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An Insider and Outsider View of Modern Egypt By Waguih Ghali And Amitav Ghosh

Waguih Ghali ve Amitav Ghosh'tan Modern Mısır'a İçeriden ve Dışarıdan Bir Bakış

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reveal an insider view of Modern Egypt in the fifties and sixties by the Egyptian writer Waguih Ghali's Beer in the Snooker Club (1964) which is a semi-autobiographical novel written in English and an outsider view of Egypt written three decades after Ghali in Amitav Ghosh's In An Antique Land (1992). Shedding a light on the struggles of the Francophone, British educated Egyptian Coptic figures with their conflicting allegiances to the Egyptian revolution that both opposed colonialism and practiced repressive domestic policies and their allegiances to the British culture that imposed colonialism, Beer in the Snooker Club seeks a cosmopolitan identity by rejecting the binaries of post-coloniality. On the other side, in In An Antique Land the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh presents two different narratives one of which is an anthropological one based on his visits to two villages in the Nile Delta, while the other narrative is based on the process of writing his doctoral dissertation (in the years 1980-81 and 1988) with the aim to reconstruct the history of a 12-century Jewish merchant, Abraham Ben Yiju and his slaves by using some documents from the Cairo Genizah.

Keywords: *Modern Egypt, Waguih Ghali, Amitav Ghosh, Coptic, the British, insider view, outsider view, Genizah*

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Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizce yazılmış yarı otobiyografik bir roman olan Mısırlı yazar Waguih Ghali'nin Snooker Club'ta Bira (1964) adlı eserinde Modern Mısır'a ellili ve atmışlı yıllarda içeriden bir bakış ve Ghali'den 30 yıl sonra yazılmış Amitav Ghosh'un Antik Bir Ülke'de (1992) adlı kitabında da Mısır'a dışarıdan bir bakış sunduğunu göstermektir. Frankofon, İngiliz, Mısırlı Kıpti karakterlerin, hem sömürgeciliğe karşı çıkan Mısır devrimine bağlılıklarıyla hem de baskıcı iç politikalar uygulayan ve sömürgeciliği dayatan İngiliz kültürüne olan bağlılıklarıyla çatışan mücadelelerine ışık tutan, Snooker Club'da Bira adlı eser, sömürgecilik sonrası ikilileri reddederek kozmopolit bir kimlik arayışı içerisindedir. Öte yandan, Hintli yazar Amitav Ghosh Antik Bir Ülke'de adlı eserinde, biri Nil Deltası'ndaki iki köye yapılan ziyaretlerine dayanan ve antropolojik olan, diğeri ise yazarın Kahire Genizah'ın bazı belgelerini kullanarak 12. yüzyıldan kalma bir Yahudi tüccar olan Abraham Ben Yiju ve kölelerinin tarihini yeniden inşa etmek amacıyla, doktora tezini (1980-81 ve 1988 yıllarında) yazma sürecine dayanan iki farklı anlatı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Modern Mısır, Waguih Ghali, Amitav Ghosh, Kıpti,* İngilizler*, içeriden görünüm, dışarıdan görünüm, Geniza*

Introduction

Based on Edward Said's assertion that the voice of the defeated "Other" should be listened as well as that of the dominant power which is inclined to discriminate or assimilate the culture of its victims, I intend to present an insider view of Modern Egypt in the fifties and sixties by Waguih Ghali's Beer in the Snooker Club (1964) and an outsider view of Egypt written three decades after Ghali in Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land (1992). Beer in the Snooker Club is a semi-autobiographical novel by a Coptic Egyptian writer, Waguih Ghali written in English from an insider perspective through the protagonist Ram, while In an Antique Land is a strong autobiographical novel written in English and directly reflecting the experiences of a secular Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh in Egypt from an outsider perspective. Both novels employ hybrid modern characters to reflect multicultural experiences and intricate historical intersections in the portrayal of modern Egypt, while they present us with different squares from modern Egypt through some flashbacks.

Beer in the Snooker Club

Raised in Cairo, Waguih Ghali worked in Britain, France, Sweden and Germany and this location shift affecting his social and political ideas draws a parallelism with his life and the life of Ram, his main character in his only published novel, *Beer in the Snooker Club*. Ghali portrays the lives of a polyglot Cairene upper class shortly after the fall of King Farouk by referring to what Egypt was like in the forties and fifties in the face of colonial powers which only pursued for their interests and did not give any insight into the unfair

treatment applied upon native people. The economic imbalance between rich landowners and the fellaheen (peasants) is a cause of tension in society and so after the revolution which toppled the King Farouk it is seen that titles have been abolished and land ownership has been limited to a maximum of two thousand acres per person, as it could be confirmed by Ram's wealthy aunt, who sarcastically delivers her lands to poor people in return for a certain sum of money.

Beer in the Snooker Club is mainly concerned with the lives of the Francophone, British educated Egyptian Coptic protagonists such as Ram, Font and Edna, who are stuck between English culture which imposes colonialism and the Egyptian revolution which protests against colonialism by resorting to suppressive domestic policies. They go through identity conflicts in their allegiances to both sides and long for a cosmopolitan identity rather than adopting cliché postcolonial binaries.

