Old World Orders: Amitav Ghosh and the Writing of Nostalgia

Of Antique Lands and Friendly Seas

If one were to think of a contemporary text that has appealed to a variety of critics for its vision of travel, migration, and the lived experience of cosmopolitanism, Amitav Ghosh’s In an Antique Land would surely emerge as a contender. On its first American appearance in 1993, Clifford Geertz celebrated its historical vision of a “multicultural bazaar,” and his favorable reading was echoed with only minor caveats by numerous reviews in the Times Literary Supplement, the New York Times Book Review, the American Scholar, and similar brokers in the creation of metropolitan tastes. Indeed, the book was much anticipated by its readership, excerpts of it having already been published in the literary journal Granta, and portions of it having appeared in a more scholarly tone in an issue of Subaltern Studies, a journal on the radar of most scholars of postcolonial cultural studies. One such early reader was James Clifford, whose much-cited essay “Traveling Cultures” drew upon the excerpt in Granta. Clifford’s reinvocation of In an Antique Land and its celebration of the “transit lounge” of culture in the opening pages of his collection of essays Routes has virtually sealed the already formidable canonical status of Ghosh’s text in contemporary U.S. cultural theory. Written as a “history in the guise of a traveler’s tale,” In an Antique Land is at once a travelogue, a detective story, a romance with a lost world, and an anthropologist’s attempt to write a dialogic ethnography. It is not a text that is immune from some of the slippages of what we now commonly recognize as the Orientalist imaginary, but its participation in that discursive economy is calculated, ironic, or as Ali Behdad might put it, self-consciously belated. One way of describing the book is to suggest that the two main narratives interwoven here are those of anthropology and history. The anthropological narrative is that of Ghosh going to two villages in the Nile Delta in Egypt, the first time for almost a year in 1980–81 to conduct fieldwork related to his doctoral dissertation, and then again briefly in 1988 and...
1990. These later visits are arguably those of a writer less invested in the formal profession of academic anthropology and more those of someone seeking to reconnect with a community of friends left behind. They are also the visits of a writer who has, in the intervening years, found a renewed interest in the historical connections between Egypt, the subject of his study, and India, which is, as passports often say, his “country of origin.” It is at this juncture, then, that the historical narrative enters the frame. For, in addition to being an ethnographic memoir, *In an Antique Land* is also the story of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant active in the India trade in the twelfth century. In its simplest form, Ben Yiju’s is the story of a man originally from Ifriqiya who went as a trader to Mangalore on the Malabar Coast sometime before A.D. 1132 and lived there for nearly two decades. He seems to have had a female slave named Ashu whom he manumitted in 1132. It is likely that he married Ashu and had two children with her. As far as his business interests are concerned, he is known to have had a factory in the area that worked with bronze goods, and we also know that his overseas trade was primarily handled by a slave whose name and identity are subject to debate. There is evidence that in 1149 Ben Yiju went to Aden, a major gateway on the trade route between India and Egypt, and that at some point thereafter he moved to the city of Fustat, known today as Old Cairo.

If the anthropological narrative is based on Ghosh’s own fieldwork, the historical one is based on an extraordinary triumph of chance over will, of luck over intent. Medieval Jews believed that it was sacrilegious to destroy any piece of paper that might have the name of God inscribed upon it. Rather than allowing such papers to be destroyed naturally by the elements or by accidental fires, Jewish communities in a variety of places deposited such documents in a special chamber in the synagogue called the *geniza*. Soon, what was meant to be a practice related to documents of a religious nature was extended to almost all documents written in the Hebrew script, which came to be considered holy in itself. Secular documents, like trade records, everyday correspondence, deeds of manumission, and the like, were all thrown into the *geniza* for proper, religiously sanctioned burial at a later date. Through what might have been an act of sheer negligence, one such *geniza* was never properly emptied, discarded documents collecting in it over a period of several centuries. The history of the discovery of this storehouse of documents—the Cairo Geniza—and the resultant scramble for its contents, is part of the larger politics of knowledge that Ghosh invites us to consider. The reconstruction of the story of Ben Yiju is based mainly on documents found in this, shall we say, dustbin of history.

For much of our knowledge of the world of Ben Yiju and the Cairo Geniza we are indebted to the formidable work of S. D. Goitein. Born in April 1900 in a small village in Bavaria, Goitein pursued his studies at Frankfurt University, where at the age of twenty-three he completed a dissertation entitled “Prayer in the Qur’an.” Moving to Palestine thereafter, he became in 1925 the first instructor of Islamic...
studies at the newly opened Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The research on the
traditions of the Yemenite Jews that Goitein initiated at this post continued to reso-
nate in his later work on the Cairo Geniza. In 1957 he moved to the United States
to fill the chair in Arabic studies at the University of Pennsylvania and in 1971 was
appointed as a long-term fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.
It was in the United States that he concentrated on studying the materials from the
Cairo Geniza, and by the time of his death in 1985 he had completed numerous
studies on the life and times of the people associated with it. His crowning achieve-
ment was the six-volume study *A Mediterranean Society* (which, by my rough calcula-
tions, exceeds three thousand pages), but he also wrote a book entitled *Jews and
Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages* (1955) and edited a volume, *Letters of Medieval
Jewish Traders*, both of which are of immediate interest to readers of Ghosh.

Goitein’s work makes a prominent appearance in Ghosh’s book and is supple-
mented by the work of numerous scholars who are cited in the last few pages of *In
an Antique Land*. My project in this article is to draw on some of this scholarship in
order to examine the political as well as aesthetic tensions in Ghosh’s imaginative
reconstruction of this older world and especially his attempts to link it with our own
contemporaneity. It should be clear by the end of this exercise that the point is not
to criticize Ghosh’s fidelity to the historical record but rather to understand the
dynamics of what might be called the “production of history” in a nostalgic mode.
I will suggest that the all too common structural affinity of such nostalgia with
discourses of purity and authenticity is challenged in Ghosh’s narrative, where cul-
tural, racial, and economic hybridity, mixture, and exchange appear as privileged
terms. A central part of my project is to track, in both the historical and anthro-
pological accounts, the political valences of these alleged mixings and to question
what other processes they may elide. Since the writing of nostalgia is as much about
the forgetting as the remembrance of the past, I will attempt to foreground what it
is that the text “forgets” in its desire to weave a nostalgic narrative. In the final
analysis, like most commentators on Ghosh’s text, and like the students in my classes
who consistently enjoy studying it, I find the text’s nostalgia both appealing aesthet-
ically and inspiring politically. But as a critic who has taken on Ghosh’s challenge
to read the historical scholarship on Ben Yiju’s times, I find that the book deserves
a more sustained scrutiny.

