosh’s juxtaposition of past and present. However, a reading that stops at interpreting the text as mere juxtaposition between both worlds risks simplification. The contemporary narrative depicts a postcolonial world where boundaries separate people, however, there are numerous stories in this narrative that uncover bonds and affinities forged beyond national borders. Moreover, the past and the present in the text are not confined within separate realms. Ghosh’s journeys through space and time converge as he discovers traces of the medieval “time” in the contemporary “space.” Thus, histories in the text question divisions produced by boundaries through uncovering affinities and continuities across space and time.

The contemporary world in the narrative reveals spatial and temporal configurations that separate people. Any place is a potential checkpoint; Ghosh is stopped by an officer on his visit to a shrine during his stay in Egypt and his passport is checked. Earlier, he is asked for his identity card by one the villagers who suspect him. The

contemporary map of the region is best encapsulated in his reference to an incident when one of the *fellaheen* asks him whether he can reach India on a donkey:

Thinking of all the reasons why it would not be possible to travel from Egypt to India on a donkey, something caught fire in my imagination and I began to talk as I had never before, in Lataifa and Nashawy, of *visas* and *quarantines*, of the *ribbon of war* that stretched from Iraq to Afghanistan, of the heat of Dasht-e-kebir and the height of the Hindu Kush, of the foraging of snow leopards and the hairiness of yaks. (emphasis mine 173)

The above description uncovers a geopolitical map that is far removed from that of Ben Yiju's world—a world where different parts of the region were interconnected: “to the young Ben Yiju, journeying eastwards would have appeared as the simplest and most natural means of availing himself of the most rewarding possibilities his world had to offer” (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 153). In Ben Yiju's time, travel was neither contingent upon “visas” nor was the region yet distorted by “quarantines” and “ribbons of war.” Paradoxically, means of communications are much faster and advanced today yet mobility in the past was much easier. In this respect, Hind Wassef writes: “No national boundaries, in the sense we have today, restricted such movement. And when he [Ben Yiju] went to live in Aden and Mangalore, there too no question of nationality arose that made him an outsider or refugee in the modern sense” (87). In the light of Wassef's words, the non-existence of borders has borne on Ben Yiju's status as he traveled, for borders are intertwined with the notion of citizenship.

In fact, Ben Yiju's experience was a collective one in the same way Ghosh's experience in Egypt represents the experience of many in the contemporary world. Territorial divisions in the contemporary postcolonial world have not only problematized travel and movement between different parts of the region but they have also precluded mutual understanding between people. In a 1993 interview published in *Newsweek*, Ghosh says: "Today nationalism, once conceived as a form of freedom, is really destroying our world. . . . The nation-state prevents the development of free exchange between peoples" (52).¹² Unlike Ben Yiju, the Hindu/Indian Ghosh is made to feel different in Egypt as the Muslim/Egyptian *fellaheen* consistently ask him questions that reflect contemporary intolerance towards difference. Their questions also reveal stereotypes born out of these boundaries. Their questions about whether he worships cows, whether he is circumcised and whether Indians burn their dead derive from a stereotyped, monolithic conception of India.

Boundaries are not only confined to Ghosh's experience in Egypt. He recalls stories from his part of the world which reflect hostilities and intolerance on the basis of religious difference. He recalls an early childhood experience when he used to live with his family in Dhaka (in East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh) and the threat which a minority group of Hindu refugees were subjected to in this Muslim majority area. Many of these Hindu refugees would seek protection in the house of Ghosh's Hindu family who used to take them in and have them settle in the garden of their house. Ghosh recounts a particular incident when they were all besieged by a crowd that wanted to get in and the painful experience they all went through. He also refers to parallel stories in Calcutta where the Hindu majority committed acts of violence against the Muslim

minority though in both cases he refers the benevolence on the part of other Muslims and Hindus which saved many lives (*Antique Land* 204-210). Towards the end of the text, there are also references to the Iran-Iraq War and Ghosh's last visit to Egypt takes place in 1990 during the interval between Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990) and the Gulf War (1991). This is a world torn by violence and struggle over constructed borders.

The medieval narrative conjures up a different geopolitical map. Unlike Ghosh who feels out of place in Egypt, Ben Yiju was part of a harmonious community of merchants based on "understandings that clearly presuppose free and direct communications between the participants, despite their cultural, religious and linguistic differences" (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 280). In fact, Ghosh goes a step further in reconstructing the story of the Jewish Ben Yiju and Bomma—who was familiar (Ghosh believes) with unorthodox beliefs and traditions that are subversive of Hinduism (*Antique Land* 263). Their relationship was not only established beyond religious differences but one that was based—Ghosh would like to think—on seeking common grounds. Ghosh would like to imagine that both of them shared an interest in unorthodox practices that "eventually became a small patch of level ground between them" (*Antique Land* 263).

In addition, class differences did not constitute a problem in marriage in medieval times, in contrast to the present. In the contemporary narrative, Ghosh refers to one of the *fellaheen* who marries the girl he loves after he travels to the Gulf and makes sufficient money—that is after he moves up in the material scale. Unlike the contemporary subaltern, class difference was not problematic; Ben Yiju marries his slave Ashu. In precolonial times, "'slavery' was . . . often a kind of career opening" and "a means of creating fictive ties of kinship between people who were otherwise unrelated" (Ghosh,

Antique Land 260). There is a difference—Ghosh points out—between past and present connotations of slavery.

These examples subvert the time configuration modeled on dominant Eurocentric views about the linear forward movement of history. Ghosh's narrative presents an alternative time configuration; it presents a reversed model where the past is shown to be more progressive and liberal than the present as Padmini Mongia writes: "Bomma's mediaeval society is richly seen by Ghosh as a vital, cosmopolitan one that put to shame our current notions of cosmopolitanism" (159).

Not only does the text present an alternative temporal configuration but also an alternative spatial configuration that subverts the one produced through colonial territorial divisions of the region in the early part of the twentieth century. Retrieving stories of the past play a central role in subverting boundaries constructed in the present. However, it is important to note that Ghosh's text does not produce an essentialized model of past and present. Stories in the contemporary narrative challenge contemporary borders and boundaries by uncovering contemporary affinities and continuities across space. In Nashawy, Ustaz Sabry warmly introduces Ghosh to the villagers referring to their countries' parallel histories, socio-economic conditions, mutual support and the collaboration of their leaders during colonial and postcolonial rule (134). These stories challenge the borders of nation-states and mainstream narratives that highlight differences and divisions between them.

