



Research Paper

Taming The Hermaphrodite: Clash Of Cultures In Pico Iyer's India In The 1980s And 1990s

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ABSTRACT: Pico Iyer's journey through India in the 1980s unravels a strange battle in the socio cultural arena of the nation. The former British Empire wrestles with the new American empire to dominate the Indian cultural site. Thesecond journey in the 1990s throws light ontheevents that compel the narrative to downplay the American influence in India. These two narratives, emerging subsequent to the two visits of the traveller, converge into a new imaginary of India. It effectively subverts the notions of East-West binary that permeates the discourses about India. This revelation also triggers a fracture in the narrative language which fails to accommodate the "hermaphrodite" India- the untameable one.

KEYWORDS: Pico Iyer, India, Empire, Hermaphrodite

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I. INTRODUCTION

Video Night in Kathmandu, the first work by Pico Iyer is a collection of essays written based on his journeys across the world to "see what kind of resistance had been put up against the Coca-Colonizing forces and what kind of counter strategies were planned"(5). The essay titled "India: Hollywood in the Fifties" written in 1984, appears in this collection. Another article on India, "Bombay: Hobson-Jobson on the Streets", was written after his next visit to India in the 1990s. India in the 1980s and 1990s was the site of a very strange battle- the clash of Empires. The newly emergent American Empire was on a mission to replace the old British Empire. This article is an attempt to read how Pico Iyer maps this clash of cultures in India and where he positions himself as the narrator of the story.

The narrative literally takes its entry in India through the Bollywood following the hero of the movie "Mard".

"Mard" according to Iyer epitomises how in India, the private and the public spheres are inseparable. The family, romance, politics, religion, everything exist in a tangled mess. The romantic action story told in the context of Indian Independence movement says it all- India's reluctance to leave the raj behind, and how nationalist movement itself has emerged as a myth in the land which worships epic heroes. A story with all its typical Bollywood clichés is only a trailer to the real Indian drama.

In a number of his essays he picks up a pilot theme and uses it as a thread to introduce and analyse the place and to compare and contrast it with other places. Pilot themes are in fact the most conspicuous examples of the inductive method employed by Iyer in his narratives. Iyer picks particular instances and meticulously develops them to examine the pulse of the place. Iyer's selection of a central theme to introduce and rather comment upon a place is not just a device of writing or part of a personal style but also points towards the popular perception about the place in the West. In "India: Hollywood in the Fifties" he states, "Mard was the cultural event of the season when I was in India. "Mard" shouted the monstrous, many colored hoardings that towered above the streets of Bombay. "Mard", proclaimed the huge trailers splashed across the newspapers" (243). Later he observes that "Indian movies were India, only more so" (244).

The huge billboards, film music streaming out from the cafés and cabs, hundreds of people crowded in front of the theatre, streets named after movie stars etc. present the huge space the Bollywood has in the cultural geography of India. Such dominance of cultural space has its political undertones. The actor of the film has become a member of a leading political party, a parliamentarian as well as the best friend of the prime minister himself. Iyer unravels the favourite Bollywood formula which caters to the mass fantasy and thereby influences both the cultural and political space of the nation. But its presence and appeal beyond India, across the world, he attributes to "some universal chord" which is "the longing for an uncommon redeemer" (247). Iyer seems to gauge the mystery of India with an example of Bollywood movies. The role of family in India, he observes, pervades all aspects of its culture; from filmdom to politics, from its greatest epics to business world. Family

rules everywhere, Production houses, and offices of the government, business world and political parties. Bollywood movies embody the typical Indian formula.

According to Iyer India is best in imitation, Bollywood steadfastly imitates the Hollywood. What interests Iyer here is how India adopts and adapts the Hollywood storylines, spicing it up with all the popular clichés of Indian cultural milieu. Every new Hollywood movie produces myriad Indian versions. Iyer ridicules the Indian parody of Bollywood but even then he is proud of the fact that India hasn't accepted America wholeheartedly. The narrative also depicts the conquest of Indian movies in the rest of the world, where Raj Kapoor is "more famous than Gandhi and Nehru" (246).

Iyer goes on to analyse the Indian character in the next few pages. Distancing himself carefully from his ancestor's land, he portrays India from the point of view of an international citizen. On board the Cathay Pacific flight to India, Iyer is a little too much disturbed by the "febrile hyperactivity" of Indians.

