

From Bondage to Brotherhood: Bomma and Ben Yiju as agents of Cross-Cultural Interaction

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ABSTRACT

In an Antique Land offers a unique lens to find out cross-cultural interactions by reconstructing the historical relationship between Bomma, an Indian slave, and Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant, against the backdrop of the medieval Indian Ocean trade networks of the 12th century. Unlike the conventional master-slave dynamic characterized by dominance and subjugation, their relationship is marked by mutual respect, trust, and interdependence. Bomma emerges as an influential figure, actively participating in commercial and diplomatic affairs while navigating diverse cultures and geographies. His role in Ben Yiju's mercantile enterprise reflects the fluidity of identity and social mobility in the pre-colonial world, countering rigid, hierarchical structures often associated with servitude. By intertwining historical narrative with personal travelogue, Ghosh challenges Eurocentric historiography that often marginalizes non-Western perspectives. The novel foregrounds a nuanced depiction of medieval globalization, demonstrating how trade networks facilitated not just economic transactions but also cultural exchanges and hybrid identities. The movement of people, ideas, and goods across regions ranging from Egypt to India reshapes conventional understandings of interconnected histories. This paper examines how Bomma and Ben Yiju function as agents of cultural transmission, breaking down barriers of religion, ethnicity, and class through their interwoven lives. Drawing on textual evidence, historical documents, and secondary sources, the analysis highlights how their relationship embodies themes of cultural hybridity and transnationalism. Ghosh's approach, which blends fiction with historical reconstruction, critiques static national and cultural boundaries, emphasizing instead the dynamic and fluid nature of identity formation over time. Ultimately, *In an Antique Land* reconstructs a deeply interlinked past, providing an alternative historical perspective that challenges dominant narratives of separation and difference.

Keywords: Bomma, Ben Yiju, cultural hybridity, Indian Ocean trade, Amitav Ghosh, cross-cultural interaction, transcultural exchange.

1. INTRODUCTION :

In an Antique Land is a compelling narrative that merges history, anthropology, and literature to explore the lives of Bomma, an Indian slave, and Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant, within the vibrant Indian Ocean trade network of the 12th century. Drawing on the Cairo Geniza documents, Ghosh reconstructs the interconnected lives of these two figures, emphasizing their roles in a world shaped by commerce, migration, and cultural exchange. The novel challenges traditional historical narratives that often focus on dominant figures and empires, instead highlighting the agency of marginalized individuals like Bomma, who, despite his servitude, plays a crucial role as a cultural mediator in mercantile operations. Ben Yiju, as a Jewish merchant, is portrayed as not just a trader, but as someone who navigates and embraces the social and cultural diversity of medieval India. This partnership between Bomma and Ben Yiju exemplifies the fluidity of identity and relationships in a pre-colonial world defined by interconnectedness.

Furthermore, Ghosh's dual narrative, which intertwines his modern-day journey with the historical reconstruction of Bomma and Ben Yiju's lives, bridges the past and present, illustrating the persistence of transcultural interactions. This approach highlights how historical research can reveal forgotten connections and shared histories, while also offering insights into the dynamics of hybridity, migration, and cultural exchange. By analyzing the relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju, this paper seeks to explore their roles as agents of cross-cultural interaction and to understand how their lives reflect the broader dynamics of the Indian Ocean world. Through their experiences, Ghosh contributes to the ongoing discourse on interconnected histories and how ordinary individuals, often overlooked by mainstream historiography, shape global narratives.