*Syncretism, Antisyncretism,
and the “Enforcers of History”*

What is evident in *In an Antique Land* is that, despite its alleged mystery,
the slave Bomma’s identity, first as an Indian man and, moreover, as one who comes
from a lower-caste, non-Sanskritic community, is a necessary and enabling fiction
for Ghosh. Unlike the scholarly venue of *Subaltern Studies*, where Ghosh expresses
no personal preferences, his sense of delight in having finally discovered a subaltern presence who is in many ways the “other’s other”—the lowest of the low—is not hidden from the readers of the longer narrative. It is only such a subaltern who, outside of the grasp of a majoritarian Sanskritic fold, would have shared with his master Ben Yiju an affinity for “the hidden and subversive counter-image of the orthodox religions” (263) of his time and invested in practices such as exorcism cults, magical rites, and the visitations of saints’ graves and shrines. Ghosh writes, “It was probably those inarticulate counter-beliefs, rather than the formal conversion that Bomma probably had to undergo while in Ben Yiju’s service, that eventually became a small patch of level ground between them: the matrilineally-descended Tulu and the patriarchal Jew who would otherwise seem to stand on different sides of an unbridgeable chasm” (263).

The fact that the world of the Cairo Geniza exhibited a significant degree of religious syncretism is of great interest to Ghosh. The most literal form of this syncretism, he suggests, may well be seen in the language of the geniza documents themselves. Ben Yiju “and his friends were all orthodox, observant Jews, strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity,” writes Ghosh. “But they were also part of the Arabic-speaking world, and the everyday language of their religious life was one they shared with the Muslims of that region: when they invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah, and more often than not their invocations were in Arabic forms, such as inshâ’allah and al-hamdul-illâh” (261). In addition, the close proximity of the religions meant that Judaism in Egypt would soon see the influence of Islamic Sufism, and the practice of worshipping at the shrines of saints would become common to both the Jewish and Islamic communities. Ghosh contends that such syncretic practices were, over time, policed, and with the advent of modernity their histories were erased. In such a context, any residual syncretism evident today is to Ghosh a privileged site of political resistance itself—and particularly of political resistance to the repressive state. For instance, Ghosh celebrates the folk narratives that he hears in Egypt about the saint Abu-Kanaka, whose grave is said to have resisted any efforts by the government to build a canal through it, and again the story of the Bhuta shrine in Mangalore, which has similarly put in check the construction of a road from the city of Mangalore to its new port. Ghosh sees in these narratives a popular critique of the ideologies and practices of state-sponsored “development.”

Perhaps the most significant episode in the text in which the modern fate of syncretism is put to a test is the encounter Ghosh has in Egypt on his second visit in 1988. On his way out of the country, he decides to visit the tomb of the saint Sidi Abu-Hasira. Abu-Hasira, Ghosh has learned from the villagers, was a Jew from the Maghreb who came to Egypt and converted to Islam. He was recognized by the people as a man of extraordinary benevolent powers, a good man, endowed with the blessings of baraka. He developed a large following among the locals, and he still had Jewish followers from Israel who attended the annual Mowlid in his
honor in Damanhour. As it turns out, the Mowlid takes place during Ghosh’s visit, but, although his friends in Nashawy and Lataifa persuade him to attend he never quite makes it to the festival itself. Instead, he attempts a quick detour to the shrine on his way to the train station from which he plans to depart. What he sees there surprises him: the tomb itself is much bigger than similar tombs he has seen before. “It was,” writes Ghosh, “a sleek, concrete structure of a kind that one might expect to see in the newer and more expensive parts of Alexandria and Cairo: in that poor quarter of Damanhour, it was not merely incongruous—its presence seemed almost an act of defiance” (333). If the sight of the tomb itself is dissonant, his expectations of a quick and quiet visit are shaken by the approach of armed police officers, who quickly begin to interrogate him. Recognizing Ghosh as a foreigner, one of the officers demands an explanation for his visit to the tomb. The Mowlid is already over, the tourists are all gone, and therefore the presence of a foreigner at the tomb is, according to the officer, itself a cause for suspicion. But what baffles the officer most is the fact that Ghosh is neither an Israeli devotee on a pilgrimage nor a follower of any of the monotheistic religions with which he is familiar. “Neither Jewish, nor Muslim, nor Christian—there had to be something odd afoot” (334–35). The potentially dangerous visitor is escorted to the local police station for further interrogation. In this setting, to Ghosh reminiscent of the colonial buildings built by the British in India, and probably a testimony to the British occupation of Egypt, the two men face each other across what Ghosh sees as the resolutely modern, all too contemporary, colonially implicated divisions between peoples who once experienced a connected history. “You’re Indian—what connection could you have with the tomb of a Jewish holy man, here in Egypt?” he is asked. He cannot find an immediate answer but, the book he will eventually write will attempt to provide one.

Finding himself at a narrative impasse at the moment of the officer’s questioning, Ghosh nevertheless shares with the reader his own sense of excitement at the survival of a popular religious syncretism of the past: “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 was living” (342). This is, in fact, an echo of an earlier moment in the text when Ghosh has visited, this time in the vicinity of Mangalore, a Hindu temple built by the Magavira community. He has arrived there in pursuit of a Bhuta shrine of a spirit-diety called Bobbariya, legendarily named after a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea. But just as Ghosh is surprised to find a modern concrete structure honoring Abu-Hasira, he is surprised to find that the Bhuta shrine in this community has in fact been placed in a Hindu temple that is a testament to the high Sanskritic form of the religion. The main deity is Vishnu, a Brahmanical god, and the Bobbariya-bhuta is placed in a subordinate position. The Bhuta itself has been stripped of its traditional iconography and is now represented as a Hindu god. Remarking on the ironies of such a representation, Ghosh writes, “The past had revenged itself on the
present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic tradition” (274).

It is the nostalgic impulse in Ghosh that chooses to read the survival of earlier religious syncretisms as potential spaces of modern “defiance” and “revenge.” Such a reading, politically appealing as it is, nevertheless depends on a dismissal of the religious self-fashioning of the communities themselves. At one point during his visit to the temple, Ghosh notes, “It was not really a Bhuta-shrine any more, they explained proudly: it had become a real Hindu temple, and the main place in it was now reserved for Vishnu, the most Brahmanical of Gods” (273–74). The incorporation of the Bhuta into the temple is experienced by the community, then, not as a gesture of religious syncretism but rather as an antisyncretic practice. The fact that this historically lower-caste community has appropriated for itself the symbols of high Brahmanical tradition in an attempt at upward mobility and the fact that the temple prominently displays posters of a fundamentalist Hindu organization “notorious for its anti-Muslim rhetoric” (273) suggests that the Muslim trader here has been disciplined, tamed, and co-opted into a resolutely Hindu cosmology. Likewise, in the case of the shrine of Abu-Hasira Ghosh’s representation of the police officers as ultimately blind to the richness of popular religion and its history may well betray a certain overzealousness on behalf of the political possibilities of religious syncretism. Let us remember that when the villagers in Lataifa and Nashawy encourage him to go to the Mowlid, they seemingly do so not out of any sense of religious conviction. “The Mowlid was a wonderful spectacle, I was told; there would be lights everywhere, stalls with pistols and airguns, swings and carousels; the streets would be lined with kebab-shops and vendor’s carts and thronged with crowds of sightseers. The tourists alone were a good reason to go, they said, it was not often that one got to see foreigners in a place like Damanhour” (330). To the villagers, then, the Mowlid is a recreational activity, and perhaps, as in the case of Moshin the taxi driver, an opportunity to make some money. To read the shrine as an act of defiance against “the enforcers of History” is to participate in the well-established and indeed often well-meaning anthropological discourse of “survivals” at the risk of erasing historically contingent and continually renegotiated cultural practices.18

