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Pico Iyer and the Japanese Mystique

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Abstract

Pico Iyer's connection with Japan explores a country that is enigmatic, incorporating the modern with the traditional. Born to Indian parents, he was educated in England but regularly visited his parents in Santa Barbara, California. Far from opting for England or America as a place of domicile, Iyer opted for Japan and lived in Kyoto for over three decades. This shows the rootless nature of his life. He shows in his three books on Japan – *The Lady and the Monk: Four seasons in Kyoto*, *Autumn Sunlight: Season of Fire and Farewells*, and *A Beginners Guide to Japan* – a country that shows great resilience in crisis and adherence to tradition in the face of mechanized modernity. This trio of sojourn narratives on Japan reveals a country that has been an example for the world as much as it is a place of sojourn for Pico Iyer.

Keywords: Modern, traditional, resilience, crisis, enigma, rootless, domicile.

Siddharth Pico Raghavan Iyer was born to Raghavan Iyer and Nandini Nayak Mehta in February 1957. His parents grew up in India and went to England for tertiary education. His father Raghavan Iyer was a philosopher and political theorist at Oxford. His hybrid name Siddharth and Pico combines the original name of the Buddha and that of the Florentine neo-platonist Pico della Mirandola. His parents migrated to Santa Barbara, California when his father started working with the Center for the study of Democratic institutions, and for more than a decade Pico Iyer travelled to his parents' home in the United States from England where he went to school at Eton and then to Oxford. With his English upbringing one surmises it might have been most natural for him to have established a home in England but instead by an occurrence that can only be considered an alchemy of chance and desire, Pico Iyer found himself at home in one of the most ordered and sedate of Asian cultures, namely Japan. Writing of his long sojourn in a culture that he knew neither by birth nor by upbringing Iyer wrote in Harpers in 1993, "I am simply a typical product of a moveable sensibility living and working in a world that is itself increasingly small and increasingly mongrel. I am a multinational soul on a multinational globe on which more and more countries are as polyglot and restless as airports. Taking planes seems as natural to me as picking up the phone or going to school; I fold up my self as if it were an overnight bag." While this suggests a rootless and homeless state of being the fact is that Iyer has chosen to live in Nara for nearly three decades since 1992. On a visit to Kyoto the ancient capital of Japan where he came to study Zen Buddhism, Iyer meets Sachiko a married Japanese woman with two children. Their chance meeting leads to a friendship and love and when Sachiko divorces her husband who remains in

Iyer's narratives an invisible figure, Iyer and Sachiko marry and have lived ever so since. While this is needless to say a personal and romantic liaison, it is from the point of view of two of his books on Japan a liaison that forms the basis of his depiction of Japan. The first of these is *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto* published in 1991 and the second published in 2019 after three decades of sojourn in Nara entitled *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*. Both books establish Pico Iyer's deep affinity for Japan despite his global forays in other parts of the world whether Cuba or Brazil, India or Tibet. Yet like the paradox that Japan itself presents as a country that has incorporated a ritualistic past with a highly mechanized present, Iyer does not think or speak of Japan as the home that he might have been in quest of. Asked if he feels rooted in Japan his reply is characteristic of the global sensibility quoted earlier, "Japan is therefore an ideal place because I will never be a true citizen here, and will always be an outsider, however long I live here and however well I speak the language. And the society around me is as comfortable with that as I am....I am not rooted in a place, I think, so much as in certain values and affiliations and friendships that I carry wherever I go; my home is both invisible and portable. Speaking for so many diasporic writers Iyer affirms this rootlessness when he says, "For more and more of us, home has really less to do with a piece of soil, than you could say with a piece of soul"

Writing of his first sense of affiliation with Japan, Iyer's sense of the affinity between England and Japan is noteworthy, "There were many features of Japan that might have reminded me of England: the small villages set amidst rich green hills, all scaled with a cozy modesty; the self enclosure of an island apart from the world, not open to sea and light, as tropical islands are, but huddled upon itself, an attic place of gray and cold..." Iyer writes of the attraction Japan has always held for him, "For through whatever curious affinities propel us towards people or places we have never met, I had always been powerfully drawn towards Japan.....I felt mysteriously close to the place, and closest of all when I read its poems---the rainy-night lyrics of Japanese women, the clear-water Haiku of itinerant Zen monks. From afar, Japan felt like an unacknowledged home" (Iyer 4)