As both the narrator and protagonist of the novel, Ram presents an insider view of Egypt in early forties and fifties as a representative of an elite Coptic Cairene circle who conceals his opposite political activism and poverty under the mask of a debonair dandy person. To some extent the autobiographical nature of the novel is obscured by Ghali's suicide in London in 1968 after his loss of citizenship due to his leftist tendencies, whereas Ram pictures a more optimistic persona who goes unpunished despite his secret political deeds through the end of the novel. Ram is intelligent, hugely well read and politically sophisticated. He is also stylish and well-dressed, but unemployed. In fact, he sponges on his rich relatives and his wealthy friends although they are despicable in his eye. He lives with his still youthful and widowed mother in a flat paid for by the richest of her three (also widowed) sisters. As well as a Coptic character who has experienced or witnessed to what is told in the novel, he is also the reporter of the political crises, cultural conflicts and identity problems of Nasser's Egypt.

Beer in the Snooker Club starts with the description how Ram's aunt signs a great number of papers by giving away three acres of land at each signature for the sake of help to the poor. Ram comes to borrow money from his aunt, but his aunt doesn't care him a lot. Ironically enough, later, one of his aunt's friends, Marie comes and tells him she bought a new Cadillac, as the other one was costing her so much in petrol, which is an indication of the economic imbalance between the fellaheen and the wealthy upper class.

One of the main characters in the novel, Font has a significant role in terms of his contributions to the revelation of Ram's inner feelings and ideas by dialogues and fires thought-provoking questions to arouse Ram's conscience. Ram's bosom friend since childhood, Font is a lonely, shy, funny, and sympathetic character. Ram and Jameel meet Font who sells cucumbers on the street at the beginning of the novel and then Ram asks Jameel to employ Font in the snooker club. Although Font has a degree in his pocket, he sells cucumbers sarcastically and this case makes him infuriated. Font's furious nature towards life due to his satirical position induces him to be identified with Jimmy Porter

in *Looking Back in Anger*. He is trapped by his class and condemned not to be able to do anything useful. On the other hand, Edna, the great love of Ram's life comes from a millionaire class besides her Jewish identity. She gets married with a Jew, a member of the Communist Party, who went to Israel after being hit by three bullets and completely disfigured. Four years older, she is more knowledgeable, sophisticated and wealthier than Ram and Font and she helps Ram and Font broaden their horizons by arousing their interest in political and social books, and brings them to England to taste the British life and culture by supporting them financially. As she has a multicultural background, a wider view of life and connections with different political and cultural groups, she has great influence on Font and Ram's way of life and way of thinking throughout the novel.

Ram comes across the major character of the novel, Edna, "Salva girl" in a party that his aunt gives. In the party Ram quarrels with his cousin, Mounir who has just returned from the USA and throws capitalist slogans to people around him under the spell of unconscious admiration for it like: "'Believe me, American Democracy is the thing. Boy, you wanna see that country. I was there and I saw for myself. Man, that's the country for me. I tell you…'[1] Mounir defends that England should remain in Egypt by claiming "England must stay at Suez and protect us from the Red Menace'[2]. By referring to the colonial acts of missionaries who claim to be "freedom fighters", Ram responds to Mounir ironically: "Two days earlier, I had been with a group of 'freedom fighters', all students, harassing the English troops at Suez. Three of my friends had died, and Font was lying in hospital with a bullet in his thigh"[3]. Mounir's moral unawareness and indifference to the expansion and exploitation of colonial powers make Ram angry as the critical and moral voice in the novel.

> *I asked him what happened to China. He didn't know. He didn't know there was any racial discrimination in America. He had never heard of Sacco and Vanzetti; he did not know what 'un-American activities' was. No, he did not believe there were poor Puerto Rican so poor anyone else in America…all he knew was that he had spent three years in America, had picked up their pet phrases and had been given a degree. He was all set to be given high Office, and what sickened me was the knowledge that he would get it. It made me sick because apart from Font and myself, all the other students dying at Suez were poor families and Mounir and Co. were going to lord it over the survivors*[4].

Ram cannot stand Mounir's idiotic manners and leaves the party immediately after fighting with him. After that moment Edna follows Ram and supports him in his opposition to Mounir and people like him. Later they visit Font, wounded by English troops at Suez, and lying in hospital. After that day Font and Ram meet Edna nearly every day and they exchange opinions and knowledge about politics going around the world. Font and Ram are bookworms. They develop their perspectives by reading more and more political books

1 Waguih Ghali, *Beer in the Snooker Club,* (New York: New Amsterdam Books), 1964.
2 Ibid., 49.
3 Ibid., 48.
4 Ibid., 49.