The examples of the Magavira temple and the shrine of Abu-Hasira suggest, then, at least two things about the nature of religious syncretism: one, that what at first appears as religious syncretism may in fact be marked by antisyncretic tendencies; and two, that a practice that may seem syncretic—insofar as it engages the interests of more than one religious community—may in fact be experienced by the two communities in entirely different and possibly even nonreligious ways.19 In the case of the shrine of Abu-Hasira we may ask, who here is resisting whom? Just who are the so-called “enforcers of History”? In Ghosh’s economy of popular syncretism, it is clear that the police officers are meant to represent the repressive appa-
ratus of the modern nation-state. It is in defiance of these state actors, these “enforcers of History,” that the shrine stands as a testimony to popular will. Notice that in this account it is the shrine itself that does the resisting. Much as in the case of the statue of the Bhuta in the temple, it is the spirits of the past—whether those of Abu-Hasira or Bobbriya—that “revenge” themselves on the present. The nostalgic axiomatic of popular religiosity puts under erasure the agency of contemporary worshippers. In doing so it risks a misrecognition both of the role of the state and of popular will, which, as the following news report from December 2000 suggests, have actually ended up playing roles exactly opposite to those that Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* casts for them. I quote the report here in full:

CAIRO. An Egyptian village has cancelled the festival of a Jewish saint attended annually by many Israelis, after protests by local people sympathetic to the Palestinian uprising. The Council of Demito village in the Delta province of Behira said it made the last-minute decision on Sunday after an outcry in the community. There have been calls to cancel the Moulid of Abu Hasira festival permanently. Local member of parliament Emadal-Sayyed had submitted a request to the People’s Assembly to have the festival called off because of public anger over Israeli “aggression” against Palestinians. Israeli-Palestinian violence in the last three months has killed at least 343 people, most of them Palestinian. The MP added that alcohol, dancing and singing at the festival offended the conservative mores of the mostly Muslim area. The Moulid of Abu Hasira, which had been due to begin on Tuesday, lasts eight days and celebrates the birth of a Moroccan Jew who lived and died in the village. There is no Jewish community in the area, and the festival has been organized by overseas Jewish groups with official Egyptian permission since Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Jews from all over the world, particularly Israel, flock to the small village to visit his shrine.

While the curt, almost clinical quality of this report—as well as its reference to a conflict that has by now claimed many more lives (on both sides)—is sure to chill any reader, the fact worthy of note is that here the “enforcers of History” are allegedly the people themselves and not the state. Furthermore, this incorporation of the Moulid of Abu-Hasira into a popular politics is quite explicit in articulating itself as resisting both the foreign pilgrims and the indigenous nation-state. That is why “protests” are necessary in the first place. The extra security at the tomb that Ghosh experienced about ten years before these protests is better understood as both a response to and a further provocation of the struggle between an increasingly Islamicized populace and a decreasingly credible state. Indeed, Ghosh’s own presentation earlier in the narrative of the rise of an Islamist modernity that is youth driven and often university based suggests that the state is here putting in check actors very much like the character of Ustaz Sabry in Ghosh’s narrative. Sabry’s version of modernity may not appeal to those of us who style ourselves secular intellectuals, yet it seems necessary to be able to account for it, and to recognize that the “popular” may not always generate forms of resistance that are palatable to a secular disposition, just as the state may not always be an agent of repression but
can also be the upholder of a multireligious, noncommunitarian society. Ultimately, then, to idolize the “popular” and to be unwilling to acknowledge its participation in the enforcement of history is to sacrifice the analytic power of the social scientist in order to live by the insistently secular vision of the humanist.

The Libertarian Imaginary

It is, I suggest, precisely at those moments when it relaxes its historicist rigor and begins to pursue a romance with a pre-Western world that Ghosh’s narrative exhibits a preference for a poetic imagination over a historical one. I will ultimately defend this choice in my discussion of Ghosh’s creative use of nostalgia, but it must also be noted here that for Ghosh’s project to work, it must flatten out the micropolitics of the world before what he sees as the intrusive arrival of the Western powers in this setting. Much of my discussion of Ghosh’s text in what follows will attempt to trouble this erasure particularly with regard to the treatment of slavery, but at this point it must be acknowledged that Ghosh’s metonymic use of tolerant, Fatimid Egypt belies other potential stories, less tolerant but also set before the arrival of the West. To recognize this is also to recognize that, despite its universalist—or at least anticommmunitarian—appeal, Ghosh’s vision of a multicultural Levant may be seen to participate—perhaps unwittingly—in a more contemporary polarizing politics.

In a seminal article, “Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth and History,” Mark Cohen suggests that discussions of the historical relationship between Jews and Muslims have become increasingly politically charged today. The question “How have Jews fared in the Islamic world in medieval and modern times?” has sparked a great deal of debate, with some answers positing an interfaith utopia and others suggesting that Islamic treatment of Jews throughout history has been relentlessly persecutory. The “myth” of interfaith utopia, suggests Cohen, was first propagated by Jewish writers in the nineteenth century who, themselves frustrated by the anti-Semitism of the European world, turned to an alternative space of history in which Judaism was treated with respect and Jews were accepted as friends. This version of an interfaith utopia, suggests Cohen, was later appropriated by those sympathetic to the plight of modern Palestinians and critical of Zionism and the State of Israel. In turn, there arose a “counter-myth” that presented Jewish-Islamic history as one of continued conflict and emphasized the persecution of Jews by Muslims. This “counter-myth” was explicitly rooted in a desire to argue for the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the cause of Zionism. Bemoaning the excesses of both myths, Cohen argues for a more balanced account that he calls “history” itself. Such a history would show that the fate of Jews in Islamic lands was contingent upon several factors, including the state of the economy at any given time, the personal disposition of the individual ruler in question, the vulnerability of the
Islamic state in the light of attacks from outside, and other factors that are of more material significance than religious doctrines and ideologies themselves.

