

A Study of Pico Iyer's Video Night in Kathmandu and Other Reports from Not - So - Far East as a Post-Colonial Travelogue

S.Mohammad Shafiullah¹, Dr.K.Ravi Sankar²

¹Svcr Govt Degree College, Palamaner, Chittoor Dist (Ap)

²Research Supervisor, Lec SVGM Govt Degree College, Kalyandurg

Abstract:

When Pico Iyer began his travels writings, he wanted to know how ³Rambo conquered Asian countries, which had previously been under the colonial rule. Pico Iyer travelled to Bali, realised that Paradise might not be lost after all. Then in Tibet, he checked on how Tibet was faring as the world's last secret to be revealed to full view. Pico Iyer wants to know how pop culture and imperialism perforate through the world's most ancient civilisations, and began to uncover more startling, subtle and complex things than he ever anticipated. Pico Iyer then reveal how in this world, where the movie stars like Amitabh Bachan and Raj Kapoor have become gods and celluloid heroes. To travel with Pico Iyer, is like experiencing the seductions and ironies, trials and tribulations of today's Asian cultures - and our own.

Key Words: Travelogue, Post-Colonial Travel Writing, Ethno-cultural, Globalization, Imperialism.

1. Introduction:

Siddharth Pico Raghavan Iyer was born on 11th February, 1957 in Oxford, England, and educated at Eton, Oxford and Harvard Universities. He is a travel writer, book reviewer, essayist, author and novelist. He was the son of Indian parents, residing in United Kingdom and had his schooling in England and California. He is a widely travelled travel writer of 21st century and his travelogues are always being revealing and reflective. Pico Iyer displays a sharpshooter's eye for fresh and immensely accomplished evocative detail. In a way he brings life to the places he visited by his travel narratives and thus invented modern Asia (Roger Rosenblatt:1). His chief Non – fiction works include: 'Sun After Dark,' 'The Global Soul,' 'Tropical Classical,' 'Falling Off the Map,' 'The Lady and the Monk,' 'Video Night in Kathmandu.' 'The Open Road.' His fictional works include 'Abandon,' and 'Cuba and the Night.' Pico Iyer has been a writer for Time, since 1982 and articles appear often in Harper's New York Review of Books, New York

¹ Research Scholar, Dept of English, Bharatiya Engineering, Science and Technology Innovation University, Gorantla, Satya Sai (Dt) A.P

² Research Supervisor, Lecturer in English, SVGM Govt Degree College, Kalyandurg, Anantapur (Dt) AP.

³ **Rambo (2008)** is an action film starring **Sylvester Stallone** as John Rambo. Set in war-torn Burma, Rambo leads a daring mission to rescue kidnapped missionaries.

Times and other publications on both sides of the Atlantic and Pacific. After marrying with Japanese partner, Hiroko, he divides his time between California and Japan.

Travelling has always been a basic human urge. Men have travelled for various reasons – out of curiosity, for adventure, on diplomatic missions, on pilgrimage, for trade and commerce, in search of food or jobs and many others. Some travellers, endowed with alert and methodical minds recorded in writings their observations and experiences and facts of history as it appeared to them. The world's ancient and medieval travel history is very rich and bounteous with many literary traditions, customs and cultural practices of people around the world. In India, we are familiar with the travel books of Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien and Huiuen – TSang and also with those of medieval French travellers, Tavenier and Bernier. These books and many more are very important documents of our religious, political, social and cultural history. India is also visited by other travellers like those Italian travelers to India, Marco Polo and the Arabian travellers – Ibn Batuta and Alberuni. In modern times, interesting travelogues have been written by such literary stalwarts like Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, V.S.Naipaul, Ved Mehta, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh etc. Vikram Seth's "Heaven Lake (2004) and Amitav Ghosh's "In an Antique Land (1992), "Dancing in Cambodia (1998)", "The Imam and the India, (2002)", are the examples of travel writings.

The travel writings of the ancient, medieval and modern times served different purposes like the recording of the particular peoples, places, customs, ceremonies etc. Often these books provide the life of the ordinary people lived at particular times in history. They give us insights into different cultures. They show us how same thing could often be perceived differently by people. Travel writers and writings differ from each other, depending on whether the travel writer kept an open mind or was guided by any pre-conceived notions and ideas.

Pico Iyer's travel writings are excellent pieces of travel narratives of Asian countries, such as Bali, Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan, Philippines, Burma, Hong Kong, India, Thailand etc. In the present travelogue under study, 'Video Nights in Kathmandu and other Reports from the not-so-far East' is a collection of 10 short essays on travel in 10 Asian countries namely, Bali, Tibet, Nepal, China, Philippines, Burma, Hong Kong, India, Thailand and Japan. These countries were previously under the colonial rule and travelogues of these countries by Pico Iyer is not an academic study; but more of an account of a traveller who sought to understand the American and British cultural influence on the Orient and the joy and adventure that brings in being in alien land as a traveller and as a travel writer.