through Edna's encouragement. They discuss about democracy, socialism or freedom and think that these concepts are at the core of the Egyptian revolution as they believe everything good was going to be carried out by the revolution. Although Ram and Font could not conceive of Edna's politics properly, they gradually become more aware of it as Edna talked to them about oppressed people in Africa and Asia and even some parts of Europe, and this stimulates Font and Ram to read political books with more interest. Ram confesses: "we learnt, for the first time, the history of British imperialism and why we didn't want the British troops in the Suez Canal area. Up to then we had shouted 'evacuation' like everyone else, without precisely knowing why evacuation was so important. Gradually, we began to see ourselves as members of humanity in general not just as Egyptians"[5]. In the chapter called "Performances, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Wealth" in her book entitled Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa, Annie Gagiano indicates: "the narrator refers to the continuing British military presence, the fallout from the Suez crisis that was precipitated by Nasser's annexation of the Canal and the 1956 British invasion which followed"[6]. Furthermore, as Nadia Gindy puts it, although Ghali's novel is "concerned with change and revolution [it] suggests that nothing really changes" [7]. Ram's dismay is linked to his intricate feelings about the revolution he and Font supported enthusiastically before they left but he discovered this revolution has since been betrayed when he returned to Egypt from London. Towards the end of the novel Ram explains his disillusionment to Didi, the woman he agrees to marry:

> *Anyway, when I came back, I saw that life here is exactly as it used to be. […] I mean how can I go and work in a boiling village when he [alluding to Nasser, the post-revolutionary head of state] is travelling about in Farouk's yacht which costs a million just for upkeep? And all this nationalization business just makes me laugh, although I don't tell Front that. The money goes to that useless army. Even the Asswan dam; by the time it's completed we'll have increased by ten million*[8].

What is striking in the novel is that Ram starts to know Egyptians by Edna's eye although he was himself born in Egypt. The situation reflects the bitter fact that "the Egyptian born in them is a stranger to his land"[9]. In fact, Ram starts to know Egyptian people thanks to Edna. It is not possible for Ram to know Egyptians in the social environment where he was born since the Sporting Club, the race meetings and the villa-owners and the European-dressed and –travelled people he meets, don't not refer to the Egyptian identity and culture. Ram discovers that "Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan not so much because they contained foreigners, but because the Egyptian born in them is himself a stranger to his

5 Ibid., 53.

6 Annie Gagiano, *Dealing with Evils: Essays on Writing from Africa* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2014), p. 251.

7 *Nadia Gindy*, "The *gift of our birth*': An image of Egypt in the Work of Waguih", Ghali," in *Images of Egypt in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. H. **Gindy** (Cairo: Cairo University English Department, 1991), p. 425.

8 Waguih Ghali, *Beer in the Snooker Club,* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1964), p. 202.

9 Ibid., 53.

land"[10]. It is even funny that Levy teaches Arabic to adult Egyptians who are urgently required to know this language, although he had a French education and studied Arabic only by Moslem Sheikhs at Azhar University. Ram ironically attracts our attention to his success with the words "he would probably have become a scholar of repute in the Arab world had it not been for the Suez War"[11], while he criticizes the deplorable condition of Egyptians who are even alienated from their own language and need the help of others to learn this language.

Edna's attempt to bring Font and Ram to England is a turning point that changes their life dramatically as it can be understood from Ram's own words about his changing lifestyle:

> *Edna, what is this? What is happening to me? I am Egyptian and have lived in Egypt all my life and suddenly I am here, and at the end of three weeks I have slid into this strange life where I meet a girl and think it natural to go to bed with her at the end of the day, under the same roof as her brother and mother and Paddy, and find it natural that she sleeps with me if she wants to. Such things don't happen in Egypt, so how can I come here and live in an entirely different manner and yet feel I have been living like this all my life?*[12]

Ram feels lost in this foreign culture. He tells Edna he feels like a character in the books he read. He remains under the effect of the stories he reads and transforms into a different identity within British culture. He is not satisfied with this case and he struggles to find himself, whereas Edna is happy to have spent time in Cairo with Ram and Font. She finds them sincere and honest. However, Ram is not pleased to have come to England, as it affects his life, manners and views negatively as it can be understood from his own words as following:

> *Mental sophistication of Europe has killed something good and natural in us, killed it for good…for ever. To me, now, it is apparent that we have, both Font and myself, lost the best thing we ever had: the gift of our birth, as it we were; something indescribable but solid and hidden and, most of all, natural. We have lost it for ever. And those who know what it is, cannot possess it…Gradually, I have lost my natural self…we left, Font and I, for London. For dreamed-of Europe, for 'civilization', for 'freedom of speech', for 'culture', for 'life'. we left that day and we shall never return, although we are back here again*[13].

Pursuing for a cosmopolitan identity, Edna cannot stand even her parents because of their colonial views as Mounir's. When we look at Edna's life story, we learn that her family has been in Egypt for a long time and she is the first person in the family to speak

10 Ibid., 53.
11 Ibid., 41.
12 Ibid., 105.
13 Ibid., 60.

Arabic[14] . Thanks to her nurse, Rose and Rose's family, Edna learns a lot about Egyptian culture and life and feels love and sympathy to Arabic people. She feels in love with Rose's husband's brother, Adle, but her parents oppose their reconciliation. Then Edna goes to Europe and when she returns to Egypt, she learns Adle died in the war between Israel and Egypt. Later she joins the communist party because she finds humanity in it, mixed with Jews, Egyptians and Greeks. Then the Egyptian revolution takes place and she rushes back to fight for it and support it. Edna marries a man, a Jew and a member of the communist party. As he is going to be arrested, they plan to marry by hoping they wouldn't imprison him, since Edna has a British passport. However, the British doesn't give him asylum or nationality and he is taken away and given ten years, two weeks after they get married. While he tries to escape, he is hit and completely disfigured. Because he is a Jew, he lives in Israel now. The ups and downs she has experienced in life don't make her a racist person but conversely, they reinforce her humanistic side.