To suggest this, then, is to suggest, along with Bernard Lewis, that the problem with a generalizable claim about Jews under Muslim rule is that, in the absence of either historical, geographical, or what I will call performative specificity, either version—both Cohen’s “myth” and “counter-myth”—can be persuasively argued. It is always possible to compare the worst historical moments in one cultural frame with the best moments in another, or to ignore the divergences between the doctrines and the actual practices of two religions so that one appears to be more favorable than the other. It makes more sense, then, to be nominalist in one’s evaluation of the historical record, and it is such a nominalism that underwrites the scholarly work of Cohen, Lewis, and Goitein as well. Based on their work, much of what we know about the world of Ben Yiju does indeed suggest that Jewish traders in Cairo in the twelfth century experienced life under one of the most tolerant Islamic regimes. Goitein suggests that, while they were certainly not regarded as equals by their Muslim neighbors, Jews were allowed to practice their own faith, to live in religiously mixed neighborhoods (rather than ghettos), to pursue occupations of their own choosing, and to abide by a juridical code derived from and executed by their own religious authorities. Practices prevalent at other times and places in Islamic and Christian history, such as the requirement that Jews wear specially marked clothes, were, according to Goitein, much relaxed or nonexistent during Ben Yiju’s times, and interfaith business relations were the norm rather than the exception. While none of this tolerance prevented occasional suspicion of those who were not believers of one’s own religion, such suspicion seems to have affected both Jews and Muslims. Jews did, however, have to pay a special poll tax in exchange for their protected status as a religious minority, but ironically it may have been precisely this tax and its economic importance to Muslim rulers that underwrote the religious tolerance of the state. Indeed, economic calculations were also at work when later, in 1198, an overzealous ruler established himself in Yemen and forced the mass conversion of the local Jews. We learn, however, from a letter in the Cairo Geniza that, when foreign Jewish traders called at the port of Aden, the ruler declared: “‘No foreigner should be molested.’ He ordered that everyone should pay a third of the poll tax. We disbursed this and he dismissed us graciously, thank God.” In his annotations to the letter, Goitein points out that the imposition of the one-third poll tax was itself unlawful since non-Muslims were supposed to be taxed only in their domicile. But the incident shows not only that the traders were content to buy their freedom for this amount but, more significantly, that the ruler recognized the economic importance of the traders and that no amount of religious conviction would let him forgo the material benefits they provided. Persecuting the traders would have been tantamount to eating the goose that laid the golden eggs, and thus the traders were perhaps economically exploited but otherwise left alone.
Religious tolerance, then, is seen as intimately related to the economic interests of the state, and this vision deeply informs the work of both Goitein and Ghosh. The most explicit admission of this orientation occurs in the preface to the second volume of Goitein’s *A Mediterranean Society*. Here, in an autobiographical aside on his ongoing research on the *geniza* documents, Goitein writes,

I believe I would have missed many aspects of the *geniza* documents had I not been granted the opportunity of observing the American scene for many years. Authoritarian Germany, where I spent my childhood and youth, and the Jewish society in Palestine and later Israel, with its socialist, welfare and protectionist tendencies, which saw most of my working life, were utterly different from the *geniza* society, which was loosely organized and competitive in every respect. This vigorous free-enterprise society of the United States, which is not without petty jealousies and cheap public honors, its endless fund-raising campaigns and all that goes with them, its general involvement in public affairs and deep concern (or lip-service as the case may be) for the underdog—all proved to be extremely instructive. *We do not wear turbans here; but, while reading many a *geniza* document one feels quite at home.*

In Goitein’s construction, what binds contemporary American society with the world of the Cairo *geniza* is precisely the importance of the free market and a minimalist state. Germany and Palestine/Israel fail because the state is too authoritarian in one case, and too socialist and welfare-oriented in the other.

This romance with free-market economics and the minimalist state is an undercurrent throughout much of Goitein’s work. He writes at other points that “in many respects, the area resembled a free-trade community. The treatment of foreigners, as a rule, was remarkably liberal.” Or again, “the machinery of the state was relatively loose in those days, that is, the technique of making life unbearable was not yet as perfected as it is in our own days.” But to talk of a minimalist state is by no means to talk of a weak one. The power of the state is still necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of the free-market economy. The state as protector of private property, including of course its own interests, is not to be undermined. “Officially appointed spies and the secret police saw to it that visitors from foreign countries did not evade their customs duties and did not engage in any activity detrimental to the state. Quarrels between individuals and community strife often invoked the intervention of the governments or their local officials. Thus, it was not so much the looseness of the machinery of the state as positive factors that contributed to the amazing degree of the freedom of movement and to the comparatively close unity of the Mediterranean world.”

Despite Ghosh’s own critique of the West, particularly its imperialist history, *In an Antique Land* shares with Goitein’s work an uncanny disposition in favor of free-market economics and the market-oriented state. Its overwhelming acceptance of the proposition that multiculturalism would follow if only the market were left to work on its own ultimately reflects a libertarian rather than a liberal imagination. In such an imagination, the critical role of the state in guarding the interests of market flows ensures, as did the *Commerce Clause* in the early jurisprudence of...
the United States, that toleration itself becomes an interest of the state. Yet it goes without saying that nothing can be tolerated that might threaten the economic interests of the state. The episode in Ghosh’s narrative that best speaks to this is the account of the raid on Aden by pirates from the island of Kish (Qais). The heroes of this event are the Adenese soldiers, who protect not only their own territory from the incursions of the attackers but also, and more important in Ghosh’s reckoning, the incoming ships of the wealthy merchant Ramishr of Siraf. Order is restored, trade and private property protected, and the “villains of the piece” (257), the pirates from Qais, are soundly defeated and forced to retreat. This version of the story is entirely consistent with the sympathies of the trader Madmum, whose letter to his business friend and partner Ben Yiju provides Ghosh with much of the eyewitness flavor of the event. But Ghosh makes use of poetic license to go further, imagining a drunken Bomma (who, we have been told by Madmum, has just demanded more money of him than the allowance allocated to him by Ben Yiju) cheering the Adenese soldiers into battle. To imagine someone who was legally a slave, rebelling against what he perceived to be an inadequate allowance from his master, as nevertheless simultaneously being in complete sympathy with the interests of his master, is to make a strong statement indeed both about the interpellations of slavery and the ultimate virtues of the market.

There is a second aspect to this episode that is no less significant. Despite his acknowledgment that the raid was carried out by sailors who were allied to the king of Qais, Ghosh chooses to downplay the political significance of the attack. Foregrounding its piratical nature rather than its interstate political attributes allows Ghosh to read it as continuous with the numerous activities of pirates throughout the Indian Ocean. Such activities, writes Ghosh, were, even at their worst, “a nuisance rather than a serious threat to commerce, and neither [the rulers of Qais] nor any of the powers of the Indian Ocean, no matter how large or well-armed, ever tried to gain control of the seas or to take over the trade routes by force” (257). It is important for Ghosh to establish piracy as a nuisance rather than a serious threat since one of the central claims that Ghosh wants to make is that it is only with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 that violence enters the Indian Ocean trade. It was then that the unarmed, pacifist traditions of commerce were disrupted by a player who introduced armed navies to take control over the trade. “Unable to compete in the Indian Ocean trade by purely commercial means, the Europeans were bent on taking control of it by aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. . . .” As always, the determination of a small united band of soldiers triumphed easily over the rich confusions that accompany a culture of accommodation and compromise” (288). Yet Ghosh’s contention that intrusion by force of arms arrived only with Europeans seems somewhat questionable given the little that we do know about the Indian Ocean trade in this period. For instance, we know that there was a significant decline in trade in the Persian Gulf after the Fatimid ascendency in Egypt and the decline of the Abbasid
powers in Baghdad in the early eleventh century. The Indian Ocean spice trade was now centered on Egypt and the Red Sea, resulting in the rise of Aden as a competing and increasingly prosperous center of the trade. Nestled in the Persian Gulf, the rulers of the island of Qais, who Goitein tells us were described by the geographer Yakut as the “overlord[s] of that whole sea and as ruler[s] of Oman,” were understandably disturbed by their loss of commercial power to the newly prosperous port city in the Red Sea. The raid on Aden, then, is properly understood in the context of this history not as the opportunistic thievery of a group of pirates, but rather as an alliance of political and economic forces of resistance.

