

# PICO IYER'S *AUTUMN LIGHTS: SEASON OF FIRE AND FAREWELLS*. A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT.** In the contemporary world, terms such as multi-culturalism and multi-identities have become common parlance. Although migration has been a feature in society since times immemorial, its connotations have been gradually changing with the passage of time. History records forced mass movements from one country to another in the world for political, economic and religious reasons. But there have also been voluntary migrations. Today increasingly we find people who choose to migrate to another land for the sheer pleasure of it. Pico Iyer, journalist, memoirist and travel writer is one such person. In fact, he chooses to spend his time between two countries – America, where his mother lives and Japan, where his wife is. Japan cast a spell on him the very first time he visited it and he was sure he wanted to return to it. But he is happy to live there as a tourist. My paper focuses on his recently published book *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*, which is autobiographical in nature. I have brought out his concerns about the impermanence of life and human suffering that emerge in his ruminations which are interspersed with an engrossing commentary on the society, culture, places, events, history etc. of Japan. Enthralling descriptions of the Autumn season add to the poignancy of his awareness of fleeting time in the autumn of his life.

**KEY WORDS:** migration, globalization, hybridity, multicultural, multinational

*I am simply a fairly 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 myself and carry it around as if it were an overnight bag.*

Pico Iyer, Harper's, April 1993

## **Introduction**

Pico Iyer is a well known journalist, memoirist, essayist, novelist and travel writer. Philip Lopate describes him as “globe-trotting journalist, memoirist and travel writer extraordinaire” who has authored several cross-cultural writings, prominent of which are *Video Night in Kathmandu*, *The Lady and the*

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*Monk, The Global Soul* and his most recent book *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*, which is somewhat a sequel to *The Lady and the Monk*.

Pico Iyer in his book *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells* brings into conversation ideas of impermanence set against the season of autumn in Japan. Though the experience of autumn is universally felt and relayed, Iyer's book reads as a personal account of his interaction and engagement with people, places and problems of Japan in his late middle age years. Specifically, the narrative is strung together with Iyer's reflections on conversations had in the "everyday" spaces and the sites he traverses in Japan and as he says "it's in the spaces where nothing is happening that one has to make a life" (Iyer 2019: 227-228). Though Iyer does not "belong" to Japan by birth, his insight into the experience of Japan and inclination to identify with the Japanese sensibility complicate ideas of affiliation and "homeland". A Brahmin, born in England, with a British citizenship, living in America, and choosing also to live partly in Japan, Iyer's identity and thought resist rigidity of space and are informed through a global perspective. Nostalgia is not where one might conventionally place him, migration in his context is a continuous and fluid one and most importantly the notion of "foreign" seems to have gone "underground". Thus, in this paper I would like to explore the changing experiences and articulations of diaspora and migration in the context of an author like Pico Iyer who with his job as a reporter of world affairs with *Time* has had opportunity to be mobile in the world and move through multiple spaces. In his literary essays and Ted Talks, he has repeatedly averred that 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. His experience as a migrant, is therefore, not one of loss but rather of gain.

### **Iyer and Diapora**

In the contemporary world where distances are inconsequential and borders are surmountable migration has become an accepted reality. Marie Gillespie writes: "The experience of migrant or diasporic people is central to contemporary societies." and is an inevitable condition of post modern society (Ashcroft 2000: 57). The term Diaspora does not imply only mass movements it can be individual as well. There are several offshoots of the diasporic condition and it would be pertinent to understand how the implications of this term are changing over time.

The word *diaspora* or dispersal had particular association with the Jewish, later Armenian and African peoples living out of their natal lands. These associations particularly evoked the ideas of "victims" - groups that were forcibly dispersed at one moment in history when a cataclysmic event happened. These forced migrations which were usually the result of political upheavals or natural calamities made people head for unknown destina-

tions. The migrant experience has always been variable due to the various reasons for migration of people from their home to the host lands. Nowadays the concept is used more widely and imaginatively to include groups which are essentially voluntary migrants. And in fact Walker Conner in an all-encompassing definition describes diaspora as the group of people who live outside their homeland. Today voluntary migrations are undertaken for economic and social reasons, migrants are generally in search of greener pastures and not necessarily oppressed and downtrodden. The migrant shifts with the hope of improving his life, to a better environment, where his desires and ambitions may be fulfilled. Whatever the cause for migration may be the immigrant is self-confident and strong enough to face and encounter the strange, unexplored world of the new land.