Edna thinks she is Egyptian, but Ram challenges this idea because for Ram humour is indispensable in Egyptian culture. Ram believes his friends, Jameel, Yehia and he are really Egyptian as they have humour. Maybe this sense of humour sets a barrier in front of Edna and Ram's happiness. Ram compares his outlook on Egyptians with Edna's by asserting: "you told me so many times you love Egyptians. I, too, Edna, but unconsciously, not like you. Egypt to me is so many different things. Playing snooker with Doromian and Varenian the Armenians, is Egypt to me. Sarcastic remarks are Egypt to me—not only the fellah and his plight. Riding the tram is Egypt"[15]. This shows that cultural differences influence people's feelings more or less, however objectively men of different cultures approach events or situations. Although Ram loves Edna very much, he feels much more comfortable with Didi Nackla as he can mix politics and humour and love with her, while Edna has no sense of humour and politics is politics with her[16].

> *I stood up. "You know, Edna, you are not Egyptian. Not because you are married to an Israeli or because you are Jewish; you are just not Egyptian. I'll tell you why. Do you remember you told me once that I am not Egyptian because I belong to the* élite**,** *etc.? But I am Egyptian. Like Jameel and Yehia, I am real Egyptian. I have our humour. Even though my 'Egyptian' has been enfeebled by my stay in England and by the books I have read, I have the Egyptian character. You haven't," I told her. "You have no humour, Edna. We would all have died a long time ago if we didn't have our humour*[17].

Ram's aunt arranges a marriage between her son, Mounir and Didi Nackla. When Ram hears it, he confesses to Didi that he loves her and he is never really natural with Edna[18]. He tries to persuade her to marry himself rather than Mounir. Didi also reveals

14 Ibid., 107.
15 Ibid., 190.
16 Ibid., 198.
17 Ibid., 185.
18 Ibid., 202.

that she loves him, but claims he has no job and money. Ram tells her seriously she will support him and his mother because she is very rich. Thereupon, his aunt and Mounir bribe him to give up the idea of marrying Didi, but Ram is decided and sure of Didi's love for him. However, Didi is afraid of Ram's feelings for Edna and his connection with political businesses, so Ram promises to give this job up immediately and guarantees he loves her, as Edna is already married, which directly shows his opportunistic perspective. After all this, Ram continues his routine life and calls one of his friends to play poker at Groppi's without any idea of taking responsibility by seeking to work in his new life.

It is thought-provoking why Ghali gave the title "Beer in the Snooker Club" into his book. The special beer called "Draught Bass" Ram and Font got addicted to while staying in England becomes indispensable for them and even if they come back to Egypt, they seek for ways how to find the taste in Draught Bass, which indicates how they are dependent upon English culture unconsciously. Ram describes how they obtain the taste of Draught Bass in this way: "I opened two bottles of Egyptian Stella beer and poured them into a large tumbler, then beat the liquid until all the gas had escaped. I then added a drop of vodka and some whisky. It was the nearest we could get to Draught Bass"[19]. They make an imitation of British beer by using Egyptian beer, adding some vodka and whisky. In fact, these words clearly show that they lead a life in a mixture of cultures in none of which they do not find their exact place and Font questions this pungent reality like "the real trouble with us… (when Font says 'us' for him and me, it means he's exceptionally kindly disposed towards me), 'is that we're so English it is nauseating. We have no culture of our own"[20]. Font is dissatisfied with the social conditions of his class and struggles with social injustice. When Ram and Font come across a homeless child who has no other way than sleep in doorways, once again Font's anger comes up and you can observe "the genuine frustration and the anger at his inadequacy and the injustice of it seep up to his eyes and blind him with useless fury', Ram points out. Actually, what is annoying about the social injustice is the passive acceptance of the situation by public as Kharafallah, the coffee-house owner's words in relation to the condition of the homeless boy confirm it: 'no father, no mother, 'what can we do? It's God's will'[21].

Cultures are biased against each other because of the enmities and clashes that have been experienced between themselves throughout history and each of them prefers looking at the events from their own windows, ignoring what harm they have done to others. Just for the sake of conquering lands their greed drives them to attack each other unfairly, so sufferers do not forget what they were inflicted upon, whatever the other side says to deny the history. As a person who was wounded by a bloody Englishman in Suez, Font confronts this denial while arguing the Suez crisis and its results with Jean. Although Jean tries to persuade Font not to believe what others or foreigners say, Font's scar is a great evidence for the harm the British gave during the Suez Crisis. On the other hand, Jean is also one of the sufferers whose cousin was raped and killed by several Egyptians in Suez, which

19 Ibid., 17.
20 Ibid., 18.
21 Ibid., 40.

makes Font ashamed and suspicious of his Egyptian identity and he cannot help asking 'isn't it horrible we can do such things?'[22] However, Ram takes the rape for granted unlike Font and claims that it is her fault to go to Suez although she isn't wanted. Font does not accept this way of thinking and asserts: 'there is a difference between harassing the British troops at Suez and murdering a woman…it's a wonder they're so hospitable to us after what happened…after their cousin murdered'[23], while Ram reminds him of all those who died in Suez and warns him against assuming westernized manners like his cousin, Mounir, by forgetting his own past and trying to justify the expansionist policy of the west.