And no sooner had any of them sat down than they began shouting across the aisle at their children or calling out to relatives or standing up again to order the mostly Chinese cabin attendants to bring drinks and then more drinks. The kids started slithering over seats, their mothers raced to the bathroom, the men took up permanent residence in the aisles and began crying out gossip to friends and presumed enemies several cabins away...the passengers bawled, the attendants snapped. Shouting matches broke out, and all the while, tens of families kept trundling inexorably through the isles, transporting curries, heirlooms, squalling kids, more pieces of luggage, and then some more. Before long, the arguments turned into all out, ten-decibel warfare. (260)

To Iyer the whole scene appears to be a comic vision of India. The violation of the sanctity of the travel manners Iyer used to and their characteristically Indian behaviour with a lack of respect for rules has confirmed his opinions about the place. India is a pandemonium, and also a place of abundance. The smells, colours, noises, everything is too much. This is a collective opinion shared by other global souls whom he quotes. The words used to qualify India are of superlative degree just like the reaction India evoked in the travellers "but it was surely the most shocking, the most amusing the most overwhelming the happiest and the saddest the most human" (261). His conclusion of India is accompanied by similar opinions by other foreign visitors, "India has everything," said a Yugoslavian girl I met in Tibet. "India is life on the stage," said a Canadian sitting nearby. "India is so different," said a Swiss designer" (261). Interested in how people perceive places Iyer gathers and accumulates various perception people have about each place. These glimpses are actually part of a larger foreign discourse which constructs the global images of people and places.

Iyer here talks about the India during the Rajiv era when according to him it was shedding off its Edwardian past and moving towards the "new futurism" of America. In spite of the anti-western notions and increasing nationalism, paradoxically the desire for western goods and services lurked every third world nation. Politicians rode Mercedes's, smoked western cigarettes, and built western style hotels and services.

Theromanticization of the Raj reiterates elsewhere. The remnants of colonial geography, culture, literature, cuisine, language has turned it into a romantic myth. Narratives such as Iyer's thus fail to read India's struggle to fight the phantoms of an empire. Unlike Naipaul he is not troubled by the plight of the nation instead there is an air of amusement and detachment. For the same reasons he was less shattered by its wounds.

Speaking about the influences of the West he muses "the British a relatively straight forward romance of elegance and class, the American a matter of instant gratification and thrills" (282). Iyer thus hints at his displeasure about American influence. Unlike the old imperial influence the new becomes peripheral and unable to create any lasting impact. This judgement is not a hastily made one as it seems to be. On a personal level Iyer's connection with the British Empire runs deep. For Iyer, British imperialism has become the lore of the past, something of an heirloom that he inherits from his parents. Iyer constantly evokes his parents' connection with British India. The sites of trauma inflicted by the British Empire had been less prominent in comparison with the nostalgia for the raj in Indian cultural milieu. American empire did not have the fortune of being subsidized by the memories of its glory. Its assaults were more recent and well-remembered. In the Indian political imaginary of 1980s and 1990s America was demonised as a predator whereas the British had become the part of a legacy.

The India he finds in the first narrative was undergoing a strange conflict, the British imperialism vs. the American. Iyer however interestingly has no doubt about where to position himself in the battle.

India seemed to have gained as a colony, a sense of ritual solemnity, a feeling for the language of Shakespeare, a polished civil service, a belief in democracy and a sonorous faith in upstanding legal or educational institutions; it had, in some respects, been steadied by the chin up British presence. By contrast the most conspicuous institutions that America had bequeathed to the Philippines seemed to be the disco, the variety show and the beauty pageant...in the Philippines I found no sign of Lincoln or Thoreau or Sojourner Truth; just Dick Clark, Ronald MacDonald and Madonna (171).

America becomes a philistine coloniser due to its failure in imparting the wisdom of spreading the high culture not because of its ruthless domination of the Philippines. What is problematic here is Iyer's demarcation

between the highbrow British Empire and the low brow American empire. Iyer here joins the league of Matthew Arnold and F R Leavis. The high culture that Arnold eulogised in his *Culture and Anarchy* was the one that FR Leavis found under the threat of mass culture in his *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. America became the vanguard of "mass culture" which according to Leavis was destructive. As Iyer identifies there exists in India a class of Indians fashioned by British sensibilities- the promoters of high culture. Leavis's "minority capable of...

"appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Hardy" (qtd. In Higgins 17)- the safe keepers of high culture in this context is replaced by the Indian middleclass who find themselves torn between "divided loyalty". "This strange sense of divided loyalty informed every aspect of middleclass city life. My college age cousins spent much of their time trying to get hold of records by Bob Dylan, Don Mclean and Simon and Garfunkel, yet when it came to reading, they clearly felt most comfortable with PG Woodhouse and CP Snow" (Video 278). The narratives project depoliticized empires discussed only in terms of taste and style.

Interestingly this observation takes place in his first visit in the 1984 when he was keen to seek the America elsewhere. The account of the second visit in 1996, "Bombay: Hobson Jobson on The Streets" appears in *The Tropical Classical* published in 1997. The objective of the visit was "to see the forces of nationalism and internationalism in collision" (64).

The presence of America strongly felt in the first visit takes a back stage here, but the Raj still becomes an inevitable part of the narrative. America that was well on the way to conquer India fades into neglect. This curious turn of events is astonishing, when one actually knows that the Americanization in India has become much more accelerated in the wake of economic liberalisation in 1991. By this time India had opened its market to the foreign investors. Coca-Cola which was forced out of India in 1977 made a grand re-entry along with many other American corporates. Iyer's silence on the American conquest of India, in the 1990s seems deliberate. The answer to this probably lies in his next work published in 2000 *The Global Soul*. Iyer's focus by this time has turned into a multicultural globalization instead of an American one (Graulund 56). And he was fashioning himself as a global soul with a "cosmopolitan vision" (Lisle 5). This cosmopolitan persona probably by now recognizes the dangers of obsession with Americanization. The emergence of the global soul requires a much broader perspectives to accommodate myriads of cultural traditions and emergent hybrid forms. Iyer hence allies with the long list of contemporary traveller with a "cosmopolitan vision".

But more interestingly Iyer witnesses how India had not succumbed to another empire, but created her own version. In that sense the appropriation of the imperial elements in Indian context does not necessarily derive from the postcolonial awakening but characteristic of quintessential 'Indianness'. This is emphasized by the fact that "even many of the foreigners who came to India came, after a while, to seem Indian. In Thailand, or Indonesia, or Japan, I suspected, such transformations were almost unknown." (Video 281)

India becomes the site where empires wrestle one another. But in the end India seems to have the last word as the one who manipulates everything foreign. The whole cultural scenario becomes a grand show where it allows one strand of imperialism clash with another, giving a false sense of availability, only to remould the winner in its own terms. India seems not bound by anything when it comes to the new opportunities. Here India emerges as a place of agency to control and dominate whoever enters its territory. "India had everything, and its opposites; and if the West often struck me as a masculine culture, dedicated to assertion, virility and power, while Southeast Asia seemed feminine in its texture, all softness, delicacy and grace, India was both, and neither, as grotesque and fascinating as a hermaphrodite" (Video 261).

The empires clash in its soil and both fail to claim it as its own. The hermaphrodite is a powerful image which defies the categorization of the West and the East -the binaries on which imperial forces built its foundation is in a crisis state. Hence India has now been removed from the oriental imaginary of the West into an unpredictable hermaphrodite whose terms are not easily intelligible. The neat formulaic definitions of India in terms of Bollywood movies, its Hollywood imitations, and the raj nostalgia fall apart in the end. Therefore the narrative implies its failure to talk about India by employing terms such as 'perverse', 'madness', 'chaos' 'incongruities', 'pandemonium', 'confusion' etc. The masculine travel narrative implies its lacuna in terms of an appropriate language to talk about the 'hermaphrodite'. Its usual courting ritual characterised by the eulogy of the feminine land falls apart at a juncture of recognition of the mixed gender. It also implies the successive failure of masculine imperial forces in taming India. Hence the contingency of American empire in India comes as no surprise for Iyer. India of 1980s and 1990s, thus reveals a battle ground of cultures with unexpected victories and failures that unsettle given imagery and discourses.

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