Usha Bande in her book *Cultural Space and Diaspora Journey Metaphor in Indian Women's Writing* (2003) has described the diasporic experience as one fraught with challenges. She says that the social reality migrants have to confront in the host society is distinct from their own, and compels them to face various issues such as problems of acceptability, adaptation, assimilation and at the same time keeping their own identity intact. She opines:

Though the intellectuals, professionals, writers and others are leaving their homelands with conscious decision, and they are no longer the "gimmits", the sense of loss, unsettlement and dislocation associated with the condition remains intact. (Bande 2003: 7)

But this no longer holds true for everyone as the transnational experience has changed for many. The "sense of loss, unsettlement and dislocation associated with the condition" that Bande describes no longer remains. For Pico Iyer, who has chosen to be in two locations at the same time, the concepts of location, dislocation and relocation are not relevant. There is no feeling of loss of selfhood, or desire to look back at location to find his "moorings" (Bande 2003: 8).

The division between various cultural processes in the contemporary world have got blurred due to Globalization which results in the loss of identity or creation of new identities so that identities are no longer limited to territories and their loyalties are not restricted to a single country. Iyer, who as he claims, is a "global citizen" is truly multi-national as he divides his time between his mother in California and his wife in Japan. In fact he is happy to be on a tourist visa in Japan and has never felt the necessity to make the arrangement more permanent. As Robin Cohen and Paul Kennedy opine:

Whatever the impulse for migration for many people there is no longer the need for "identificational assimilation". Home and away are connected by rapid transport, electronic communications and cultural sharing-part of

the process we call globalization. It is now possible to have multiple localities and multiple identities. (Cohen and Kennedy 2000: 353)

Iyer's decision to spend a significant portion of his life in Japan is not a restless quest but a spiritual lead, it is not a displacement but a wish fulfilment. "Reflexive individuals tend to be self-conscious and knowledgeable. They seek to shape their own lives while redefining the world around them. In contemporary societies, the number of such individuals has grown" (Cohen and Kennedy 2000: 36). Living in Japan is a deliberate choice and decision because there are many things about Japan which appeal to him.

As a global citizen, Iyer is able to appreciate the unique patterns of behaviour, practices and beliefs of the people from other cultural backgrounds which may seem alien because he can contextualize them as being part of a wider culture and view them without bias. This is only possible if a person can avoid being ethnocentric and does away with his "cultural blinkers" (Giddens and Griffiths 2008: 39). In the manner in which Pico Iyer describes and represents different facets of Japanese culture proves how objective his perspective is. He possesses the cultural relativism which makes him believe that human needs can be met by an infinite variety of cultural systems and that it is counterproductive to make value judgements about cultures other than one's own. Cohen and Kennedy have described this as broadening of identity. They state:

A final subjective component of globalism that is helping to change the way we construct our identities and orient ourselves towards life in the world concerns what Robertson calls "relativization" and we will call "broadening". Today no person or institution can avoid contact with, and some knowledge of other cultures. But our allegiance to the particular, local cultures in which most of us remain rooted at any one point in time are altered by our comparisons with and understandings of other cultures. The local or the particular cease to be sufficient as a resource in enabling us to make decisions about our lives and where we belong. (Cohen and Kennedy 2000: 37-38)

Iyer is multi-cultural because he recognizes and celebrates other cultures or cultural identities and advocates that equitable status should be accorded to distinct cultural and religious groups. Being in a profession which exposes him to various cultures and as a keen observer of human beings and their lifestyles, Iyer is known for his cross-cultural writings. The term cross-culturalism coined by Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s to describe processes of cultural hybridity in Latin America is nearly synonymous with transculturation. It has become prevalent in cultural studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Cross-culturalism advocates the same values as transculturation, cosmopolitanism, interculturalism and globalism, but is basically a neutral term. It is not necessary for a work or writer to portray other cul-

tures or processes of cultural mixing favourably in order to be considered cross-cultural. Cross-cultural narratives are often characterized by primitivism, exoticism, as well as culture specific forms such as Orientalism. The narratives also include elements like ethnographic description, travel writing, culture shock, social obstacles such as discrimination, racism, prejudices, linguistic difficulties, to name a few; and overcoming of these obstacles.

The experience of the Diasporic is conducive in enhancing the imagination as it exposes him or her to new realities and gives impetus to the creative principle. Guyanese writer Wilson Harris, author of *The Womb of Space* (1983) writes that cultural heterogeneity or cross-cultural capacity gives an “evolutionary thrust” to the imagination. In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands” (2012) Salman Rushdie presents an optimistic view of the situation of the migrant in the host country, the hostility they endure and the resultant sense of alienation. The space of the ‘in-between’ becomes rethought as a place of immense creativity and possibility. On one hand, the lack of belonging deprives the person of a feeling of identity. At the same time many transnational models of identity and belonging are possible. The migrant cannot remain impervious to the new culture with which he comes in contact and this leads to the creation and evolution of multi- identities. “In recent times, the notion of a diasporic identity has been adopted by many writers as a positive affirmation of their hybridity” (Ashcroft 2000: 57). Homi K. Bhabha describes:

Borders as being important thresholds, full of contradictions and ambivalence. They both separate and join different places. They are intermediate locations where one contemplates moving beyond a barrier. He defines the “beyond” as an in-between site of transition: the “beyond” is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion (McLeod 2000: 217).