While Ram is discussing with Vincent about the economic imbalance between the fellaheen and the wealthy class, Vincent keeps Ram and his rich relatives responsible for this unfair situation, which Ram opposes fiercely:

> *Haven't you got any rich relatives? Well, I tell you, you have rich relatives. Some of the richest people on earth are your relatives. All the rich country-house owners and May-fair-flat occupiers are your relatives. All the Rolls-Royce-transported and unlimited expense-account possessors are your relatives. Isn't it bloody horrible you have so many rich relatives, while half of the population in Africa, which you own, is half-starving?' You are so well informed you know all about the Egyptian fellah, do you? Do you know anything of the natives in Kenya? in Rhodesia? In Aden? And worst of all, perhaps, in South Africa? Or are you going to tell me South Africa doesn't belong to your rich relatives? It does. If your rich relatives weren't so happy doing business with those filthy rich there, they would have been scared to flog defenceless black women. Don't you know your rich relatives will send you to South Africa in a second if a few white throats are cut by the natives, but it's the fellah you're worried about, is it? He is in his present plight after being ruled by your rich relatives, the Kitcheners and Co. for sixty years. Whatever happens to him now he can't be worse off than when your rich relatives were looking after his welfare*[24].

Ram imagines he is giving an imaginary speech to hundreds of people and this speech is full of witticisms which condemn the misery the English have inflicted upon others. Ram's speech is significant in terms of picturing the imperialist motives of the English as an exceptional nation, its greedy search for colonial lands and materialistic intentions:

> *The English are a race apart. No Englishman is low enough to have scruples, no Englishman is high enough to be free from their tyranny. But every Englishman is born with a certain power. When he wants a thing, he never tells himself he wants it. He waits until there comes to his mind, no one knows how, a burning conviction that it is his moral and religious duty to conquer those who possess the thing he wants… and then he grabs it. He is never at a loss for an effective moral attitude to take. When he wants a new market for his adulterated goods, he sends a missionary to teach the*

22 Ibid., 74.
23 Ibid., 74.
24 Ibid., 89.

natives the gospel of peace. The natives kill the missionary, the Englishman flies to arms in defence of Christianity, fights for it, conquers for it, and takes the market as a reward from heaven[25].

Behind Ram's careless, opportunist ways of behaviour there is actually a different character of Ram who is critical of both himself and the society in which he lives. In this sense the novel can be called as a satire which makes a criticism of the social and political events of the period. Ram invites readers to evaluate events from a universal perspective as a distressing event happening in the far corners of the world will affect the whole world as long as necessary precautions are not taken by others urgently. He expresses his perplexity like this: "it is funny how people—millions and millions of people—go about watching the telly and singing and humming in spite of the fact that they lost brother or father or lover in a war; and what is stranger still, they contemplate with equanimity seeing their other brothers or lovers off yet another war. They don't see the tragedy of it all"[26].

Ram is involved in political activities in cooperation with Dr Hamza, Jameel's father, who is an elegant aristocratic writing to L'Express of France and is imprisoned for socialist views. Ram admires him and wants to be like him. Ram also has some connections with the communist party even though he tries to conceal it from others. He thinks there are only two alternatives to a kind, just, honest, sincere and intelligent man who has read a great amount of literature and contemporary history and cares about people from all races: "either joining the Communist party or becoming mad"[27], he explains to Edna. Even if he joined the communist party, he indicates he does not belong to it. When Dr Hamza calls him and asks what he did with the pictures and he tells he made copies and sent them to all newspaper editors, which makes Dr Hamza very angry. Dr Hamza tells Ram to burn all pictures and stop his contact with him from that moment on. Later it is seen that Ram criticizes Didi Nackla's manner and ideas about the government because Didi thinks the government is good and fair, and people like Ram are a bit theatrical by their opposite views. Although Ram posted the documents and pictures of the twelve men who committed suicide in concentration camps to Didi and all other editors, he realizes nobody wrote anything about it. He feels hatred for these coward editors and despises Didi for not working morally by writing facts without fear, but just writing what her muzzled press tells her to write. He ironically asks Didi: "do you know the number of young men, doctors, engineers, lawyers in concentration camps? Or don't you know that we have concentration camps?"[28] Ram feels sad for all these young people who prefers death to life after being imprisoned to concentration camps and wants to show his opposition to the regime. At that period Nasser imprisons communists and deals with imperialism and so Ram has to keep his relation to the party secret. Ram certainly prefers a communist dictatorship, if he has to live under a dictatorship. He tells Didi: "imagine a third of our income being pumped into an army to fight a miserable two million Jews who were massacred something terrible in the last war….it's stupid living

25 Ibid., 76.
26 Ibid., 151.
27 Ibid., 189.
28 Ibid., 205.

under a police state without the benefits of the control"[29], in a criticism to the government. In her book entitled After a Funeral: A Memoir Diana Athill points out that Waguih Ghali named Didi