Ghosh demonstrates in an article how the Third World has not merely been a recipient of nationalism but has shaped and redefined its meaning so that it has become associated not—as Ghosh notes—with Western conception of it as "an ideology of

xenophobia and parochialism” but with “xenophilia, the love of the other, the affinity for strangers—a feeling that lives very deep in the human heart but whose existence is rarely acknowledged” (“Confessions of a Xenophile” n. pag.). For Ghosh, the institutionalized partnership in the form of the Non-Aligned Movement had cultural roots and origins; he believes it is a movement whereby cross-cultural dialogues between nations were resumed after they were disrupted for some time by colonialism.¹³ Conversely, he believes in the integral role of such an institutionalized structure for cross-cultural interface: “no matter how sincere an individual’s desire for cultural communication might be, it is impossible for such exchanges to occur in the absence of an institutional framework” (“Confessions of a Xenophile” n. pag.). Continuities are integral to Ghosh’s vision not only spatially and temporally; he views continuities between partnerships established on top (the institutional) and affinities forged from below (the cultural).

Several stories in the narrative uncover affinities and bonds across space and challenge the spatial configuration created by national borders—configurations constructed and maintained by power structures. Stories of the people incorporated in the narrative produce a spatial configuration that conjures up an alternative map—a map where people in the postcolonial Third World are not wholly trapped within national borders of the state. The text represents affinities that are products of cross-cultural communication and lived experiences forged beyond national and cultural boundaries. Ghosh refers to a conversation with the father of one of the villagers who once joined the Second World War as a worker—an experience which brought him into contact with Indian soldiers. Ghosh narrates: “they [Indian soldiers] had made a deep impression on his memory and at our first meeting he had greeted me as though he was resuming an

interrupted friendship” (231). In fact the entire narrative is based on resuming “an interrupted friendship” between people of the region which according to Ghosh was disrupted with colonial intervention in the region. Cross-cultural encounters bear on the villagers’ empathetic feelings towards Ghosh making Ustaz Sabry’s mother tell him at one point: “Just the other day he [Sabry] said to me, the people of Egypt and India have been like brothers for centuries. You must consider yourself one of our family” (186). Such moments foreground what Migdal refers to as “people’s mental maps”—maps that contest national state borders.

The text also exhibits another kind of affinity—one that develops not on the basis of common grounds between nations but on the basis of human empathy. This empathy is revealed during Nabeel’s (one of the villagers) visit to Ghosh’s place and the former’s reflection on his homesickness. Their encounter represents a moment of human understanding that transcends difference. In retrospect, Ghosh comments: “Nabeel’s comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time 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” (152).

Through Ghosh’s personal experience, the reader is not only exposed to affinities between people but also to parallel stories across national borders. Ghosh hears a story about governmental attempts to build a canal and people’s opposition to the idea on the basis that the canal will pass through the shrine of Sidi Abu-Kanaka (138-140). Eventually a miracle forces officials to change the route of the canal. When they fail to dig at the site of the tomb, they open it and find out that that the body is still intact. (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 139). This story stands parallel to another story Ghosh hears in

India about a Bhuta shrine though in this story it is a road instead of a canal (265-266). Here again people resist the construction of the road but officials proceed in their plan until the bulldozers were fixed in place and eventually the route was changed (265). Usually nations construct stories about themselves that distinguish them from another. Ghosh's text foregrounds stories that reveal similarities between people.

Boundaries in Ghosh's narrative are not only subverted through juxtaposing past and present or revealing affinities across space but also through uncovering continuities between the past and the present. Ghosh demonstrates how moments from the past which do not fit within contemporary world views are severed by "History." In other words, mainstream historiography configures a certain relationship between the past and the present and omits what does not fit. Said notes "how memories of the past are shaped in accordance with a certain notion of what 'we' or, for that matter, 'they' really are" ("Invention, Memory and Place" 177). Unlike mainstream history where stories of the past are constructed to serve the present, in Ghosh's text the present is shaped by the past. Ghosh goes through an experience during his attempt to visit the shrine of Sidi Abu-Hasira which reveals to him the suppressive force of official history. Sidi Abu-Hasira, a man of saintly qualities, is of North African Jewish origin and after his move to Egypt converts from Judaism to Islam (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 329). On his way to visit the shrine, Ghosh is stopped and sent for interrogation to an officer who cannot understand the rationale behind an Indian's interest in visiting the tomb of a Jewish figure. Ghosh links this to the role of official history in forgetting or leaving out past stories and thereby severing links that once existed between people in the past. In reference to his inability to provide contemporary evidence to the officer about past "intertwined histories", he

writes: “I had been caught straddling a border unaware that the writing of History had predicated its own self-fulfillment” (*Antique Land* 339-340). Later in his research about Sidi Abu-Hasira, he discovers that the site of the shrine brought together members of religious groups (not only Jews) thereby revealing to him the diversity which characterizes the site of the shrine. Ghosh reflects: “It seemed uncanny that I 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” (342). Traces of the cosmopolitan past outlive the suppressive force of official history. The latter is embedded in the worldview of the officer (the text suggests) who interrogates him and also in the intimidating questions he is subjected to during his stay in the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy.

Ghosh blames “the West” for bringing this harmonious, heterogeneous, tolerant world to an end. In the text, the “West” manifests itself in different forms. Colonial intervention in the sixteenth century brought an end to “a culture of accommodation and compromise” (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 260). Ghosh also links the process whereby the Geniza was divested of its documents to the Imperial enterprise. He also notes an “irony” in the transfer of these documents—many of which belong to the Egyptian Jewish community—to the West since “for the most part they went to countries which would have long since destroyed the Geniza had it been part of their own history” whereas “Masr. . . was left with no traces of its riches: not a single scrap to remind her of that aspect of her past” (95). The role of the West in constructing contemporary boundaries is best couched in a statement where he says: “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” (95). The “West” still maintains its foothold even after the end of colonialism; the movement of history within the postcolonial context is conceived of in Eurocentric terms. This Eurocentric model comes out in the heated conversation between Ghosh and Imam Ibrahim when each of them argues about the superiority and progress of his postcolonial country and the inferiority of the other using a “Western” yardstick (to what extent the country of each is closer to the West). Ghosh comments: “We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West” (236). The result of their “travel in the West” entails the construction of barriers between them: “it seemed to me that the Imam and I [Ghosh] had participated in our final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries that had linked us. . .” (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 236).

“Travel in the West” leads not to progress but to a setback. Mongia writes:

By offering a glimpse into the cosmopolitan, humane circuit of relations prevalent in mediaeval India up to the moment when European dominance via colonialism enters its history, Ghosh poses a postcolonial challenge via the pre-colonial. In Ghosh’s telling of this history, an alternative picture emerges, one that is tantalizing and heartbreaking because it offers a picture of the world and of relations between peoples which might have unfolded had the rupture introduced by colonialism not occurred. (161)

By uncovering continuities across space and time, subaltern histories in the text contest boundaries and reveal their constructed nature. Robert Dixon notes that Ghosh neither relies on Western languages nor on theoretical models in retrieving the subaltern. For his purpose, Ghosh makes use—Dixon notes—of the Arabic language and empirical research

in both history and anthropology. The latter approach “is a challenging model to literary critics in the Western academy whose critical practice involves the applications of high theory to third world texts—we might call *that* ‘travelling in the East’” (Dixon 22). In the light of Dixon’s words, the movement in Ghosh shifts from East to West; stories and lived experiences in the third world deconstruct boundaries initially constructed by the West. Also, contemporary boundaries are challenged through a movement from present to past; the text reverses the relationship so that it is not the present that controls what is to be remembered but it is the present moment that is shaped by the past.