2. OBJECTIVES :

- 1) To analyze the nature of the relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju as depicted in *In an Antique Land*.
- 2) To explore how their bond facilitated cross-cultural interactions in the Indian Ocean trade network.
- 3) To examine broader implications of their story for understanding medieval transcultural exchanges.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

The relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju in *In an Antique Land* has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in the context of cultural hybridity, transcultural exchanges, and interconnected histories. Abu-Lughod (1989) and Pearson (2003) emphasize the Indian Ocean trade network as a dynamic space for cultural and economic interactions, a framework within which Bomma and Ben Yiju's partnership thrived. Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity provides a lens to analyze the cross-cultural encounters depicted in the novel, as Ben Yiju's adaptation to Indian society and Bomma's role as a mediator exemplify hybrid identities. Chakrabarty (1992) and Prakash (1990) critique Eurocentric historiography, aligning with Ghosh's effort to highlight marginalized voices like Bomma's in historical narratives. Literary scholars such as Mitra (2009) and Sen (2002) delve into Ghosh's blending of history and fiction, analyzing the nuanced dynamics of agency and servitude in Bomma and Ben Yiju's relationship. Goitein's (1971) study of the Cairo Geniza documents provides historical context, revealing the interconnected Jewish-Arab-Indian networks that underpin their story. Additionally, Chaudhuri (1985), Bose (2006), and Subrahmanyam (1997) explore the socio-economic structures of the Indian Ocean trade, highlighting the active roles of slaves like Bomma in shaping transcultural exchanges. Together, these studies underscore how *In an Antique Land* reconstructs interconnected histories, humanizing figures traditionally overlooked in historical accounts.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS :

This research employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating historical analysis, literary interpretation, and postcolonial theory to examine the relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju in *In an Antique Land*. The study draws extensively on primary sources, particularly the Cairo Geniza documents referenced by Amitav Ghosh, to understand the socio-economic and cultural contexts of the Indian Ocean trade network in the 12th century. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and essays on Indian Ocean studies, cultural hybridity, and postcolonial historiography, provide critical frameworks for analysis. Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentric historiography inform the theoretical lens of this research. The narrative's dual structure Ghosh's modern journey and the historical reconstruction of Bomma and Ben Yiju are analyzed to explore themes of interconnected histories, migration, and transcultural interaction. Combining textual analysis with historical insights highlights how Ghosh reconstructs forgotten voices and challenges traditional historical narratives, presenting a nuanced view of agency and cultural exchange in a pre-colonial, interconnected world.

4.1 Bomma and Ben Yiju as agents of Cross-Cultural Interaction

The historical relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju serves as a testament to the fluidity of cultural boundaries and economic interdependence in the medieval Indian Ocean trade network. Their dynamic interaction illustrates how individuals from different religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds could forge meaningful connections, shaping transnational commerce and cultural exchange. Ghosh's narrative highlights their roles not just as master and servant but as active participants in an interconnected world, where trade, migration, and adaptation played crucial roles in shaping identities.

4.1.1 Bomma: A Slave Beyond Subjugation

Bomma's role in *In an Antique Land* challenges the traditional perception of slavery as a condition defined solely by subjugation and lack of agency. Despite being a slave in Ben Yiju's household, Bomma was entrusted with significant responsibilities in trade operations, demonstrating intelligence, skill, and reliability. His role went far beyond passive labor, as he managed valuable goods and acted as an intermediary in commercial dealings across regions like Egypt, Aden, and Mangalore. Notably, even though he earned a modest salary of two dinars per month, he was responsible for goods worth thousands of times more, indicating the immense trust Ben Yiju placed in him. Over time, Bomma's status evolved from that of a servant to a trusted business agent, with Ben Yiju even addressing him as "Sheikh" in later years, a term of respect that signified his growing influence and importance.

Bomma's linguistic dexterity and deep familiarity with regional customs allowed him to serve as a cultural and economic mediator in the vast Indian Ocean trade network. His ability to communicate effectively with local merchants, negotiate deals, and ensure smooth trade logistics highlights the overlooked agency of individuals in servitude. Unlike the common perception of slaves as powerless, Bomma actively shaped trade interactions, demonstrating autonomy in his decisions and adaptability in complex socio-economic landscapes. Ghosh's portrayal humanizes Bomma, revealing him not just as a subordinate but as a key participant in the cultural and economic exchanges that defined medieval transnational trade. This reimagining of historical narratives underscores how enslaved individuals were not mere victims of their circumstances but were often active contributors to globalization and transcultural interactions.