While Ghosh’s anticolonial narrative has much emotive weight, a more layered understanding of the history of the Indian Ocean trade suggests that the trajectory of tolerance and intolerance is not so easily established. In addition to the ties between the state and commerce that we find between the rulers of Qais and the pirates of Aden, we note that from time to time rulers with an interest in the trade would do what they could to retain control of it. Thus, writes K.N. Chaudhuri, under the Ayyubid as well as the Mamluk rulers of Egypt (1170–1517), care was taken to prevent the excessive entry of Frankish merchants in the trade, and “it seems that the Egyptian government exercised its sovereignty and control over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean commerce, not by constructing strong naval fleets, but by instituting a system of safe-conduct passes.” These safe-conduct passes may well be seen to be the precursors of the cartazes later issued by the Portuguese as a form of toll for uninterrupted commerce. And although the degree of armament of the Europeans played an important role in raising cross-cultural barriers in Indian Ocean commerce, cultural factors were always historically at play. “Anti-Jewish propaganda grew under the Fatimids’ successors, the Ayyubids and the Almohids,” writes Andre Wink, “reaching a climax in the thirteenth century, when Mediterranean unity had been lost entirely, and the Mamluks of Egypt imposed discriminatory laws which caused a further deterioration of the position of the Jews. Egypt, after the fall of Constantinople in 1204, virtually monopolized the Indian transit trade but the Jews were expelled from this trade and an association of Arab traders known as the karimi took over.” It may be true, as Ghosh suggests, that before the arrival of the Europeans no political power in the Indian Ocean ultimately succeeded in dictating the terms of trade, but it was not for lack of trying.

If Ghosh downplays the internal rivalries between various rulers on the Indian Ocean stage, it is no less interesting to note his presentation of what may well be described as “stateless” societies. I refer in particular to the brief appearance in the book of the “tribes” around the port city of Aidhab in present-day Sudan. Ghosh tells us in his notes that the people in question were members of “one of the Beja tribes of Sudan and southern Egypt who are referred to frequently by medieval Arab geographers and travelers” (371). To the Arab travelers and the merchants of whom Ghosh writes, these semi-nomadic desert peoples characterized by their public nudity were a “breed of no regard” (quoting Ibn Jubair, 371). If the Beja’s atti-
tude toward these travelers was one of “suspicion bordering on hostility,” this, too, Ghosh’s tone suggests, is to be seen as a nuisance rather like that posed by the Indian Ocean pirates. Once again, a closer look at history might indicate that this hostility was not necessarily the simple response of a closed primitive society but rather the result of a longer period of contact. For instance, we learn from A. Paul’s A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan that contact between Arabs from the north and the indigenous Beja had, by the time of Ben Yiju’s travels, already been taking place for several centuries, with the Beja providing the northerners with slaves and camels, two important commodities in the growth of their empires and economies. In addition, writes Paul, the Beja’s resistance to the northerners increased in the tenth and eleventh centuries in reaction to the exploitative conditions by which their labor and natural resources were acquired. “The mines were worked entirely by slave labor, by methods no better than those employed by the Pharaohs and the Ptolemies, and if anything the exploitation was harsher and more thorough. Emeralds appear to have been valued more highly than gold, and the output must have been considerable since, although the caliphs attempted repeatedly to increase their direct control of the mines but had to be content with a tithe of a third, or even as little as a fifth of the output, yet the wealth of the Fatimids and of their successors was prodigious.” Beja suspicion, bordering on hostility, would make sense in this context.

Capitalism and Slavery

The importance of slave labor in the commercial rise of the Middle East is underscored by Goitein in his discussion of what he calls the “bourgeois revolution” of the eighth and ninth centuries. The Arab conquests in North Africa resulted not only in the general movement of people across wider territories but, argues Goitein, also in the creation of large reserves of cheap and free labor. The new towns being built by the conquerors increased demand for consumer goods, thus stimulating trade. Military service was increasingly being performed by a corps of slaves, and with government bureaucratic service treated with some skepticism by the pious, commercial activity began to resonate with religious approval and sanction. Both Muslims and Jews in Fatimid Egypt hence participated in the trade that resulted from this socioeconomic upheaval.

If the institution of slavery was one of the conditions of possibility of this “bourgeois revolution,” its status as a lived “structure of feeling” is somewhat open to debate. Eager to distance slavery in the Arab world from the plantation slavery of the Americas, scholars have repeatedly noted the religious edicts in both Islam and Judaism on the humane treatment of slaves. Thus, for instance, both religions considered the manumission of a slave virtuous and an honorable deed on the part of the owner. Likewise, there were restrictions on the degree to which slaves
could be worked, with specific proscriptions against their ill-treatment. The fact that some slaves were recruited to military service and indeed could rise considerably in rank has led scholars to emphasize the radical distinctions between slavery in the Middle East and across the Atlantic. Ghosh himself is alert to the distinctions and warns the reader that “the terms under which Bomma entered Ben Yiju’s service were probably entirely different from those suggested by the word ‘slavery’ today: their arrangement was probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood” (259). Ghosh goes on to note that slaves in this context could find themselves in positions with greater privilege than the poor free folk and that they could “generally be sure of obtaining manumission” (260).

While the cautionary note distinguishing transatlantic slavery from Arab forms is essential, it risks coming across as an apology. Ghosh’s own nostalgic narrative risks such a sanitized view of slavery, and it does so especially when it seeks to link the ideology of servitude to a religious foundation. Slavery in the world of Ben Yiju and Bomma, suggests Ghosh, is a “spiritual metaphor” (260), a man’s enslavement to God finding itself a worldly manifestation in a slave’s devotion to his master. This Sufi-inspired vision was articulated through poetry, in which “it was slavery that was the paradoxical embodiment of personal freedom; the image that represented the very notion of relationship, of human bonds, as well as the possibility of their transcendence” (261). The implication here is that if we fail to see this paradox, we do so because we approach it with a post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric understanding of freedom. To give authority to his claims Ghosh refers the reader to Franz Rosenthal’s much-cited book *The Muslim Concept of Freedom prior to the Nineteenth Century*, but a close reading of this source suggests that despite the philosophical and poetic links between enslavement to God and enslavement to man, human bondage nevertheless remained a shameful prospect. Thus, writes Rosenthal, “the idea of slavery, in metaphorical usage, stood for the most loathsome condition of mankind, to be avoided at all costs,” and he further notes, in refutation of the “privileged status” argument, that “regardless of their position and the social advantages derived from it, the unfree status of individuals was always considered a personal disgrace. And it should be noted that it is often the point of stories showing slaves in a good light that good things could be found even in the persons of lowly slaves.”

Orlando Patterson has persuasively argued that what characterizes slavery in almost all contexts is the “social death” of the slave and the denial of the slave’s honor. In this sense, whether or not slaves could look forward to their manumission or whether or not they occupied positions of considerable power, it is nevertheless the case that they were acting not as free agents but always on behalf of their masters. We might ultimately never know exactly how slaves in the Arab world incorporated the ideologies of their times, but we do know that there were slave rebellions, the most famous one occurring in Iraq in the ninth century. Slaves sought their freedom and often escaped from their masters. And while Ghosh portrays
an amicable relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju, even a quick look at the strictures on the treatment of “heathen” slaves that Abraham Maimonides laid down for his coreligionists suggests an ugly side. I quote only two: “8. If the master smites the eye of the slave and diminishes its vision, or his tooth and it becomes loose, then we hold as follows: if the slave can still use them he does not become free; if not, he becomes free; 9. If his eye is dim and its vision poor, or if his tooth is loose and the master smites him and knocks out his loose tooth or blinds his dim eye, then we hold as follows: if he could use it even to the smallest degree heretofore he goes out free; if not, he does not go out free.”54 That such strictures were necessary speaks volumes about the harsher aspects of human bondage.