Chapter Two Barghouti and the Borders of Palestine

I want to cross borders
Unseen
Like salmon
Like contaminated wind (Elmusa “Moons and Donkeys” 113-116)

In Ghassan Kanafani’s novella, *Men in the Sun*, three men die in a water tank in their desperate attempt to cross the borders between Iraq and Kuwait. Their death at the border is emblematic of the suffering many Palestinians have to endure as they move between the borders of their homeland and that of other countries. Palestinians are marked at borders lines and their attempt to render themselves invisible at border crossings—as in the case of Kanafani’s narrative—fail; borders haunt them. Rashid El Khalidi refers to the painful experience Palestinians go through at border crossings:

Borders are a problem for Palestinians since their identity . . . not only is subject to question by the powers that be; but also is in many contexts suspect almost by definition. As a result, at each of these barriers which most others take for granted, every Palestinian is exposed to the possibility of harassment, exclusion, and sometimes worse, simply because of his or her identity. (2)

Palestinians have managed to destabilize the meaning of borders so that they do not only represent suffering and dispossession; they have become sites of resistance and self-assertion. The story Said recounts in the “Preface” to his memoir *Out of Place* stands as an interesting example. In reference to his return home after long years of exile, Said writes that he accents the word “Palestine” in response to the Israeli officer’s question

about the time he left Israel since he was born (*Out of Place*, x). Here Said retrieves an erased map. Palestinians have managed to subvert significations of security and protection attached to borders. Choosing to use “Palestine” is significant in the light of Barghouti’s words: “*The battle for language becomes the battle for the land*. The destruction of one leads to the destruction of the other. When Palestine disappears as a word it disappears as a state, as a country, and as a homeland. The name of Palestine itself had to vanish. The occupation wanted it to be forgotten, to become extinct, to die out” (“Servants of War” emphasis mine 41). In the light of Barghouti’s words, naming and by extension narrating the “omitted”, is just as important as other forms of struggle.

Insistence on referring to the place as “Palestine” becomes a form of resistance to colonial attempts to erase Palestinian national identity. Joseph Massad points out how a place is contextualized through the process of “naming.” “Palestine”—he notes—signifies a colonial context (before and after 1948) with a future outlook for a postcolonial one while “Israel” stands for the Zionist dream coming true in the period after 1948 and precludes “the notion of a post-Israel Palestine.” He then refers to the politics embedded in the process of “naming”: “Naming . . . functions as locating in history, as temporalizing, and ultimately as asserting power as colonial domination or as anti-colonial resistance” (14).

The rise of the State of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 have not only entailed a geopolitical remapping process but also a historiographical one. Therefore, Barghouti’s memoir *Ra’aytu Rām Allāh* is an important intervention in so far as it retrieves memories and stories that contest Israeli geopolitical remapping of the land and the narrative that sustains it. In his interview with Stuart

Reigeluth, Barghouti responds that he did not intend his book to be a form of resistance to Israeli collective memory, but he adds: “We are not seen. Now at least there is one person who is seen. The life of a Palestinian, from A to Z, is in the limelight for 184 pages and then he’s seen. He occupies the stage for a while. For those reading this book, I occupy the stage—or my people, or victims of the Israeli occupation are occupying the stage” (177).

Barghouti’s displacement started in 1967, however, in his interview with Bill Parry, he critiques views which regard 1967 as the root problem calling it a “fallacy.” This interdependence between the past and the present¹⁴ is integral to Barghouti’s vision and informs the structure of his memoir which keeps shifting between past and present. Unless the past is incorporated—Barghouti demonstrates towards the end of his narrative—the picture will get distorted and the victimizer will be looked upon as the victimized and vice versa.¹⁵

Barghouti also expresses his discontent with the Oslo Agreement and calls the idea of Palestinian self-rule (that emerged out of the Agreement) an “illusion [that] gave (and always with it the US administrations) the right to order us to behave politely as a state. . . . [and which] is scandalously challenged and exposed every day by Israeli checkpoints and closures” (Interview with Bill Parry n. pag.). The text uncovers the incompatibility between Palestinian self-rule and the continued existence of Israeli checkpoints not through the hyperbolic language of statesmen and leaders but through the actual experience of a subaltern. As the reader relives Barghouti’s experience at the border, it becomes clear how the Agreement hardly moved the land and its inhabitants

from a colonized context. The “illusion” of this official acknowledgement is exposed in the memoir through the lived reality of Palestinians.

While Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* represents geopolitical boundaries in the postcolonial context, Barghouti’s text is situated within a colonial context (postcolonial only on paper); the Oslo Agreement granted Palestinians only “officially” the right to an independent self-autonomous state. Colonial borders have scattered them and continue to challenge their attempts at forming a state of their own. Barghouti succeeds in returning to his homeland after 30 years of forced exile and in crossing the borders that twice denied the entry of his late brother, Mounif.¹⁶ Barghouti’s travel in space leads him to a journey in time to the precolonial world of his early years before he left his homeland and to the world of his exile which followed the Occupation of 1967. Barghouti’s return not only constitutes an access to the geographical space but also to the history of the place and its people. The text keeps moving back and forth between various spatial and temporal contexts that are framed within Barghouti’s contemporary return to his homeland.

Barghouti’s *Ra’aytu Rām Allāh* retrieves the lost map of Palestine. Stories in his memoir contest colonial distortion of space by foregrounding the spatial configuration embedded in Palestinians’ “mental maps.” Palestinian land has been distorted in reality but has not been erased from Palestinian memory. Also, histories in the text challenge the signification of borders in hegemonic, colonial narratives where borders are linked to Israeli security with no consideration to their impact on the daily lives of thousands of Palestinians. These stories foreground the signification of borders from a Palestinian point of view where borders connote daily suffering, displacement, the dispersal of the

Palestinian nation and the fragmentation of their identity.¹⁷ Fouad Moughrabi cites the meaning of “bridge” in *Webster’s*¹⁸ and refers to its reversed role in the case of Palestinians:

This particular bridge is not designed to afford convenient passage but rather to do quite the opposite, namely, to keep Palestinian exiles away and to facilitate the permanent exit of those who are still on the inside. . . . ‘The bridge’, very much like Ben Gurion airport, the Rafah crossing or any other entry point, is a place where Palestinians endure humiliation . . . It has also become a Palestinian metaphor for endurance, tenacity and persistence, for the ability to suffer monstrous humiliation while maintaining one’s dignity and self-respect. (110)

Israel controls the bridge militarily but does not control the signification of the bridge.