Culture according to him is intermingled and manifold which results in the creation of new hybrid identities. These identities are not constant but changing. The present cannot be disconnected from the past, its memory and impact remains. Diaspora identities are multiple and mobile because of the changes resulting due to migration. Pico Iyer enjoys being in the “in-between” state as he feels it gives him a vantage in order to look within other cultures. Having grown up as a part of English, American and Indian cultures, he became one of the first writers to take the international airport itself as his subject, along with the associated jet lag, displacement and cultural mingling. He writes often of his delight in living between the cracks and outside fixed categories. Most of his books have been about trying to see within some society or way of life-revolutionary Cuba, Sufism, Buddhist

Kyoto, even global disorientation-but from the larger perspective an outsider can sometimes.

As Chelva Kanaganayakam in his essay entitled “Exiles and Expatriates” (1995), writes that “to be an expatriate or an exile is not to inhabit a void. It is not... to choose the artistic freedom and anonymity afforded by the metropolis. It is rather, to be granted a special insight, a vision not available to the insider” (Kanaganayakam 1995: 213).

### **Literary Overview**

Pico Iyer’s latest book *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewell* was published in April, 2019. Several newspapers and publishing houses have given their comments on the book which are available online. The book has been recognized as travel writing, memoir, autobiography, etc. and has inspired many book reviews and articles. Penguin Random House has lauded the book for its deep insight into Japanese history and culture and its engagement with the problems of impermanence and immortality. “A knack for embracing impermanence” describes the book as a mix of prose and Haiku. The *Hindustan Times* has acclaimed it as an elegant meditation on mortality, ageing, dwindling, love. It is Pico’s advice to savour the things we have to the full, and enjoy the things that surround us in the world we inhabit. In another interview with the *Hindustan Times* “All who wander are not lost” he has been credited for transforming the genre from being utilitarian to being philosophical. Pico admits to being happy in being an outsider and calls himself a “global wanderer”. “Pico Iyer Reflects on a Quarter Century of Life in Japan” has commented on the idealized picture of what the East has to offer the West in way of healing that Iyer has presented.

### **Text and Context – *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells***

Belonging to the genre of non-fiction *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells* reads like a journal or a memoir, and is definitely autobiographical explicating Iyer’s deep emotional response to Japan and the reasons for his affiliation with it. At the same time it contains reflections on various issues of universal import such as the impermanence of life, degeneration in old age, human relationships, familial obligations, the status of women in Japan and human values to mention a few.

Anna Altman writes in her article “Pico Iyer’s Japanese Love Story, from Spring to *Autumn Light*”:

Iyer is known primarily for his travel writing, his erudite essays in literature, and his wise, restrained accounts of his Buddhist inflected striving for stillness and contentment. But memoir is an equally exquisite aspect of his oeuvre. As of this spring, he has a new book out that is something of a sequel to *The Lady and the Monk*, *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*, which returns to the subject of

Japan and to the life that he has made with Hiroko there, from the vantage of late Middle Age. (Altman 2019: 2)

Iyer has used Autumn as a metaphor recurrently in his narrative and in various contexts. It helps in elucidating his motives for visiting Japan. It also shows his preoccupation with fleeting time as autumn or fall is symbolic of the inexorable passage of time and indicates that just as the end of the year is near so is the end of life. But in spite of the awareness of the impermanence of all things, Iyer emphasizes the importance of making the most of every moment in life in his dedication which reads: In memory of Jiban, who showed me how to cherish the seasons inside us, and how to seek our changelessness in change. The book attempts a similar paring down, composed as it is of brief ruminations, notations, vignettes, descriptions. What holds everything together, besides Iyer's elegantly smooth prose style and gift for detailed observation, is a circling around the theme of autumn in Japan and this autumnal period in his life.

### **Love Affair with Japan**

Iyer explains the combination of impressions and sensations that drew him to Japan in the first place. His fascination with Japan dates back to when he was only twenty six years old. He relates the instance of his journey from Hong Kong to New York by Japan Airlines where the itinerary demanded a stopover at Narita. His first impression was the sight of the red and gold trees in autumn. He recounts the deep impact his sojourn into the city, possible because of a free lift and spare time, had had on him. His rambles had led him to a large gate which opened into a courtyard with a big wooden meditation hall at the far end surrounded by statues.