> *had rational grounds for criticising the Revolution. The Arab-Israel conflict is likely to be ruinous to the Middle East, so that in writing school boyish articles attacking Nasser for cherishing that conflict and spending the country's resources on building up an army for it, Didi was talking sense. That, it seems, was the immediate cause of his exile. He doesn't only imagine that he feels passionately about these things: his intelligence and the generosity of his nature are genuinely outraged by them. But his intelligence also tells him that 'if you really care so passionately about the fellaheen it would have made more sense to keep quiet and get on with doing what you could on the side of the good in the Revolution,' he answered sadly 'Do you think I haven't told myself that a thousand times?*[30]

Moreover, regarding Didi's rebellious and passionate nature Diana Athill comments:

> *Many Egyptians of Didi's background think wistfully of living abroad but stay at home because if they left they would lose their passports, and they can take no money out. They resent the regime because they are to its left. He was in opposition first (like all his contemporaries) to the British, the foreign people he most loves and admires; then to the Revolution because it didn't go far enough. And had neither of these two things existed to oppose, he would have found something else: the impulse to take a stand against authority was bred, surely, by his family* [31].

In An Antique Land

On the other hand, in *In an Antique Land* written almost three decades after Ghali, Amitav Ghosh portrays an Egypt greatly changed from the perspective of a foreigner. The protagonist of the novel is a Hindu graduate student of anthropology, who is interested in a Medieval Jewish trader named Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave whose records have been found in the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra at Fustat. This tradesman moves from Egypt to India, Ghosh's homeland, for commercial reasons in the 12th century and spends a great amount of time, which arouses Ghosh's interest for research. His professor, thesis supervisor Aly Issa, one of the most eminent anthropologists in Egypt, helped him to reside in Lataifa for his anthropological research, as the spoken language of this village is closer to the sound of the Geniza documents. Although it is expected that the Hindu student will bear a feeling of superiority to the poor natives, he is eager to learn Arabic, which will help him to decipher the languages of his research topic and bears witness to the lives and ideas of people as an outsider both observing culture and recording history.

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29 Ibid., 202.

30 Diana Athill, *After A Funeral*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.15.

31 Ibid., 13.

One of the core topics focused on throughout the novel is the importance of Geniza documents in the Cairo Geniza, a storehouse in which all kinds of written documents with God's name were deposited in the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, including also the letters written by Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave. Although every synagogue had a Geniza in the Middle East and their contents were emptied and buried regularly, the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra was never emptied and it continued to collect papers from different parts of the region until the nineteenth century and it is estimated the last document was deposited in 1875. Even though the Geniza remained entirely unnoticed for a long time, it gained importance with the construction of the Suez Canal and a scholar and collector of Judaic antiquities visited the synagogue, but could not find anything remarkable in the documents he obtained. Later, a Crimean Jew of the Karaite sect, Abraham Firkowitch visited the synagogue and formed one of the largest collections of Hebrew manuscripts in the world through the documents he obtained from it. His collections become the subject of research for the subsequent scholars, although he never revealed his sources even to his co-religionists. According to Ghosh's interpretation of this secrecy:

> *If there is an irony today in the thought that a Jewish collector, not so very long ago, would have seen reason to steal manuscripts from his fellow Jews in Palestine in order to take them to Russia, it is not one that would have been apparent to Firkowitch: he was merely practising on his co-religionists the methods that Western scholarship used, as a normal part of its functioning, throughout the colonized world*[32].

In her essay entitled "Taboo Memories. Diasporic Visions", in her book in the same name, Ella Shohat benefits from Ghosh's novel to learn about the Jewish communities in Egypt or in other Arab countries and one of the main points Shohat focuses on in her essay is the issue of Geniza which was looted by colonial powers. She ironically expresses: "colonialism did not pass over Egypt's Jewish community. Egypt's strategic location turned it into the object of interest for imperial powers, soon becoming a focus of attraction not only for Napoleon's battalions and their British competitors, but also for an army of researchers, artists, and diverse travelers afflicted with Egyptomania"[33]. Lastly Dr Solomon, an expert in Hebrew documents in Cambridge, discovers the significance of the manuscripts in the Geniza and plays a pivotal role in shipping the documents off to Cambridge. Ella Shohat is furious that westerners exploited the Geniza like as part of colonialism without getting any formal permission or paying for the documents deposited there. Ghosh describes how Schechter achieved his mission in this way:

> *The precise details of what transpired between Schechter and British officialdom and the leaders of the Cairo's Jewish community are hazy, but soon enough…they granted him permission to remove everything he wanted from the Geniza (a synagogue*

32 Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, (London: Granta Publications, 1998), 84.

33 Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories: Diasporic Voices*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 203.

chamber where the community books, papers, and documents were kept for centuries), every last paper and parchment, without condition or payment. It has sometimes been suggested that Schechter succeeded so easily in his mission because the custodians of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra had no idea of the real value of the Geniza documents—a species of argument that was widely used in the nineteenth century to justify the acquisition of historical artifacts by colonial powers[34].