A nation-state is contingent upon continuous space. Colonial borders have remapped Palestinian space and continue to abort Palestinian attempts to form their own independent self-autonomous nation-state. However, Palestinians—the text demonstrates—have managed to challenge imposed borders by finding alternative means to forge and maintain their nationhood. Palestinians in the diaspora provide financial support to those who remained (Barghouti *I Saw 57/Ra’aytu* 62). This created bonds between people so that at Mounif’s funeral students whom he had supported financially come to pay their condolences though they have never seen him personally (Barghouti *I Saw 50/Ra’aytu* 55-56). This fits very well within Benedict’s Anderson definition of a nation as “imagined”: “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in

the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Borders separate them but they still manage to find alternative means to maintain their bond.

Self-assertion in the form of official documents is important for Palestinians. During his visit, Barghouti applies for a reunion permit that would allow him to return later in the company of his son Tamim. Also, in reference to his mother’s regular renewal of her permit in the aftermath of 1967, he notes: “The right to citizenship even under occupation was something to be held on to, whatever the circumstances” (*I Saw* 27/*Ra’aytu* 31). Issuing an official proof of their citizenship becomes a form of resistance—a challenge to the colonizer’s denial of their existence as a nation.

The textual production of Barghouti’s narrative takes place as he crosses the borders into his homeland. In other words, border crossing in the text is not simply mentioned or recounted; the reader is made to live the experience. Noha Abou Sedera writes:

The bridge which represents a spatial and a temporal link plays a central role in the structure of the literary work itself. Entry into the bridge is interlinked with entry into the events of the *riwaya* [narrative] itself which starts when he crosses -- as if the bridge represents a link between the moment prior to writing and the moment of writing itself. The bridge is the pathway to the *riwaya* and since crossing it for entry is a condition to start the *riwaya* crossing it for departure announces the end of the *riwaya*. (24, translation mine)

From the opening chapter of *I Saw Ramallah*, where the bridge figures prominently, the signification of borders for Palestinians is foregrounded. Barghouti goes

back to his homeland after the Oslo Accords but he still has to wait for Israeli permission to cross the bridge—an experience which Palestinians have to go through daily. His anxiety as he waits for their permission is a Palestinian collective experience: “My tension increases with each new minute of waiting. Will they allow me to cross the river? Why are they so late?” (*I Saw 9/Ra’aytu 11*). Eventually, his papers are checked and he is given permission to cross the bridge. As he walks, he reflects:

At last! Here I am, walking with my small bag, across the bridge. A bridge no longer than a few meters of wood and thirty years of *exile*. How was this piece of dark wood able to *distance a whole nation* from its dreams? To prevent entire generations from taking their coffee homes that were theirs? How did it deliver us to all this patience and all that *death*? How was it able to *scatter* us among exiles, and tents, and political parties, and frightened whisper? (emphasis mine *I Saw 9/Ra’aytu 12*)

Here Barghouti presents the Palestinian side of the story—a story where borders signify exile, separation, death and fragmentation “with the guard guarding our country—against us” (*I Saw 15/Ra’aytu 18*) and where “The others are still masters of the place” (*I Saw 38/Ra’aytu 42*). The meaning of “borders” for Palestinians is best couched in Barghouti’s metaphorical interpretation of his brother’s death: “Being forbidden to return killed him” (*I Saw 35/Ra’aytu 39*). As Barghouti crosses the bridge he reverses its thirty year old connotation for Palestinians so that it becomes a metaphor for reunion, return and survival. As Barghouti reflects on whether he will be admitted or not he narrates a story that undermines the function of borders. He remembers a time when he had the chance to

go to Qunaytera in Syria in 1979. Despite the presence of barbed wires he was able to touch the Occupied land on the other side; he tells his companion at the time: “Here is the Occupied Territory, Abu Nizar; I can hold it with my hand!” (*I Saw 6/Ra’aytu 7*). Remembering this story at this critical moment when his admission is contingent upon Israeli permission is very significant. Neither Occupation nor Israeli checkpoints can prevent people’s access to the land.

When Barghouti crosses the border, he only finds the Israeli story/narrative visible. The posters at the border narrate Israeli suffering at Massada¹⁹ (*I Saw 14/Ra’aytu 17*). At this site which remembers the suffering of one group and forgets the suffering of another, Barghouti recalls stories and memories of his family and friends—past stories that challenge a present geopolitical reality.

Palestinians do not only suffer at the borders of their own country but at other borders as well. By narrating Palestinian experience at borders, Barghouti demonstrates how the Oslo Agreement has neither changed their situation at their borders nor at the borders of other countries:

Neither this ID nor even the new Palestinian passport that the Palestinian authority has started to issue after the Oslo Agreement will solve our problems at borders. The states of the world acknowledge the Palestinian ID and the Palestinian passport on paper only. But at the borders, in airports, they tell the holder of these papers: ‘You have to be pre-approved by security.’ And this pre-approval we will never obtain. (Barghouti, *I Saw 139/Ra’aytu 150-151*)

Passports are a means to allow people to cross from one border to another. However, with Palestinians it has an opposite effect; it detains them at borders. Barghouti was not only displaced from his homeland but also from Egypt where he lived with wife and son. Palestinians are made to feel different and out of place everywhere.

Borders have also entailed a spatial-temporal disruption that is pointed out in the text from the very beginning. As Barghouti crosses the bridge, he travels in time to the moment when 1967 disrupted his world—when his world became occupied. Life was moving smoothly until 1967 disrupted its normality.²⁰ Barghouti was expecting to graduate and his family was looking forward to the day when he would come back with the degree. Their home was painted for this grand event but 1967 marked a shift: “I am awarded a BA from the Department of English Language and Literature, and I fail to find a wall on which to hang my certificate” (*I Saw 3/Ra’aytu 4*). As the land is remapped, Barghouti’s status changes: “From the summer of ’67 I became that displaced stranger whom I had always thought was someone else” (*I Saw 3/Ra’aytu 5*).

Barghouti foregrounds stories that reveal the spatial distortion and the temporal disruption that followed the occupation. He notes the transformation of the land on his way to Ramallah: “I used to tell my friends at university that Palestine was covered with trees and shrubs and wild flowers. What are these hills? Bare and chalky. Had I been lying to people, then? Or has Israel changed the route to the bridge and exchanged it for this dull road that I do not remember ever seeing in my childhood” (*I Saw 28/Ra’aytu 32*). Israel has transformed his homeland. Now what he sees are the Israeli flag and settlements. Israeli Occupation not only distorted the place but it has also locked the

place within the realm of the past: “The Occupation forced us to remain with the old. That is its crime” (*I Saw* 69/*Ra’aytu* 76).