Siddharth Pico Raghavan Iyer's "Video Night in Kathmandu and other Reports from the Not-so-far East" (1988) is a collection of ten essays on ten Asian countries in the mid 1980's. The writer takes the reader on a joyful and adventurous tour of Asia with his insights on culture, traditions, food habits, ethno – cultural, and demographic details etc. In this book, he brings a new life to the places he visited and as Roger Rosenblatt comments, the author invented the modern Asia. All the chapters are loaded with interesting accounts about the 'mysterious and enticing East.'

Pico Iyer starts this delightful book with an interesting account of Bali, the 'world's loveliest paradise island' in Indonesia (p.33). Bali had something for everyone and it remained unavoidable and irresistible. When he landed in Bali, in no time his eyes captured the strong western invasion and the western presence in the tiny island. Like Prospero's island in 'The Tempest,' it was governed by a race of noblemen, artisans and priests. Tourism hung around Bali as chains around a mermaid and famous for its

worldly exoticism, its cultural integrity, its natural grace (p.30). The Dutch sailors were the first westerners to land in Bali in 1597 and announced their discovery of ‘Eden’ like Prospero’s isle. Bali offered all the amenities of Eden and nature had been charged by art and architecture and everything was at peace.

Through his journey into the main land of Bali, Pico Iyer had discovered that, Bali is popular for myths, rituals and superstitions. There are about 30,000 temples in the small island country and the pious women who offered prayers at the temples caught the attention of the author (p.32). Touching a child on his or her head was disallowed. Elders carried every boy and girl until the age of three, so as to protect them from the impure earth. Indonesia is a combination of 13,000 big and small islands and majority of the population belongs to Muslim community, yet there seemed to be fewer mosques since most of the architecture was based on Hindu mythology, and its most famous monument was Buddhist. Further, Pico Iyer observes that, Indonesia was the only airlines he knew in the world, where national airlines gave no indication of its homeland and was named after a mythological god bird. Thus, travellers across the globe experience a secular and soothing experience of peace in the land of Bali and thus fittingly called it as the land of ‘Eden’ and Paradise of gentle souls.

Pico Iyer’s account of his second essay on Tibet, begins with his picturesque description of its physical beauty with huge and highest peaks and points out that it always been one of the world’s secret places; hidden behind the highest peaks on earth, disengaged from the march of time. Indeed, in all of history until 1979, less than 2000 Westerners had ever set their eyes on the ⁴‘Forbidden Land.’ The ‘City of Sun’ and the ‘Land of Snow’ was opened to all the visitors and Tibetans welcomed all with a pleasing smile. Tibetans are the most pious people. They loved peace and harmony. Buddhism was the main religion of the people and they love ⁵‘Dalai Lama’ as their spiritual leader, who exiled from the country, a quarter century ago due to the Chinese aggression and anti-religious legislation in Tibet. Then Iyer points out that, 7 million Tibetans, reputed to be among the most pious and peace loving people in the world, had found themselves assaulted by the forces of a billion Chinese ideologues who seemed to derive a perseveres delight from violating the monasteries of their faith. Nevertheless, Pico Iyer feels that, Tibet was in every sense the land where a breath of fresh air blows and Tibetans reputed to be most pious and peace loving people in the world.

2. Conclusion:

Thirst for information of men all over the world demands to take place the form of travel writings. Each travel writing and writer is distinctive in nature and had its own flavour of narrative style and the insights that he brings before the readers. As such, travel writings are not a catalogue of objective facts and no two travel writers have the same homogenized way of narrating the place of their writings.

Pico Iyer’s travel writings were different from other recent European travel writers like, Frank Delaney, Dan Jacobson and Dervla Murphy in so far as they consider themselves as European travel writers and many of the travel books written at the height of British Empire and therefore often incorporates the very essence of British imperialism and colonialism. Thus, more or less the above travel writers deliberately follow the footsteps of their predecessors. As such, many authors of Post-Colonial

⁴ The phrase “**Forbidden Land**” often **refers to Tibet**, especially in historical and travel literature.

⁵ The **Dalai Lama** is the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and an important figure in global discussions on peace, nonviolence, and compassion

travelogues acknowledge the difficulties they have in positioning themselves. But for the travel writers like, Vikram Seth and Pico Iyer, the aspect of globalization is more important to them than the difficulties of Post-Colonial existence. In an interview with Kati Stammwitz on 13 Nov. 1997, Pico Iyer agrees that he feels at home everywhere and thus unaffiliated with no particular relation to India or America or Britain. In view of globalization, he feels less dilemma with regard to positioning himself as a travel writer. Rather, he feels international or un-affiliation (EASE/1999:2). For Pico Iyer and other Post-Colonial travel writers the search for identity persists, but now it is of multiple identities or what Pico Iyer called ⁶‘mongrel identity.’ Thus in turn he becomes mongrel citizen, inspecting a mongrel world and having less affiliation to any particular culture or country.

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⁶ refers to the concept of having a mixed or hybrid identity, which can be viewed positively or negatively.