4.1.2 Ben Yiju: A Merchant Embracing Cosmopolitanism

In *In an Antique Land*, Amitav Ghosh portrays Ben Yiju as a 12th-century Jewish merchant whose life exemplifies the cosmopolitan nature of the Indian Ocean world. Originally from Tunisia, Ben Yiju settled in Mangalore, a city on India's Malabar Coast, around 1132 CE. His migration was not merely a physical relocation but also a journey of cultural assimilation and adaptation. In Mangalore, a predominantly Hindu region, Ben Yiju immersed himself in the local culture by learning the language and establishing relationships within the community. His marriage to Ashu, a local Nair woman, symbolizes this cultural blending. Scholars infer that Ashu became Ben Yiju's wife and was the mother of his children, indicating a deep personal integration into the local society.

Ben Yiju's household in Mangalore became a microcosm of the cultural diversity characteristic of the Indian Ocean trade network. This fusion of Jewish, Indian, and Arab traditions illustrates how global commerce facilitated the exchange of ideas, practices, and customs. Ghosh presents Ben Yiju as a figure who transcended rigid cultural boundaries, embodying the adaptability and openness necessary to thrive in a pluralistic society. His ability to maintain his Jewish identity while embracing local culture challenges the notion of fixed identities, demonstrating how interconnected spaces can shape fluid and inclusive worldviews.

4.1.3 The Bomma-Ben Yiju Partnership: A Model of Transcultural Collaboration

The relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju in *In an Antique Land* highlights the deep interdependence that shaped historical trade networks in the Indian Ocean world. Unlike the typical master-slave dynamic, their partnership was based on mutual reliance, trust, and shared objectives. While Ben Yiju was a wealthy Jewish merchant with extensive trade connections, Bomma, though a slave, played a crucial role in

managing trade operations. He was not merely a subordinate but an active participant in business dealings, handling transactions, negotiating with local merchants, and ensuring the smooth transportation of goods across vast distances. His skills in communication and trade negotiations were essential for the success of Ben Yiju's commercial ventures (Ghosh, 1992, p. 234).

Their relationship also reflects how human connections, rather than rigid hierarchies, often defined trade in the medieval world. Despite the structural inequalities of their relationship, Bomma enjoyed a significant level of agency. For instance, records suggest that Ben Yiju entrusted Bomma with independent responsibilities, allowing him to act on his behalf in trade dealings. This trust was particularly evident when Ben Yiju left India and traveled to Egypt, during which Bomma continued to manage parts of his trade business (Ghosh, 1992, p. 247). Such responsibilities suggest that Bomma was more than just an enslaved worker; he was a key figure in the merchant's network, playing a role that required intelligence, reliability, and strategic thinking.

Moreover, the bond between Bomma and Ben Yiju illustrates how people from diverse cultural, religious, and social backgrounds can collaborate and build meaningful relationships. Their collaboration was not just economic but also personal, built on years of working side by side. This interaction between a Jewish merchant and his Indian slave reflects the broader dynamics of the Indian Ocean trade system, where individuals from different regions and ethnicities cooperated in business, exchanging not only goods but also ideas and cultural practices (Ghosh, 1992, p. 256).

Amitav Ghosh's narrative also serves as a critique of conventional historical writing, which often focuses on kings, conquerors, and elite figures while neglecting the contributions of ordinary individuals. By reconstructing Bomma's story, Ghosh challenges the Eurocentric perspective that marginalizes non-European actors in global trade history. Bomma's role in Ben Yiju's household and business demonstrates that even those in subordinate positions could shape historical events through their work and interactions (Ghosh, 1992, p. 261).

Through the depiction of this partnership, *In an Antique Land* reveals the human side of historical global trade, showing that trust, collaboration, and adaptability were key factors in the success of transregional commerce. Bomma and Ben Yiju's relationship is thus a powerful example of how transcultural exchanges shaped the medieval world, proving that economic and social networks thrived not through domination alone but through cooperation and mutual dependence.