Borders have caused a rupture that has set Palestinians apart and challenged their attempts in creating a nation-state that brings them all together. 1948 led to their displacement and 1967 divided them further. Since then, they are no longer located within the same geographical continuum. Members of Barghouti’s family end up living in separate countries and their family gathering after 1967 takes place in a hotel in Amman ironically called Caravan Hotel (*I Saw* 24-27/*Ra’aytu* 27-31). Moreover, the text reveals how borders are barriers in happiness and in sorrow; weddings take place outside borders and Barghouti hears about family deaths from a distance. Borders do not even give them the chance to go back when there is death: “you discover that you cannot join the funeral, accompany him to the grave, because you have no passport, or no visa, or no residence or because you are forbidden from entry” (*I Saw* 135/*Ra’aytu* 145). Colonial borders prevent reunions but the text demonstrates how Palestinians have developed various strategies to maintain their bond as a nation so that it is not contingent upon continuous space.

According to Migdal, “the space of a group . . . might differ from a state in that it might be discontinuous” (8). Colonialism has deprived Palestinians of having their own unified space but it has not expropriated the spatial configuration of their own “mental map” – to use Migdal’s term. The occupation has scattered them across the globe, however, it did not sever their national bond. Palestinians who remained—Barghouti narrates—found strategies to keep hold of the properties of those who could not return:

Many people have registered their
possessions in the names of their

relatives so that the Occupation cannot confiscate those possessions as belonging to absentees. This is how the Palestinian lands and homes, whose owners work in the Diaspora, were saved. This is how the olive groves were maintained and how the land was looked after and plowed and turned and combed and watered. If it had not been for the mutual trust between those who were there and those who were absent, Israel would have confiscated everything. (*I Saw* 104-105/*Ra'aytu* 113)

Massad points out how in the Palestinian context, national identity since the expropriation of the land has been contingent not upon “territory” but upon “paternity”: “while the land as mother was responsible for the reproduction of Palestinians until 1947, the rape disqualified her from this role. It is now fathers who will reproduce the nation. Territory was replaced by paternity” (45). In the light of Massad’s theoretical analysis, the central role of Barghouti’s brother, Mounif, in the text becomes clear. He takes on a parental role sending Barghouti money when the latter was a student and dictating to him his conditions to continue his financial support (*I Saw* 111/*Ra'aytu* 120). Mounif is physically absent during Barghouti’s return but he is brought to life in the text: “Here I step on a patch of earth that his feet will never reach. But the mirror in the waiting room reflected his face when I looked into it” (*I Saw* 36/*Ra'aytu* 39). His consistent references to him as he recalls the past points to the latter’s central role in his life—a role that that reflects the importance of the elder brother figure in the collective Palestinian experience:

Someone should write about the role of the older brother in the Palestinian family. From his adolescence he is afflicted with the role of brother and father and

mother and head of family and dispenser of advice. He is the child who has always to prefer others to himself. The child who gives and does not acquire. The child who keeps watch over flock both older and younger and so excels at noticing things. (*I Saw* 35/*Ra'aytu* 39)

Thus, Mounif's death and Barghouti's return to the land can be interpreted on the metaphorical level as an attempt on the part of Barghouti to reclaim "territory" after the loss of "paternity."

"Time" is another strategy which Palestinians have resorted to after the loss of "space" in order to maintain their national bond as Richard van Leeuwen writes: "[t]he elimination of space as a unifying force leads to the prevalence of the time-factor" (201). Colonial power attempts to obliterate Palestinian identity through expropriation of the land, however, Palestinians have managed to transpose their attachment from space onto time: "My relationship with place is a relationship with time. I move in patches of time, some I have lost and some I possess for a while and then I lose because I am always without a place. I try to regain a personal time that has passed. . . . 'Ein al-Deir is not a place, it is a time" (*I Saw* 87/*Ra'aytu* 95). Time is also a site for the Palestinian self to reside beyond the fragmentation, dislocation and exilic condition wrought upon it in the world outside. In a section titled "Living in Time", Barghouti writes: "From Baghdad to Budapest to Amman to Cairo again. It was impossible to hold on to a particular location. . . . I do not live in a place. I live in time, in the components of my psyche, in a sensitivity special to me" (*I Saw* 91/*Ra'aytu* 98). The interlink between time and identity is clear as Barghouti wonders whether the temporal rupture can be bridged: "They lived their time

here and I lived my time there. Can the two times be patched together? And how? They have to be.” (*I Saw* 85-86/*Ra’aytu* 93). Healing the time rupture becomes a substitute for the inability to heal the distortion of space; space is usually controlled by those who are powerful—those who have the advanced equipment to control the land.

Dispossessed of their history, memory for Palestinians is an important strategy of resistance that challenges geopolitical remapping of the land and colonial historiographical attempts to sever people’s link with their homeland. Abu-Lughod and Sa’di note how: “Memory is one of the few weapons available to those whom the tide of history has turned. It can slip in to rattle the wall. Palestinian memory . . . is dissident memory, counter-memory. It contributes to a counter-history” (6). Barghouti’s memoir represents “counter-history.” Histories in Barghouti’s narrative do not belong to those who are powerful but to those who are victimized. Borders entail the loss of the land, the inability to move between borders but not the loss of national identity. Israel has enforced a map but a text like that of Barghouti uncovers the “mental map” of Palestinians—a map that defies geopolitical borders—borders that distorted the land, displaced its inhabitants and prevent many from return.

Conclusion

Anyone reading history should understand from the start that there is no such thing as impartial history. All written history is partial in two senses. It is partial in that it is only a tiny *part* of what really happened. That is a limitation that can never be overcome. And it is partial in that it inevitably takes sides, by what it includes or omits, what it emphasizes or deemphasizes. It may do this openly or deceptively, consciously or sub-consciously. (Zinn 43)

History, as Howard Zinn argues, is not “impartial” or objective. Modern historiography demonstrates how history is written by the powerful and, therefore, represents their perspective. In other words, history is not about reality but the construction of reality. Herein lies the central role of *In an Antique Land* and *Ra’aytu Rām Allāh*; they retrieve silences in official history by giving voice to the voiceless. Ghosh and Barghouti provide us with an insight into what Zinn calls “the use and abuse of history” (41).²¹ Ghosh’s narrative ends in 1990 during the prelude to the First Gulf War (1991). At the time, Nabeel—one of the villagers with whom Ghosh had developed a bond—was working in Iraq while Ghosh was in Egypt on a visit. Together with the other villagers, he was watching the news on television about the return of many back home. As he narrates, his description of the view on the screen illustrates the workings of official history: “We were crowded around the TV set, watching carefully, minutely, looking at every *face* we could see. There was nothing to be seen except crowds: *Nabeel had vanished into the anonymity of History*” (353 emphasis mine). Ghosh exposes the “abuse of history” (to borrow Zinn’s phrase) which perceives subalterns as one lot. Each

and every “face” represents a story but within the realm of official history, they are indistinguishable.