Even if such violence were the exception, the systemic inequities between masters and slaves suggest that exploitation was not entirely absent from the commercial world that Ghosh depicts. At one point Ghosh notes that the amount of money Bomma spent shopping for his master on one of his trips to Aden would have “paid the wages of a mason or builder for more than two and a half years” (255–56). The amount of money circulating in the Indian Ocean trade was enormous compared to the costs of labor. Without involving ourselves in debates over whether these societies could be characterized as engaging in a “slave mode of production,” we can easily establish that surplus value was being generated not only through trade, but also through the manufacture of commodities. Thus, for instance, we remember that in addition to Bomma and Ashu, Ben Yiju also had a number of other slaves who worked in his bronze factory on the Malabar coast. And if we may categorize this relationship as one of economic exploitation, sexual exploitation was never far behind in the case of female slaves. India in Ben Yiju’s time, suggests Ghosh, “bore a reputation as a place notable for the ease of its sexual relations” (228) where concubinage was thought to be the norm rather than the exception.

Perhaps the greatest insight into the problematic of slavery in this context and of Ghosh’s creative handling of it comes not from what Ghosh writes but from what he leaves out. A meticulous student of Goitein’s oeuvre, Ghosh could not fail to have noticed the story I refer to. Its absence from In an Antique Land supports the basic lesson of deconstructive critique that a text’s silences may often say more than its utterances. The story is that of the Indian slave “Safi” and his protestations about the fate of a young Indian slave girl abandoned by her master on the coast of Somalia. Safi, Goitein tells us, was the business agent and legal slave of the head of the Jewish high council in Egypt. As such he would have commanded a certain amount of authority by virtue of his connection with the master. Yet his fate in this particular episode is of some interest to us in understanding the precarious nature of a slave’s social status. I quote in full Goitein’s telling of the story:

In December, 1144, there arrived among the Jewish merchants of Egypt and the Maghreb returning from India, Safi, “the pure, sincere,” the slave and agent of the head of the Jewish academy in Old Cairo, and one Ibn Jamahir, a notable, well known to us as a troublemaker from other papers relevant to the India trade. Safi insulted the notable in the presence of
Muslim fellow merchants, accusing him of having disposed of a slave girl, after having had a child by her, in Berbera on the African coast. Ibn Jumahir filed a complaint of slander against him with the governor of the town. The governor, well aware of the special status of Safi, tried to consult the Jewish merchants staying in town, most of whom, however, disregarded his invitation. After Ibn Jumahir’s Muslim friends had given witness, the governor ordered Safi to be flogged. “What!” exclaimed Safi, “I, the ghulam of the Head of the Academy, should be flogged?” His protest was of no avail, for he was flogged and jailed. One of the Jewish merchants from the Maghreb intervened, and Safi was set free—“not without loss of money,” whether for himself or his liberator, is not stated.55

This story, then, is also about two Indian slaves—one male and the other female. But it is one that speaks not to the romance of intercultural bonding but to the unjust nature of human bondage. No matter how privileged a slave might seem, this story tells us, he was always susceptible to a “social death.”56 And no matter how romantic an alliance between the Jewish traveler Ben Yiju and the Nair woman Ashu might appear to the poetic imagination, there were also other stories of sexual exploitation and abandonment.57 I suggested earlier that Bomma’s status as the lowest of the low is an enabling fiction for Ghosh. Bomma, Ghosh has told us in his prologue, is not one of those for whom we can imagine “properly human, individual, existences” (17). He is not one of the “literate and the consequential, the wazirs and the sultans, the chroniclers and the priests—the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time” (17). If, as sympathetic readers, we can celebrate Ghosh’s nostalgic reconstruction of the character of Bomma, we must do so with the knowledge that here too is an erasure. The abandoned concubine, defended in her time by her fellow traveler Safi, has yet to find a modern spokesperson.

The Threat of Melancholia

One way of understanding Ghosh’s writing of nostalgia is to see it as an authorial imperative to counter the workings of melancholia. For there are at least two ways in which one can interpret the lives of commoners such as the villagers of Lataifa and Nashawy or the traders of Ben Yiju’s day. One is to celebrate their will and determination, despite the odds, to make meaningful lives for themselves and their kind. The other is to bemoan their entrapment in the quagmires of history, which often worked to limit their possibilities, to thwart their will, and to destroy their dreams. The former we might call the domain of nostalgia, and the latter that of melancholia. The former remains optimistic about the possible future recovery of a fragile dream, while the latter is resigned to mourning its irretrievable loss. What makes In an Antique Land such a powerful text for our own times is its insistence on a nostalgic optimism even as it recognizes the encroachment of an inevitable melancholia. The writing of nostalgia, as Nicholas Dames has persuasively ar-
gued, is intricately tied to the pursuit of pleasure—"What is pleasurable to recall will be recalled, while the unworthy or the painful will erase itself." Nostalgia is, in effect, a necessary forgetting of trauma and a celebration of recuperable memories oriented toward a desirable future. In this sense, the writing of history in the nostalgic mode is "always only the necessary prehistory of the present," promoting a vision of a future that is no longer burdened by the unpleasant aspects of the past, and that allows the telling of "a life lived as a coherent tale, summarizable, pointed, and finally moralizable." 

Because of its insistence on dwelling on the pleasurable, nostalgic writing can transform even the most tragic situations into narratives of survival and determination. But no matter how nostalgic, the melancholic always remains in the wings waiting to make a sobering entry. Referring to Ben Yiju toward the end of his life, at one point Ghosh writes, "The letter he wrote on this occasion was a long one, like the last, but his mood and his circumstances were greatly changed and the nostalgic exuberance that had seized him upon his return to Aden had now yielded to a resigned and broken-hearted melancholy" (313, italics mine). In his account of Ben Yiju's life, Ghosh has himself created up to this point in the narrative a nostalgic vision—despite the clear sense of alienation and loneliness that Ben Yiju feels on the Malabar Coast, Ghosh has nevertheless foregrounded the positive, the wonderful sense of cosmopolitanism around him, the connections between members of different religious faiths, even the virtues of unregulated interoceanic trade. But there is a strong awareness in the text that here, as elsewhere, there always remains the possibility that at some point the deferral of unpleasantness might break down and with it might arrive not only a "broken-hearted melancholy" but also, significantly, a breakdown of the earlier order. A sure sign of such a breakdown is Ben Yiju's refusal to let his daughter marry a foreigner, which, in the light of his own marriage with the Indian Ashu, makes it seem "almost as though he were seeking to disown a part of his own past" (316). The great cosmopolitan connections drawn in the chronotopes of nostalgia are reversed in those of melancholia. Melancholia cripples while nostalgia redeems, and, as though to underscore this lesson, the narrator approvingly notes about contemporary Mangalore, "But appropriately, Mangalore does not treat its lost history as a crippling melancholy: it has always been a busy, bustling kind of place, and today it is again a thriving, relatively prosperous city" (245).