Schechter manages to persuade the leaders of the Ben Ezra Synagogue for the transmission of the materials to Cambridge as well as with the help of the British embassy in Cairo. In Shohat's outlook "the Jewish studies experts who organized the dislocation of the Geniza to Cambridge from its region of belonging in Cairo inadvertently began a process of symbolic displacement of Jews of the East from their geocultural space. In this historical episode, the culture of the Egyptian Jewish community was partially "disappeared" through the confiscation of its documents"[35]. In the book Amitav Ghosh recounts his research in Egypt through some anecdotes, stories and historical information while he strives to practise his colloquial Arabic which helps him to decipher old scripts better and to understand easily what has happened in the Middle East so far. First, Ghosh starts to stay in the house of Abu-Ali, the richest man of the village "Lataifa". He is both the narrator in the novel and participant in the events under the guise of a traveller or researcher among Muslim friends in Egypt. He is not offended by the direct remarks they ask because he does not take them upon himself and regards himself as an outsider observer who strives to understand the Egyptian culture and the perspective of Egyptian people. Among the most common questions they ask: "do you really burn your deads? Do you worship cows? Even Jabir makes fun of Ghosh because he thinks Ghosh does not have knowledge about very simple subjects like a child and humiliates him in front of his friends, which does not affect Ghosh at all. Ghosh feels himself like an object of study by the villagers due to their curious looks and questions, while he himself intends to observe these people closely and to learn their language as part of his anthropological research.

Ghosh's travel from Egypt to India shows parallelism with the traces of Abraham Ben Yiju and his slave, Bomma in the 12th century. Like the slave, Ghosh first comes to Egypt, then goes to India and then comes back to Egypt again. While he searches for the traces of Ben Jiju and his slave, Ghosh actually gives us historical information, especially focusing on the flow of trade between Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

In 1988 when Ghosh returned to Lataifa, he realizes how things have changed since his departure dramatically. His return to Egypt coincides with the time of the first Gulf War and he meets a changed political atmosphere. As the income mostly depended on the land, it was not possible to see technological devices or machines such as a refrigerator or a TV

34 Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, (London: Granta Publications, 1998), 89-94.

35 Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories: Diasporic Voices*, p. 204.

set in houses. To buy these things people have to leave Egypt for Iraq, Libya or the Gulf to pursue for extra income, as Nabeel and Ismaeel did. Ghosh realizes most villagers went to Iraq to work. One remarkable point about these people working in Iraq is the hatred for their presence to make money in Iraq by taking advantage of the war, while the Iraqis are dying on the front during the war between Iran and Iraqi. Thanks to the extra income Nabeel sent to his family they renovate their house. Ghosh also realizes that the young children of the village have grown up and are studying in college.

Ghosh's return to Nashawy and Lataifa coincides with a mowlid dedicated to the memory of a saintly figure called "Sidi Abu-Hasira" born into a Jewish family and Sidi-Abu-Hasira means "the Saint of the Mat" since this Saint crossed the Mediterranean on a rush mat as his miracle. The tomb of this Saint arouses Ghosh's interest as he listened to his story again and again. While Mohsin is driving Ghosh to the railway station in Damanhour, they stop and approach the tomb when the police officers prevent them. By supposing Ghosh is an Israeli, he smiles, but when he learnt he is Indian, his smile disappears. The man is astonished that such a foreigner wants to visit the tomb although the mowlid is finished. He wants to know what his business was at that tomb despite his non-Jewish origin, which is a question maybe touching on the core of the whole book. At last he explains that he did not know Sidi-Abu-Hasira was a Jewish Saint and he learnt everybody went to visit his tomb in the countryside, whether they are Muslim, Christian or Jewish, so he wanted to visit it just out of curiosity. However, the man cannot conceive this situation as the unity between races and religions was already shattered. In the face of his amazement Ghosh puts it:

> *He seemed so reasonable and intelligent, that for an instant I even thought of telling him the story of Bomma and Ben Yiju. But then it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story—the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago. Nothing remained in Egypt now to effectively challenge his disbelief: not a single one, for instance, of the documents of the Geniza. It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved; that I was sitting at that desk now because the mowlid of Sidi Abu-Hasira was an anomaly within the categories of knowledge represented by those divisions. I had been caught straddling a border, unaware that the writing of History had predicated its own self-fulfilment*[36].

Lamentably Ghosh observes that it is not so easy to convince the person opposite him that Egypt has been a multicultural country which has witnessed various religions and races throughout history as a meeting point and naturally it can be perceived as an interactive place where each culture has shown respect for other cultures or even adopted some traditions or their customs because disunities, partitions and divisions are dominant in social, cultural and religious life in modern Egyptian history. Discussing *In An Antique Land*,

36 Amitav Ghosh, *In An Antique Land*, 339-340.

James Clifford points out: "the story delivers a sharp critique of a classic quest—exoticist, anthropological, orientalist—for pure traditions and discrete differences"[37]. Therefore, once it was normal that a foreigner was interested in the cultural life of different groups in this multicultural world, now it is anomaly because cultural and religious world are so separate from each other that imagining their gathering at the same point seems to be a dream as well as imagining Ghosh's visit of the tomb of a Jewish Saint as an Indian foreigner. In his book entitled *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion* Tabish Khair indicates:

> *By offering a glimpse of into the cosmopolitan, humane circuit of relations prevalent in medieval 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 alternate picture emerges, one that is tantalising 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 […] The world he creates reveals the possibility of futures and histories other than the one we have come to regard as inevitable"*[38].