“Partiality”—as Zinn demonstrates in the above citation—is not only about what is included or excluded but also about remembering “only a tiny *part* of what really happened” (43). “Partiality” of history in this sense is highlighted towards the end of Barghouti’s memoir. Barghouti points out the “secondly” tactic embedded in the Israeli discourse in his reference to a speech Rabin gives at the White House in 1993 (during the signing of Oslo Accords) in which he talks about Israeli victimization:

It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: start your story from “Secondly”. Yes this is what Rabin did. He simply neglected to speak of what happened first. Start your story with “Secondly”, and the world will be turned upside down. . . . It is enough to start your story with “Secondly”, for my grandmother Umm ‘Ata, to become the criminal and Ariel Sharon her victim. (*I Saw* 178/*Ra’aytu* 195)

The two examples cited above reveal succinctly each writer’s approach in resisting and subverting the process of erasure in official history. Like the viewers who focus on the faces on television, Ghosh—throughout the text—zooms into individual stories of subalterns lest the “faces” get lost in the big picture. On the other hand, retrieving past memories in Barghouti is a means to restore the big picture since a “partial” perception would only distort the truth. While Ghosh’s focus on individual (hi)stories is a means of going beyond the collective story of the nation (stories that entail boundaries) to uncover cross-cultural affinities, Barghouti retrieves individual stories as a means to forge a

collective story of the Palestinian nation—a story that resists colonial attempts to erase Palestinian national identity.

“Return” is a prominent motif in both works; Ghosh’s narrative ends with the return of Nabeel and others back home, while Barghouti’s memoir ends with the latter leaving Ramallah in the hope of coming back later with his son Tamim. Nabeel’s return recalls Ben Yiju’s eventual return to Egypt from Mangalore in medieval times thereby establishing a link between the Egyptian villager and the Tunisian merchant—a link that reveals cross-cultural affinities across space and time. In Barghouti, the future return of the father and son is an affirmation of the survival of the Palestinian nation across time despite their fragmentation across space. Moreover, “return” is an important theme in both works in so far as they shed light on the (un)changeability of the two villages in Egypt and Palestine—which both writers revisit—as well as each writer’s conception of the idea of “progress.” During Ghosh’s later revisit to the village, he notes the remarkable change it has undergone. As many from the village travel to work in the Gulf, specifically Iraq (with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War), the money they send back reflects on the socio-economic conditions of the village and gives it a modern, urban look; villagers move up on the social ladder and houses are refurbished and supplied with modern gadgets and appliances. There is a skeptical tone in Ghosh’s description of the change (*Antique Land* 291-299). Barghouti is also critical of the socio-economic conditions of his village Deir Ghassanah but for a different reason. He resents the fact it hardly changed and blames this on the occupation which prevented his village from catching up with the modern world outside (*I Saw* 67-70/*Ra’aytu* 73-76). In Ghosh’s text, the village opens up on the world outside while in Barghouti’s memoir the occupation keeps it

detached. Progress and modernity are viewed differently by both writers; Ghosh sees its distorting impact in wiping out the distinctive rural character of the village whereas Barghouti sees the positive aspect of modernity and views its lack as crippling. On reading both texts, it is clear how modernity is neither completely positive nor negative; it has its upsides and downsides.

The telephone, a modern invention, defies the separating force of borders in both works. Barghouti points out its important role in linking Palestinians across the globe in a poignant description: “[t]he Palestinian has become a telephonic person, living by the sound of voices carried to him across huge distances” (*I Saw* 126-127/*Ra’aytu* 137-138). Barghouti recalls how he knew about his father and his elder brother’s (Mounif) death through a telephone call. A phone call—he notes—is the means through which Palestinians communicate to each other good or bad news (*I Saw* 126-127/*Ra’aytu* 137-138). The occupation has cut off Palestinians’ link with modernity but, ironically, it is a modern invention that helps them maintain their national bond. The telephone also challenges national borders in Ghosh; it enables him to communicate from the United States with Nabeel in Iraq. Ghosh seems to be skeptical of the fact that modernity has penetrated the village but, ironically, it is a product of modernity that enables him to keep in touch with Egyptian villagers like Nabeel. Here modernity plays a role in maintaining cross-cultural affinities. However, this modern means of communication also reflects Western conceptions of the Middle East map. Though the international code for Iraq is in the directory, Ghosh has to call Nabeel through an operator because he receives a message every time that the number is non-existent. Eventually, he is able to reach him

(*Antique Land* 345-347). This is clearly subversive of the geopolitical map embedded in the message he hears.

Irony plays a central subversive role in both texts.²² For Ghosh, the fact that traces of the past exist in the contemporary world is ironic in so far as it undermines the suppressive force of official history embedded in people's worldview. For him, the presence of the shrine of Sidi Abu-Hasira in Egypt stands for the survival of "intertwined histories" that are left out of official narratives (*Antique Land* 339-342). It is also ironic that the West which played a central role in imposing these boundaries in the region is the very site which enables Ghosh to subvert contemporary boundaries. Western libraries make it possible for him to reconstruct the cosmopolitan worlds of Ben Yiju and Bomma. In a similar vein, irony plays a significant subversive role in Barghouti. It subverts the rhetoric of victimization in Rabin's Oslo speech. Barghouti reflects bitterly and satirically that Palestinians must be the victimizers if Israel is the "victim" (*I Saw* 177-179/*Ra'aytu* 194-196). In Barghouti's text, irony is intertwined with metaphor. Barghouti unites with his family in Amman but they stay in a hotel which aptly holds the name "Caravan"—a name that reflects their nomadic condition and that of many Palestinians. Here nomadism has a different connotation from that which emerges in Ghosh's text. The nomadic life of Ben Yiju and other merchants in the precolonial world is looked up to as one that represents cosmopolitan diversity. On reading both works, the change in the meaning of "nomadism" becomes clear—a change that takes place with the rise of borders and nation-states.

Literary metaphors and poetic style distinguish Barghouti's memoir from Ghosh's work which mainly partakes of the historical and the anthropological. The central

metaphor in Barghouti's work is the bridge. As he walks on it, he addresses it in a poetic and metaphorically loaded passage expressing his inability to forgive it (*I Saw* 9-10/*Ra'aytu* 12). The fig tree also stands as an important metaphor in the text. Barghouti revisits his home Dar Ra'd and finds that the fig tree in their house is replaced by a block of cement; his aunt had got rid of it after the death and the departure of family members (*I Saw* 55-56/*Ra'aytu* 60-62). The occupation has placed Palestinians in a situation where they are no longer able to maintain one of the most important economic resources and cultural symbols in their life. The occupation involves not only military control but also the destruction of Palestinian cultural life in order to deny their existence as a nation. At this point, as Barghouti recounts his visit and the absence of the fig tree, he inserts a short poem—one of the numerous poems interspersed in the text—where he reflects on his relationship to his childhood home:

Does Dar Ra'd reject my story about Dar Ra'd?

Are we the same at parting and meeting?

Are you you? Am I me?

Does the stranger return to where he was?