What then, we might ask, drives this nostalgic impulse? What is the work that nostalgia does in the postcolonial imagination? To answer this, we may well turn to a useful distinction that Svetlana Boym has recently drawn between what she calls "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia. "Restorative nostalgia" she writes, "stresses nostos and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in al gia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nos-
nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.  

Attention to the contradictions of modernity and the interrogation of the truth claims of European Enlightenment thinking are both central to Ghosh’s project. Unlike the “restorative” project, which defies modernity by insisting on living in the past, the “reflective” nostalgia of In an Antique Land works contrapuntally, moving back and forth between the modern and the medieval while pointing out their contradictions, as Boym puts it, “wistfully, ironically, desperately.” It is perhaps this quality that prompts Clifford Geertz to note that the book has “a sense of incompleteness about it; of something not said about then, and even more, about now. It tells its stories, it constructs its ironies, and it leaves it at that.”

Notes

This article was written while I was an NEH fellow at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina and revised while I was a resident at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. I thank both these institutions and the wonderful people associated with them for their hospitality and support. Various versions of the paper were presented as talks at UCLA, Yale, Duke, Tulane, University of Connecticut (Storrs), State University of Rio de Janeiro, and the Federal University of Bahia. I am grateful to the hosts and the audiences for their comments.


3. Amitav Ghosh, “The Imam and the Indian,” Granta 20 (Winter 1986): 135–46. This piece was reprinted in a volume of critical essays in cultural studies, Angelika Bammer, ed., Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question (Madison, Wis., 1994), 47–55; Amitav Ghosh, “The Slave of MS. H.6,” in Subaltern Studies VII, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi, 1992), 159–220. In addition to these two previews of what was to come in In an Antique Land we should also note Ghosh’s dissertation, which was written in 1982. Written in the formal style of academic ethnographic writing, his dissertation is of great interest to those pursuing a comparative study of the scholarly and popular modalities of “writing culture.” See Amitav Ghosh, Kinship in Relation to
Economic and Social Organization in an Egyptian Village Community (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1982).


5. The Vintage paperback edition subtitles the book “History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale.”


7. The name “Ifriqiya,” from which the word “Africa” is derived, refers to the area in North Africa that roughly corresponds to present-day Tunisia.

8. Indeed, one of the major elements of Ghosh’s narrative is the detective work he undertakes to ascertain the slave’s identity.


10. S. D. Goitein explains that, while the majority of documents in the Cairo Geniza were written in Hebrew script, the languages used were various forms of Arabic vernaculars used in Spain, Sicily, and different parts of North Africa and Western Asia. A few documents written in Arabic script are also present in the geniza material, indicating the close connections between the Jewish and Islamic public spheres; see S. D. Goitein, A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, 6 vols. (Berkeley, 1967–93), 1:14–17.

11. The latest document Goitein records noting is an 1879 divorce bill from Bombay; (Mediterranean Society, 1:9).

12. In the interests of space, I forego here a discussion of this aspect of Ghosh’s text. A longer version of this article incorporating this discussion will appear as a chapter in my next book.

13. Goitein takes pains to distinguish the materials in the Cairo Geniza from a proper historical archive. Archival materials are usually those that are consciously preserved for later referral, and care is taken to protect them from deterioration. Such documents are usually also of social, economic, or political import to the people concerned and not, as in the case of the documents discarded in the geniza, those that have outlived their intended purpose. Compared to a proper archive, the documents found in the geniza have a decisively chaotic element about them. But it is precisely this chaos that allows one to reconstruct scenes of everyday life and to get an unadulterated flavor of a bygone society; see Goitein, Mediterranean Society, 1:7–28.

14. This brief biography is drawn from Abraham Udovitch’s foreword to vol. 5 of Mediterranean Society (ix–xviii).


17. This article is a shortened version of a chapter in my current book in progress and excludes discussion of aspects of the contemporary “anthropological” narrative, where Ghosh presents an excellent account of the rise of a religiously based modernity.

19. For an excellent account of how different religious communities may participate in the “same” ritual, see Peter Van der Veer, “Syncretism, Multiculturalism, and the Discourse of Tolerance,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (New York, 1994), 196–211. I am much indebted to this article and to this collection as a whole in my thinking through of the issues presented here. Van der Veer’s article is also cited by Gauri Viswanathan in an important essay that advances a critique of Ghosh along lines similar to my own. In her case, however, the argument is drawn primarily on a theoretical register concerned with the “place of syncretism in the Post-Orientalist” project. Viswanathan’s essay works best when it interrogates what she sees as the homologous nature of syncretism and “culture” in the sense given it by Matthew Arnold. Discourses of “syncretism,” Viswanathan rightly reminds us, are themselves inventions of the colonial imaginary and thus need to be used with caution in a postcolonial project. While she share her unease with the category, I have nonetheless found it indispensable in reading Ghosh’s text on its own terms. The “syncretic” refers here to the cultural mixing and exchange that become for Ghosh a defining condition of the precolonial era. In my own reading of Ghosh, I point to the limits of such mixings and exchanges, but I do not wish to disregard their presence entirely. How we read these syncretisms is, I suggest, key to understanding Ghosh’s construction of history as nostalgia. Viswanathan and I differ on our evaluation of the use of nostalgia in Ghosh. She sees it as a failure (“mere nostalgia”), whereas I find it somewhat redeeming. Readers interested in pursuing these issues further should benefit, as have I, from her analysis; see Gauri Viswanathan, “Beyond Orientalism: Syncretism and the Politics of Knowledge,” *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1995): 19–32.


21. The officer’s explanation to Ghosh, “We have to be careful, you understand. . . . We have to do everything we can to protect the tomb” (340), is perhaps less shrill than the author makes it out to be. Consider also, in this context, the events in Egypt surrounding the creation of Israel. Marion Woolfson writes of this time: “The Egyptian press began to feature the Palestinian issue prominently, and the authorities voiced their opposition to Zionism. Five days before the UN partition recommendation, the Egyptian representative in the United Nations General Assembly announced that: ‘The Arab governments will do all in their power to defend the Jewish citizens in their countries, but we all know that an excited crowd is sometimes stronger than the police. Unintentionally, you are about to spark an anti-Jewish fire in the Middle East which will be more difficult to extinguish than it was in Germany.’” Marion Woolfson, *Prophets in Babylon: Jews in the Arab World* (Boston, 1980), 177–78.

22. In other words, the rule of the Almohads in North Africa or the Mamluks in Egypt would present a different picture—a rather negative one—of interfaith relations between Jews and Muslims in the medieval world. The most readable and concise account of such variations is found in S. D. Goitein, “Interfaith Relations in Medieval Islam” (Yaacov Herzog Memorial Lecture, delivered at Columbia University, New York, October 1973).

23. Mark Cohen, “Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History,” in *Jews among Mus-
lins, ed. Shlomo Deshen and Walter P. Zenner (New York, 1996), 50–63. The book contains other essays in addition to Cohen's that would be of interest to Ghosh's readers.

24. By “performative” specificity I mean the ways in which religious beliefs are actually practiced, enforced, or, alternatively, ignored.

25. Thus, for instance, one could foreground the pacifist elements of a religion such as Christianity while ignoring the wars fought in its name, or foreground the militaristic rhetoric of portions of the Koran while ignoring aspects of Islamic societies that evidence tolerance toward other religions; see Bernard Lewis, The Jews of Islam (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 1–66.