4.1.4 The Indian Ocean World: A Space of Cross-Cultural Exchange

The Indian Ocean world, where the lives of Bomma and Ben Yiju unfold in *In an Antique Land*, is portrayed as a dynamic space of cross-cultural exchange. The region's trade routes were more than just paths for transporting goods; they served as channels for the exchange of ideas, languages, and customs. People from diverse backgrounds interacted, creating a fluid cultural environment. For instance, Bomma, who was from an African coastal region, and Ben Yiju, a Jewish merchant from Tunisia, lived and worked in Mangalore, India. Their interactions were not limited to commerce but extended to learning from each other's cultures. Ben Yiju adopted local practices and customs, while Bomma, through his linguistic skills, acted as a cultural mediator. This exemplifies how trade in the Indian Ocean world facilitated not only economic transactions but also the blending of traditions and lifestyles (Ghosh, 1992, p. 245).

The interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean world reflects a broader historical context of globalization, much before the colonial period. Ghosh uses the experiences of Bomma and Ben Yiju to highlight the fluid nature of identities in a time when boundaries between cultures were porous. In this pre-colonial world, individuals were not confined by rigid national or cultural identities. For example, despite Ben Yiju's Jewish background, he immersed himself in the local culture of Mangalore, learning the language and marrying Ashu, an Indian woman, which illustrates the blending of personal and cultural identities (Ghosh, 1992, p. 259). This openness is in stark contrast to the later colonial world, where rigid hierarchies and national borders became the norm, creating divides between people and cultures. Through the lens of Bomma and Ben Yiju's relationship, Ghosh presents a vision of human interaction based on cooperation, where cultural exchange was not just possible but thriving. The Indian Ocean world, in this sense, serves as a counterpoint to the division and conflict imposed by later colonial histories (Ghosh, 1992, p. 268).

4.1.5 Ghosh's Narrative: Recovering Forgotten Histories

Ghosh, in his work, takes on the role of a historical storyteller dedicated to recovering forgotten histories and amplifying the voices of marginalized figures who have been overlooked in conventional historical narratives. By reconstructing the lives of ordinary individuals like Bomma and Ben Yiju, Ghosh shifts the focus from elite or dominant groups to those whose contributions were pivotal, yet often uncelebrated (Chakrabarty, 1992). This approach brings into line with postcolonial historiography, which seeks to challenge Eurocentric narratives that have historically marginalized non-Western actors and their roles in shaping global history (Prakash, 1990).

Ghosh's narrative is particularly significant because it bridges the gap between historical scholarship and literary imagination. By blending archival research with fictional storytelling, Ghosh not only reconstructs the past but also humanizes it, offering a more nuanced understanding of the lives of individuals like Bomma, who were often relegated to the margins of history (Mitra, 2009). The Cairo Geniza documents, which form the backbone of Ghosh's narrative, provide a rare glimpse into the lives of ordinary people in the medieval Indian Ocean world, revealing the interconnectedness of cultures, religions, and economies (Goitein, 1971).

Through this narrative, Ghosh critiques the traditional historiography that prioritizes the stories of kings, conquerors, and elites, often ignoring the contributions of slaves, merchants, and other ordinary individuals who played crucial roles in shaping historical processes (Sen, 2002). By foregrounding the lives of Bomma and Ben Yiju, Ghosh demonstrates how transcultural exchanges in the Indian Ocean world were not merely the result of elite-driven trade policies but were also shaped by the everyday interactions of people from diverse backgrounds (Subrahmanyam, 1997). Moreover, Ghosh's dual narrative structure alternating between his modern-day journey and the historical reconstruction of Bomma and Ben Yiju's lives serves to highlight the continuity of human experiences across time. This approach not only bridges the past and present but also highlights the importance of these historical narratives in understanding present-day issues of globalization, migration, and cultural hybridity (Clifford, 1997). In essence, Ghosh's narrative is a powerful reminder of the importance of recovering forgotten histories. By giving voice to marginalized figures like Bomma, Ghosh enriches our understanding of the past and challenges us to reconsider how history is written and remembered today (Ghosh, 1992).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

The relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju, as depicted in *In an Antique Land*, serves as an example of cross-cultural interaction in the medieval Indian Ocean world. Their partnership challenges traditional historical narratives that often emphasize rigid hierarchies and power imbalances, instead highlighting the fluidity of identity and the potential for collaboration across cultural, religious, and social boundaries (Ghosh, 1992). Bomma's role as a slave in Ben Yiju's household defies the conventional perception of slavery as a condition defined solely by subjugation and lack of agency. Instead, Bomma emerges as an active participant in Ben Yiju's mercantile operations, demonstrating intelligence, skill, and reliability in managing trade goods and negotiating with local merchants (Goitein, 1971). This portrayal of Bomma as a cultural and economic mediator underscores the often-overlooked agency of individuals in positions of servitude, challenging the stereotype of slaves as powerless victims of their circumstances (Sen, 2002).

Similarly, Ben Yiju's life exemplifies the cosmopolitan nature of the Indian Ocean world. As a Jewish merchant from Tunisia who settled in Mangalore, India, Ben Yiju's ability to adapt to local customs and establish relationships within the community reflects the fluidity of identity in a pre-colonial world characterized by cultural diversity and interconnectedness (Subrahmanyam, 1997). His marriage to Ashu, a local Nair woman, symbolizes the blending of Jewish, Indian, and Arab traditions, illustrating how global commerce facilitated economic transactions and the exchange of ideas, practices, and customs (Ghosh, 1992). The partnership between Bomma and Ben Yiju also highlights the deep interdependence that defined historical trade networks in the Indian Ocean world. Their relationship was based on mutual reliance, trust, and shared objectives, rather than rigid hierarchies. Bomma's ability to act independently on behalf of Ben

Yiju in trade dealings demonstrates the level of trust and respect that existed between them, challenging the conventional master-slave dynamic (Goitein, 1971).

Through the lens of Bomma and Ben Yiju's relationship, *In an Antique Land* offers a vision of human interaction based on cooperation and mutual dependence, rather than domination and conflict. This narrative challenges the Eurocentric perspective that marginalizes non-European actors in global trade history, instead emphasizing ordinary individuals' contributions in shaping historical processes (Chakrabarty, 1992).

6. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, *In an Antique Land* offers a profound exploration of cross-cultural interaction, emphasizing the complexity of identity and the significance of mutual dependence in transcending cultural boundaries. Through the relationship between Bomma and Ben Yiju, Amitav Ghosh showcases how individuals from vastly different backgrounds such as a slave and a merchant could form a partnership based on trust, collaboration, and shared goals. This challenges traditional historical narratives that often marginalize the roles of ordinary individuals, especially those from oppressed or subjugated backgrounds. By focusing on their partnership, Ghosh highlights the fluidity of identity in a world where boundaries were porous and cultural exchange was commonplace.

Ghosh's portrayal reimagines history by prioritizing personal relationships and cultural exchanges, offering a richer, more inclusive view of the past. Instead of centering on grand historical events or elite figures, the novel foregrounds the everyday experiences of individuals, thus providing a human-centered understanding of history. In depicting Bomma's life as a slave and Ben Yiju's journey as a Jewish merchant, Ghosh shows that identity is not fixed or static but continuously shaped through ongoing interaction, adaptation, and mutual exchange. This idea, particularly in the context of the interconnected trade networks of the Indian Ocean world, presents a vision of history where collaboration across cultures and social hierarchies leads to a broader, more diverse understanding of the past. Ghosh's insights are particularly relevant today, as we navigate a globalized world where cross-cultural relationships continue to shape and redefine identities on both personal and collective levels.

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