The Lady and the Monk while being a meandering plotless narrative of his recurrent meetings with the woman he grows increasingly drawn to is also the most telling commentary on the paradox of Japanese tradition and modernity. As the title suggests the paradox is evident in the two conflicting entities of the young monk, a renunciate who has relinquished all sensual pleasure and the figure of the young and sensuous woman who pines for him. These conflicting figures play out in Japanese Literature. To begin with, reading *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonogan* and Lady Murasaki's *Tales of Genji*, Iyer points out the "feminine lilt and fragrance"(53), its "girlishness, its womanly refinement, its sensitivity to nature, and to the lights and shades of relationships."(Iyer 55) evoking thereby a Jane Austen world of the drawing room. Then from the centrality of this female vision he notes how in Yosano Akiko's *Midaregami* which translates as *Tangled Hair* a work that he describes as, "unbearably sensuous"(96) the young heroine is a girl loitering at the gates of the temple, "provoking the monks with her come-hither boldness". The seductive nature of such female longing is borne out in such verses as:

*You have yet to touch
This soft flesh
This throbbing blood-
Are you not lonely,*

Explainer of the way

The title of Akiko's book of verses *Tangled Hair* is suggestive of its deviation from tradition or the norm. A lady's hair in Japan has always been a kind of symbol of refinement and stylized femininity with women taking pride in their coiffures. The image of the tangled hair suggests a boldly seductive devil may care about promiscuity with the conflicting figure of the renunciate monk and the sensuous woman. Hair as a symbol of sensuality finds expression in such lines as:

*O this heaviness of spring,
Surrounding
Maiden and Priest,
From her shoulders a lock of hair
Over the sutra.*

The intermittently documented yet underlying theme of the narrative being the conflicting calling of the monastic life with the compelling pull of the sexual urge, Iyer demonstrates how in the theatrical performances of Kabuki in the legend of Kiyohime a typical Japanese demon-woman grows so obsessed with a monk that she transforms into a snake and scourges him. Similarly in a No performance in the classic work of *Izutsu* a monk and a lady transport themselves back to the time when they had met at a well. The fatal attraction between the worldly woman and the ascetic monk is also depicted in a fictional work *Inu* by Nana Kansuke wherein a monk is so besotted with a woman that he becomes demented and transforms himself and the woman into dogs or in Lafcadio Hearn's shocking "Force of Karma" about a handsome monk who commits suicide because of his temptation for a woman by throwing himself in front of a train.

Throughout the narrative in the sojourns of male westerners that Pico Iyer meets and befriends what comes across is the quest for spiritual life in Japan that dilutes to the search for a Japanese girlfriend. The potential renunciate like Iyer himself loses the purpose of his original quest in the face of Japan's rigorous and ritualistic spiritual practice and drifts unsure of what he wants. Japan typifying the paradox of traditional austerity and discipline panders to desire by offering all the indulgences of the comfortable and sensuous life; from young Japanese girls all too eager to have a *Gaijin* boyfriend to geishas and love hotels, which are exclusive night haunts for lovers, to Sake bars and McDonald's. As a culture steeped in material luxuries the westerner finds it easy to lose track of the spiritual or Buddhist quest and slips into a holiday mode that only causes uncertainty and doubt.

Iyer's second book on Japan *A beginner's Guide to Japan* published like *Autumn Light* in 2019 brings out through its innumerable aphorisms on Japan, one of the defining dimensions of the Japanese way of life namely silence. Far from being an argumentative person as Amartya Sen describes Indians the characteristic trait of the Japanese as Iyer perceives it is silence. The idea of silence whether as a form of acquiescence or stoic reconciliation or then as a means of communicating with another becomes a recurring leitmotif as it were in *A Beginner's Guide to Japan*.

"No word" wrote Japan's Nobel Prize-winning novelist Yasunari Kawabata, "can say as much as silence. (108 A Beginner's Guide) Extending the idea of silence as a means of communion Iyer writes, "In England, Japan's western cousin I learned to say that the ultimate sign of intimacy is not all you can say to a friend, but all you don't need to

say.”(109, Beginners)

Peter Brooks tells Iyer that he would, “bring all his productions to Japan because even in his nine-hour rendition of *The Mahabharata*, without subtitles, Japanese audiences sat rapt.” (110, Beginners). It is noteworthy that this capacity for silence and the restraint that it takes becomes a grace under pressure in the face of the most adverse circumstances as was borne out by the catastrophic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the recent Tsunami. Iyer writes, “Hours after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima what struck a German priest was the silence, even in a grove where hundreds of survivors had gathered. No one wept or screamed; no one complained; children barely cried. Those who sobbed, sobbed silently; those given water bowed their thanks.” (107) Silence as a means to communicate renders the baggage of words futile and silence as a tool of stoicism renders all resistance and lament superfluous.