Is he himself returning to a place? (I Saw

55/Ra'aytu 60-61)

Though the literary aspect is very prominent in Barghouti's memoir, his work also partakes of the anthropological and therefore overlaps with Ghosh's work in the same way the latter partakes of the literary and the autobiographical.²³ Barghouti offers an extensive description of the fields, the land and the people in the past and the present—an approach that gives his text an anthropological aspect. In a similar vein, the historical and

the anthropological in Ghosh's text merge with the literary through the latter's speculative style when he is unable to find historical evidence about certain incidents in the lives of Bomma and Ben Yiju. For example, he speculates that Ben Yiju probably married Ashu out of love since he has no historical evidence about that (*Antique Land* 230).²⁴ He also speculates with regards to Ben Yiju's final destination and points out that the version he prefers is that Ben Yiju finally settled in Egypt (*Antique Land* 328). Ghosh's work also partakes of memoir in so far as he records his own personal experience during his scholarly visit to Egypt as well his early childhood memories in Bengal.

Humor in Ghosh also undermines the scholarly, factual style associated with anthropological and historical writings. At one point, Ghosh relates an incident when one of the villagers, 'Amm Taha, runs after a hoopoe based on his superstitious belief that this will solve his wife's infertility (*Antique Land* 128-129). This humorous incident is followed by Ghosh's comment on his own reaction. In this sense, the text departs from ethnographic works where an incident like that would be employed to comment on the object of the study itself. As for Barghouti, his text is not only a record of Palestinian pain and dispossession; it also incorporates humor. Barghouti recounts an amusing story when he and several members of his family were crossing the borders between France and Switzerland. The policeman is baffled to find members of one family "Barghouti" holding so many different passports (*I Saw* 138-139/*Ra'aytu* 149-150). Humor in this story is subversive of a site that is continuously associated with Palestinian suffering. Earlier in the text, Barghouti notes that Palestinians' affliction does not preclude their

share of the comic and points out how it corresponds to the Palestinian predicament: “We are. . . living in a time of historical and geographical farce” (*I Saw* 118/*Ra’aytu*128).

With regards to the opening section in each book: the prologue in Ghosh’s text starts with his travel in time in an attempt to reconstruct the history of Ben Yiju and Bomma.²⁵ By the end of this section, the link between the medieval narrative and the contemporary narrative is established through the parallel travel routes of both Ghosh and Ben Yiju; Tunisia, Egypt and India feature in the journeys of both. The concluding lines in this section establish a link between both narrative strands through an implicit reference to the common grounds between Ghosh and Bomma (since both of them come from India) (*Antique Land* 19). Unlike in Ghosh’s text where the history of others sheds light on his own personal experience in Egypt, Barghouti starts with his own personal experience. Here the shift is from the personal to the collective; his personal experience highlights the experience of many.

It is noteworthy that displacement is not only confined to forced migration from one’s homeland. Borders lead to exile within the colonial and postcolonial contexts. In the Palestinian context, many have experienced serial exile. Barghouti is exiled once from his homeland and then from Egypt where he settled with his Egyptian wife. In Ghosh’s text, the Egyptian villagers experience voluntary exile; they choose to travel to the Gulf and are accordingly separated from their families and loved ones. Postcolonial wars over national borders result in their double displacement: first during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) which leads many Arabs, and particularly Egyptians, to travel to Iraq given the deficiency in its labor market as Iraqi men were mobilized for war and there was an acute need for workers in different sectors of the economy. This is followed by a

second forced displacement which takes place on the eve of the First Gulf War (1991) and the return of Egyptian workers to the village. Both texts end with characters crossing borders. Colonial borders lead Barghouti, like many others, out of his country yet the memoir ends on a note of optimism; he leaves with the hope of coming back again with his son Tamim. Likewise, Nabeel—one of the villagers in Ghosh's text—is on his way back home. The xenophobic, nationalist world leads Egyptians back to the confines of their nation-state; however, the picture is not totally bleak. Ghosh's presence in Egypt at this particular moment when chauvinistic wars are setting nations apart is significant as traces of precolonial cross-cultural encounters still exist.

Moreover, the structure of both texts contests the temporal configuration embedded within the construction of boundaries. In Ghosh's text, stories do not follow the formal structure of history where events are usually constructed so that they unfold in a linear chronological order. This latter structure has been associated with a conception of history that is dominant within the Eurocentric paradigm—a model that bears on the conception of the relationship between East and West, between “primitive” and “civilized.” Ghosh's narrative partakes of linearity and non-linearity. It keeps alternating between the past and the present (the medieval world of Bomma and the contemporary world of Ghosh) while the events in each narrative generally unfold within a linear structure.²⁶ On the structural level, past and present are brought together through a cyclical structure that starts with introducing the medieval subalterns, Bomma and Ben Yiju, and ends with reference to the contemporary subaltern, Nabeel. Bringing the past and present together through this cyclical structure is in line with Ghosh's attempt to uncover continuities between the past and the present. Moreover, the text inverts the

structure of official history by relegating it to the background; it stands as a backdrop to the stories of the medieval and contemporary subalterns.

Similarly, in Barghouti's memoir, the structure of the narrative contests the linearity of history; it moves between past and present within a structure that has a beginning and an end. This alternation between past and present matches the colonial distortion of the land and the identity fragmentation that followed. It is also related to the temporal rupture that took place since occupation—a point noted in the text. However, the structure of the memoir can also be read as a challenge to the structure of official historiography since it foregrounds the non-linear sequence of memory—an important Palestinian resistance strategy in the light of colonial attempts to dispossess them of their history. Moreover, it reflects the inseparability of the past and the present—which is integral to Barghouti's vision. Though both texts keep moving between the past and the present, there is a difference. In Ghosh's text, past and present are presented through two separate but thematically linked narratives. However, in Barghouti's memoir, past and present are interwoven in the same narrative.

By the end of his memoir, Barghouti reflects on the impact of this journey and notes how it has enabled him to come face to face with his memories. He recounts how on “cross[ing] the forbidden bridge” he reflects on the fragmented status of his existence (*I Saw* 181/*Ra'aytu* 199). Barghouti's reconnection with his homeland and his first-hand encounters with his fellow Palestinians is a journey that leads him to come to terms with his fragmented identity. As for Ghosh, his initial intimidation by some villagers' attitude—which culminates in his confrontation with Imam Ibrahim—is eventually replaced by a spirit of mutual acceptance and tolerance. Both works construct “alternative

maps” of the region—maps that challenge and subvert the contemporary one enforced by dominant powers.

Endnotes

¹ According to Migdal: “people’s mental maps. . . divide home from alien territory, the included from the excluded, the familiar from the other. Mental maps incorporate elements of the meaning people attach to spatial configurations, the loyalties they hold, the emotions and passions that groupings evoke, and their cognitive ideas about how the world is constructed” (7).

² Amitav Ghosh relies on S. D. Goitein’s translations of medieval manuscripts in reconstructing the life of medieval subalterns.

³ Khushwant Singh’s historical novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is a very good representation of displacement and brutal violence many suffered from following the Partition of 1947. The book focuses on the forced exile Muslims were subjected to in their village after years of peaceful co-existence with Sikhs. With massacres taking place all over the country and trains carrying dead bodies on both sides of the borders, the peace and the harmony of this village comes to an end. Muslims are forced to leave their home village and move to Pakistan.