Conclusion

Both *Beer in the Snooker Club* and *In an Antique Land* mirror the experiences of young idealists who seek for a cosmopolitan identity by breaking the restrictive chains of any racist mindset and going beyond the narrowing definition of Egyptian identity. As A. Clare Brandabur pointed out, "the aimless consumerism of the westernized Cairene elite plays out against the backdrop of a vanished past in which Egypt was the source of Greek mythology, the builder of pyramids which are still among the wonders of the earth"…"only in an ironic reversal today's Egypt is handcuffed by the global superpower"[39] (Brandabur 2009: 29). Both novels ultimately defy racial stereotypes and binary oppositions created within the context of cultural imperialism and postcoloniality. Stranded between two cultures, the protagonists in *Beer in the Snooker Club* are forced to make a choice between reluctant acquiescence.and dangerous political opposition.

Giving an intriguing account of a small village in Egypt in the midst of modernisation and economic upheaval in his time as an anthropology student, Amitav Ghosh intersperses his interesting memoir with the story of a 12th- century Indian trader, which is the subject of his research as a student. The story of a Jewish slave known only through some medieval documents and letters found in a cache in Cairo makes the narrative interesting. The author's description of the cache of documents found in the Cairo Ganizeh is very engaging, while he

37 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.5.

38 Tabish Khair, *Amitav Ghosh: A Critical Companion,* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), pp. 84-5.

39 A. Clare Brandabur, *Waguih Ghali and Amitav Ghosh: In Search of a Secular Arab Nationalist Identity in Egypt*, (the Waterford Conference of the Postcolonial Studies Association, May 6-8, 2009), 29.

also presents some vivid, shrewd observations on the politics of the Middle East in the early eighties by reflecting the changes in modern Egypt a generation or so after the Egyptian revolution of Nasser in 1952. Reflecting the different civilizations that existed before Europe's colonising activities across India, Middle East, Europe, Ghosh presents a hidden history of Egypt and India during the 12th-century under the disguise of a traveller's story. Ghosh uncovers the mystery of Ben Yiju's slave, Bomma whose life he traces the details about through a large number of letters and manuscripts signalling to the trade between Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, while gathering important pieces of information about Bomma's journey from India to Egypt. In his foreword to the volume *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Edward Said makes a criticism of the inaccessibility of historical sources about subalterns:

> *We find frequent reference to such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history as well as their historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others. ... In other words, subaltern history in literal fact is a narrative missing from the official story.*[40]

In this way Ghosh reconstructs a 12th-century master-slave relationship that mingles modern concepts of slavery in a blend of history, travelogue, and cross-cultural analysis. Likewise, *Beer in the Snooker Club* presents an authentic account of Egyptian society at a time of upheaval in the forties and fifties through tragic, funny and sympathetic protagonists.

Overall, Waguih Ghali presents an insider view of Modern Egypt in *the Beer in the Snooker* Club that chronicles the lives of a polyglot Cairene upper crust after the fall of King Farouk, while Amitav Ghosh presents an outsider view in *In An Antique Land* that transcends eras and genres. Ghosh makes eye-opening revelations about Jewish life in the Maghreb and medieval Egypt, the close relationship between Jews and the Muslims, collapsed only in the last century, are intertmingled with Ghosh's own story, a perception of Egyptian villagers through Indian eyes. Some aspects of his culture were so unfamiliar to them that they sometimes regarded him as an ignorant refugee from a primitive country, rather than understanding the ignorance of their own saintliness. It is subversive of certain historical commonplaces about Jewish-Muslim antinomy or about the contributions of Western trade, discovery, and modernity. Dealing with major themes of post-colonial identity in the 20th-century Egypt with a strong sense of realism, *Beer in the Snooker Club* is a novel of late-1950s, early-1960s Egypt, or particularly Cairo, which portrays a youth's life in the heart of the Arab World through the eyes of Ram who is a well- educated, well-connected Copt, in his mid-twenties. It refers to a time when France and the U.K. intended to punish Egypt for nationalising the Suez canal with armed invasion and when Israel agreed to destroy the Egyptian airforce before it got off the ground. As Ram and his best friend Font spent

40 Edward Said, "Foreword" in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. vii.

four years in England, they are obsessed with English civilization and culture, but they also regarded British hypocrisy and colonialism with contempt and they got involved in guerilla fighting against the British during the Suez War. Therefore Ram empathizes with the fellaheen and is intellectually indignant on their behalf, but he also mingles with the dandies who play bridge and croquet and his favorite pastime is beer in the snooker club. That's why these young and well-educated characters in the novel depicting Egypt in the tumultuous 1950's are trapped between cultures and languages. Excluded both from the military revolution and the privilege of their wealthy Cairo connections, they miss Britain in vain. All these stranded lives in both novels reflect the contradictions of different lives in metaphorical exile as a consequence of emigration.

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