In a culture that restrains speech, the tradition of taming and cultivating nature into something that is ordered and containable is understandable. Nature too evokes and is complementary to silence. Iyer writes, “In Europe a garden is something you enter, walk around in and leave behind; in Kyoto a garden is something that enters you, inviting you to become silent and well swept as everything around you.” (121 Beginner’s) This combined with the pantheistic belief in all of nature’s elements being deities worthy of worship makes the contemplation and worship of nature a characteristic part of Japanese culture. Iyer writes, “A Christian church generally has a roof and directs your eye towards a single cross: a Shinto shrine is often surrounded by a large expanse; so your attention is drawn to trees and grass and sky, the place where Japan’s sovereign deities live”(122) Reading Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence* Iyer writes Martin Scorsese realizes that the Japanese did not need a Christian God “because streams and rocks and flowers brought local deities into the house every moment.”(ABG124)

Yet as in *The Lady and the Monk* one of the contradictions between the tradition of small and barely furnished houses and uncluttered gardens, contemporary Japan with its high-tech gadgets and robots creates need and dependency upon all that can be considered dispensable and even superfluous. This is a paradox because as Iyer notes, “the Japanese aesthetic is less about accumulation than about subtraction, so that whatever remains is everything.” (99)

In his third book on Japan, *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells* Iyer once again weaves a meandering plotless narrative of his life with Sachiko his wife. In a sense, the book is much less about the Japan that Pico Iyer has been living in for thirty years and which he is so familiar with than a family saga of old age and impermanence wherein Sachiko’s father like his own father has died and just as his own mother bravely continues to live alone in California, Sachiko’s mother has survived into old age but suffers from dementia and amnesia and is put into an old people’s home where she remains disgruntled. *Autumn Light* is more about ageing and degeneration and the Asian commitment to family than it is about Japan. Yet being based in Nara and Kyoto Iyer gives us vignettes of temple visits and worship of spirits that are characteristic of Shinto culture. Much like the Indian worship of dead ancestors and rituals observed to bestow peace upon them the air is literally thick in Japan with the ghosts of ancestors. As Iyer writes, “Nothing essential seems to die in Japan, so the land is saturated with dead ancestors, river gods, the heavenly bodies to whom Hiroko gives honorifics, as if they were her country’s CEOs”(Autumn Light 37) In a world of impermanence where nothing lasts Iyer’s theme in *Autumn Light* is affirmed when he writes, “What do we have to hold on to? Only the certainty that nothing will go according to design; our hopes are newly built wooden houses, sturdy until someone drops a cigarette or match” (202)

This book like *The Lady and the Monk* is as much about the paradox of modernity coexisting with ritual and pagan

faith in Japan. While the old temples and Shinto observances form one part of the narrative it is the daily life of Pico Iyer and Sachiko, visiting Sachiko's old mother or taking her for long drives as well as the social interactions that Iyer has with the regulars who come to play Table Tennis at the Health club as well as Sachiko's daily activities that make up the uneventful tenor of this narrative of Japanese life. In *Autumn Light* Iyer is pointing to the more universal truths of impermanence and death rather than the shades of life that typify Japan.

In his interpretation of Zen Pico Iyer interestingly draws parallels with the American transcendentalist Thoreau. This sage of Concord with his happy embrace of solitude and nature reflects the spirit of Zen much as Zen replicates Thoreau's own solitary quest. Iyer writes, "With his discursive essays on "Moonlight" and "Autumnal Hints", his retreat into the woods, "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles"Thoreau seemed to have worked out for himself what was sacred in Japan...and every Zen wanderer and poet and solitary seemed, in his way, another sojourner in Walden, living off berries in the wood, sustaining himself on natural scriptures, devoting himself to slowness and idling. Having given up everything, he had nothing to lose—and all the world to gain." (Lady 272)

Yet though in his quest for Zen, Iyer like others he meets finds his moorings in a personal life that does not allow him the solitude he had originally sought, his long sojourn in Japan gives him the understanding of a uniquely paradoxical country.

Phillip Lopate in his article What I love about Kyoto sums up Pico Iyer's enchantment with Japan. He writes, "his attraction to Japan can be seen as an attempt to hold onto its exotic, eternal appeal to his partly idealized picture of what the East has to offer a Western man in the way of healing."