28. In his writings on his travels throughout the Mediterranean world, Benjamin of Tudela noted the cosmopolitan nature of the city of Alexandria. It was a point of convergence for merchants from all corners of the Indian and Mediterranean regions. In the notes to this section of his text, A. Asher discusses the fact that the trade was so important that religious warfare was, in its context, irrelevant: “The enterprises of the Crusaders were directed against the powers of the sovereigns of this country, who consequently might be said to be at war with the whole of Europe; and it might have been reasonably supposed that all commercial and other intercourse should have ceased, but mutual interests and political considerations produced different results. The importation of asiatic goods had become a source of so much profit to the inhabitants and of revenue to the government, that the Sultans never contemplated the idea of closing their ports to the Europeans, who not only purchased, but also imported and paid duty upon those articles, which were made available objects of exchange in Arabia and India. Thus do we see religious prejudices waived in consideration of pecuniary profit, by the most inveterate enemies, by two sects, who took up arms in defence of the religions they professed!” A. Asher, ed. and trans., The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (New York, 1900), 2:217. The argument for the relationship between commerce and toleration is also made by M.G.S. Narayanan for the Kerala coast. Noting the fact that foreign traders were made welcome by the indigenous rulers of Kerala, Narayanan writes, “charity began at the marketplace”; M.G.S. Narayanan, Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala (Trivandrum, 1972), 5.


30. Indeed, Goitein reads the intrusion of the state in trade as a prime cause of the breakdown of the Islamic Golden Age in the thirteenth century. “The conquest of Southwest Asia by the central-Asian Seljughs ushered in a new period in Islamic history which was characterized by the oppressive rule of foreign mercenaries, propped up by closest cooperation with a well paid orthodox clergy and replacing free enterprise by a government-controlled state economy. In Egypt this state was reached by the middle of the thirteenth century, which was, according to the definition given before, the end of the classical period of Islam”; Goitein, “Interfaith Relations in Medieval Islam,” 27–28.

31. And it is carried over in much of the subsequent research undertaken by other scholars. Stefan C. Reif, for instance, echoes the sentiment in his book, A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo. He writes, “On the domestic front, Fatimid achievements had their roots not so much in how the rulers directed their subjects but rather in the degree to which they permitted them to exercise their own initiatives. . . . At the same time, by their relatively liberal approach to the people and their skillful use of propaganda, the administration ensured that it remained internally tolerable and that no pretexts were given for out-
bursts of popular dissatisfaction”; Stefan C. Reif, A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo: The History of Cambridge University’s Genizah Collection (Richmond, 2000), 5.


33. Ibid. 34. Ibid.

35. While the terms “libertarian” and “liberal” are notoriously difficult to define, their usages varying significantly on each side of the Atlantic, I should note that the libertarianism I refer to here is connected to the economic and political theories of F.A. Hayek and his followers. This should not be confused with other anarchist variations of the term. See F.A. Hayek, The Mirage of Social Justice (Chicago, 1976); F.A. Hayek, The Constitution of Liberty (Chicago, 1960); and Fritz Machlup, ed., Essays on Hayek (New York, 1976).

36. Thus, for instance, the Commerce Clause, which barred any disruption of interstate commerce, ultimately resulted in a desegregation of hotels and other facilities.

37. Usually transcribed as Qais, the island is in the Persian Gulf.


39. Goitein, “Two Eyewitness Reports,” 247 (italics mine). At a later point in the article, Goitein refers to the Persian Gulf as “the sea controlled by the King of Kish” (252; again, italics mine).

40. Unfortunately, the research on Indian Ocean pirates in this period is still minimal, but comparative studies of piracy and privateering (that alliance established between a state and pirates) in later periods and other contexts are informative. For the Indian Ocean, I have found most useful Charles Davies, The Blood-Red Arab Flag: An Investigation into Qasimi Piracy, 1797–1820 (Exeter, 1997). I cannot claim sufficient expertise in the area to judge the merits of its rebuttals of earlier scholarship on the Qasimi, but the book is an excellent staging ground for precisely the kinds of definitional and indeed conceptual differences that arise in discussions surrounding “piracy.” Thus we can see that, depending on their ideological or historical orientations, one commentator’s “pirate” is another commentator’s “privateer” who is yet another commentator’s “warrior.” For scholarship on piracy in other contexts, see, in particular, Marcus Rediker, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750 (Cambridge, 1987); David Starkey, Jap de Moor, and E. S. van Eyck van Heslinga, Pirates and Privateers: New Perspectives on the War on Trade in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (Exeter, 1997); C. R. Pennell, ed., Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader (New York, 2001).


42. On the cartazes, see Philip D. Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History (Cambridge, 1984), 139–40.


44. Goitein suggests that one of the other reasons for the attack on Aden by the ruler of Qais “may have been the fact that owing to the rapacious character of his rule, much of the Indian Ocean trade had been diverted from the sea of Oman to Aden”; Goitein, “Two Eyewitness Accounts,” 248. I quote this because it once again points to Goitein’s implicit understanding of the mutual dependence of trade and state power. Let all future rulers beware, this sentence at one level says: if the character of your rule is “rapacious” you too will lose your commerce to other rulers.
Subject to some debate has been the role of Sudanese gold in the prosperity of North African rulers. While he himself takes the position that the role of gold—and particularly the disruption of its northward flow in the eleventh century—has been overplayed, Michael Brett reminds us in his article on Ifriqiya and its Saharan trade that the Indian Ocean trade was integrated not only with a Mediterranean economy looking toward Europe but also toward an African economy looking to the south. See Michael Brett, “Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century, a.d.,” *Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 347–64.


The literature on slavery in the Arab world is considerably less voluminous than studies of Atlantic slavery. However, a good comprehensive study of the institution as well as a critique of prevalent modes of discussing it is found in Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York, 1987). See also Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*.

Goitein notes at one point that in Ben Yiju’s time the word “abd,” for slave, was increasingly considered improper and was often replaced with euphemisms such as “boy” or “young man.” Since these terms could be equally applied to free persons as well as slaves, it is often difficult to establish the legal status of a given individual; see Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 1:131.


Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1982).


I use the masculine pronoun here because the slaves who did acquire some social status were business agents who were males. Female slaves were primarily domestic servants or concubines.

Ashu herself was probably also left behind in India when Ben Yiju returned to Aden and Egypt with their two children. In his presentation of the relationship between Ben Yiju and Ashu, Ghosh seems to be aware that his reading it as a sign of an interracial romance is probably a stretch of the imagination. Referring to the union, he writes, “If I hesitate to call it love, it is only because the documents offer no certain proof” (230). On the likely fate of the marriage, Ghosh notes, “There are many conceivable endings to Ben Yiju’s story and if the most pleasing amongst them is one which has him returning to Ashu, in the Malabar, the most likely, on the other hand, is a version in which he dies in Egypt, soon after his daughter’s wedding, and is buried somewhere in the vicinity of Fustat” (328).
59. Ibid., 7.
60. In the modern frame, the “cosmopolitanism” of Nabeel and his compatriots, who travel to Iraq in search of employment, is characterized by a similar melancholy.