⁴ Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956) is an Indian-Bengali writer. He has not only written fiction but also non-fictional works. His works include: *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988) *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *Dancing in Cambodia* (1998). His two most recent publications: *The Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011) are the first two works in the *Ibis Trilogy*. Initially Ghosh was a social anthropologist. In an interview with Claire Chambers, he says that after his PhD, he did not continue working in this field “because anthropology was creating a kind of hegemonic voice” (29). Mourid Barghouti (b. 1944) is a Palestinian poet. He published twelve poetry collections and two memoirs: the first is *Ra’aytu Rām Allāh (I Saw Ramallah* translated by Ahdaf Soueif [2000]) which won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature in 1997. His latest memoir is titled *Wulidutu hunak, wulidutu huna* (2009). The book was translated by Humphrey Davis as *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* and published by Bloomsbury in November 2011. For more on both writers see www.amitavghosh.com and <http://mouridbarghouti.net/mouridweb/English/index.htm>

⁵ Judeo-Arabic is medieval Arabic transcribed in Hebrew. The Arabic used was colloquial (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 101-104).

⁶ The Geniza is a Hebrew word derived from “ganj” the Persian word for storehouse. There was a geniza in all Middle East synagogues where papers and documents were kept to avoid throwing away written material that had the name of God on it (Ghosh, *Antique Land* 56-57).

⁷ In her review of the book, Ahdaf Soueif, a prominent Egyptian writer, notes that Ghosh offers “lively and authentic scenes” of the village. She commends his efforts in giving the *fellaheen* a voice but is skeptical of the advertisement note of the book which runs as follows: “an intimate biography of the private life of a country, Egypt, from the

Crusades to the Gulf War” (7). With regards to Ghosh’s representation of the Egyptian village, Anton Shammas, a Palestinian-Israeli writer notes that it “rivals anything by the masters of social realism in modern Egyptian literature” (26).

⁸ The Oslo Accords referred to as (The Declaration of Principles [DOP]) was signed at a ceremony held in Washington and was attended by Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin and Bill Clinton.

⁹ See the edited collection titled *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa* edited by Cronin and *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* edited by Burke III and Yaghoubian.

¹⁰ Hegel writes that history “travels from east to west: for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning” (qtd. in Gandhi 23).

¹¹ In his review of the book, Vinay Lal notes that: “The more significant thrust of Ghosh’s endeavor . . . is to suggest to us that the pre-modern age may in fact have been more modern than the modern itself” (97).

¹² Ghosh’s critique of nationalism in this interview and his later emphasis on the importance of nation-states in a 2007 interview with T. Vijay Kumar should not be read as a contradiction on Ghosh’s part. In his article “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh points out that he turns to the past not to look for a solution since “that was a historical moment and it passed. . . [but] rather to evoke the desire and hopes that animated it. . .” (n. pag.).

¹³ A 1961 summit held in Belgrade marked the launch of the Non-Aligned Movement—an alliance that comprised a number of nation-states (more than 100 nowadays) that took a neutral stance with regards to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Issues pertaining to the Third World were on their list of priorities. The Movement was co-founded by Presidents Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Nehru (India) Tito (Yugoslavia), Sukarno (Indonesia) and Nkrumah (Ghana).

¹⁴ Edward Said notes the interlink between both temporal domains. In this respect, Said gives credit to T. S. Eliot’s idea about the interlink between both in the literary and aesthetic field (*Culture and Imperialism* 1-3).

¹⁵ As Barghouti recalls Rabin’s speech during the ceremony held for signing the Oslo Accords and the latter’s reference to themselves as “victims”, Barghouti points out the distortion of the truth when the story starts not from what happened first but what happened “secondly” (*I Saw* 177-179/*Ra’aytu* 194-196). All citations from Barghouti’s memoir will include the page of the English translation followed after a slash by the page of the original Arabic.

¹⁶ Mounif, Barghouti's brother, dies before going back to his homeland. [reference is made several times in the book among which are (*I Saw* 12/*Ra'aytu* 15), (*I Saw* 35-36/*Ra'aytu* 39-40), (*I Saw* 163-166/*Ra'aytu* 177-182)]

¹⁷ Barghouti's stories demonstrate the separating force of borders in the lives of Palestinians. Friends and family die in exile; stories include the death of his brother Mounif, Naji al-'Ali, the prominent Palestinian cartoonist and the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani. Also, weddings take place outside their homeland since a family reunion is impossible (*I Saw* 148-149/*Ra'aytu* 161). Barghouti recounts Palestinian suffering at airports, the dilemma of those who live the Diaspora as they are caught up in a difficult situation—unable to return to their homeland and enduring humiliation where they live. In this respect, Barghouti cites Palestinians' suffering in Lebanon where they were only allowed to work in low profile jobs and whose departure from Lebanon excludes any possibility of return (*I Saw* 139-140/*Ra'aytu* 151). Moreover, when he visits Deir Ghassanah, his birthplace, he points to the impact of Occupation on fixing the place in the past (*I Saw* 69/*Ra'aytu* 76).

¹⁸ The meaning of bridge in *Webster's* is as follows: “any structure of wood, stone, brick, or iron raised to afford convenient passage over a river, pond, etc.” (qtd. in Moughrabi 110).

¹⁹ Massada is the mountain site of Jewish resistance to the Romans in the first century of our era; they chose suicide rather than give in to the Romans. The place stands for Jewish resistance and resilience.

²⁰ The year 1967 represents an end to normality for Barghouti because he comes from Ramallah in the West Bank. However, for others it started in 1948. In his article titled “Catastrophe, Memory and Identity: Al-Nakbah as a Component of Palestinian Identity” Ahmad H. Sa'di discusses the spatial and temporal disruption and the end of normality in Palestinian life since the *Nakba* of 1948.

²¹ This is the title of Chapter 4 in Zinn's book entitled *Declarations of Independence: Cross-examining American Ideology*. The cited excerpt was taken from the same chapter.

²² See Javed Majeed's article “Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*: The Ethnographer-Historian and the Limits of Irony” on the role of comedy and irony in the text.

²³ In her article titled “Amitav Ghosh's Ethnographic Fictions: Intertextual Links between *In An Antique Land* and His Doctoral Thesis” Neelam Srivastava looks at how the ethnographic narrative of his PhD was transformed into a literary work in *In an Antique Land* by comparing between the structure and stylistics of both.

²⁴ In this respect, Mongia writes how “the production of both history and fiction is laid bare” (159).

²⁵ The Prologue is the first section in Ghosh's book. It is followed by 5 other sections respectively titled: "Lataifa," "Nashawy," "Mangalore," "Going Back," and finally the "Epilogue."

²⁶ Ghosh visits the village of Lataifa then Nashawy. His second visit to Lataifa frames his recollection of his first visit to Nashawy.

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