I didn't know then that Narita was a celebrated pilgrimage site, consecrated to the god of fire, or that people were known to walk the forty-six mile from central Tokyo to pay homage to its thousand years of history; I had no intimation that the Dalai Lama would be visiting months later, and sent his monks here to gain familiarity with the Shingon sect of Buddhism, the esoteric, mystical Japanese school closest to his own. (Iyer 2019: 29)

He tries to explain his response to the place and the inexplicable sense of identity he experiences: "Or maybe it was the feeling I recognized, the mingled pang of wistfulness and buoyancy" (Iyer 2019: 29). His decision to quit his job and return to Japan was made before he left the place and four autumns later he was back. He had come initially to a temple along the eastern hills of Kyoto where he expected to get lessons on life which Manhattan could not teach him. But he lost his romantic notions after a week spent with two monks, who after performing a few chores, did nothing but

watch TV. He then decided to look for inspiration by living a more sparse life.

Iyer had enjoyed his total anonymity and the state of timelessness in which he could live because he had so much time on his hands. He hardly communicated because of the language barrier and because he knew no one. His visit to Tofukuji, one of Kyoto's five main centres of Zen, in the third week of his stay proved fateful. He met Hiroko who was a mother of two whom he describes as "spirited and charming" (Iyer 2019: 30). And instead of devoting himself to the exploration of temple life he embarked on a journey of love. After two autumns spent in Japan he found it difficult to leave both Hiroko and Japan. At that time their relationship seemed to be one with no definitive end, as Iyer says, like Japan in the post war decades. Like the Japanese, Iyer believes that joy and sorrow go hand in hand and "Endings seemed like sanctuaries in which humans hid to protect themselves from a larger wider landscape and it hardly mattered to me whether they were happy or sorrowful, since the story kept unfolding" (Iyer 2019: 35).

### **Japan: Realities Past and Present**

Iyer regales us with stories of events and lore that exist around places in Japan. He talks about the attempts of the Baptist church to draw restless teenagers to them and convert them. There is a historical reference to the 52 Christians who burnt to death on Sanjo Bridge. He mentions the eleven year long violent protest by the local farmers, because their crops were destroyed, which ended in a burning truck sent through the gates of the new airport at Narita. There are several references to the effects of Hiroshima and its impact on people especially his father-in-law who was a survivor. The people who fought in the war were never really able to get over it and his father-in-law gives him an account of his experiences during the war on their first meeting. After his death, Hiroko discovers poems written by her father about the war.

Iyer points out the harsh realities of life, advertently or inadvertently, and though he seems to be mulling over the problems faced by people who inhabit his immediate environment in Nara, he is actually highlighting universal problems. He describes Hiroko's mother's state, who is sent to a nursing home because of her dementia. He expresses his concern and puzzlement about the callous indifference of Hiroko's brother who has broken from his family which comprises aged parents and a loving sister. Iyer talks about his step daughter's health problems and the issues in her love life. His musings are often taken up by present day dilemmas and uncertainties. His description of the aged and their lives also shows how the flux is taking



place in the world—people are leaving their homelands in search of jobs and a better life, leaving old parents behind—lonely and forsaken.

### **Japan and Patriarchy**

Iyer has commented on the slow change that is coming about in the Japanese social fabric. Hiroko had been influenced when she saw foreign visitors living alone with their children, and this encouraged her to walk out of her meaningless marriage. He writes: “A divorce was heresy in Japan in those days – an act of failure on the woman’s part, a rent in the country’s woven tapestry – but, as more and more Japanese women began to be exposed to foreign lives, such separations became quite common” (Iyer 2019: 35). And later while viewing Sachi’s situation, he points out how insignificant the change in the status of women is: “But Japanese women still have no good place in the system, so either they defect—as Hiroko had done by marrying me—or they try to make the most of the free time that being denied most public opportunity can bring” (Iyer 2019: 73).

Sachi, their daughter, had been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease at the age of 13 when it was in the third stage, a disease very rare in Japan. The only choice one has is to accept one’s fate and see the positives in any situation. Iyer too, views the upside in Sachi’s situation, they never had to spend a penny on her treatment because Kyoto University Hospital needed a real life patient for its students and researchers as the disease was so rare. She also got admission without the torture of entrance exams in a nearby university so long as she majored in Spanish. They view it as fortunate that 16 years have elapsed and the disease has not recurred, even though they live in constant fear.

Sachi’s story is relevant as it shows the stoicism of Japanese women. “Sachi cried for a few minutes, and then she picked up her culture’s sense that an argument with reality is one you’ll never win, and never cried again” (Iyer 2019: 58). She never complains, never betrays sadness or anger even with her boyfriend of 6 years whose intentions are hard to gauge. Sachi’s move to Spain is typical of many Japanese girls to leave Japan at the first opportunity. The men are more conservative just as Takashi, her brother was just focused on having a secure job and marriage.

### **Nara and Kyoto**

Iyer admits his predilection for taking down copious notes of places as a travel writer. He confesses that he often finds it difficult to choose what can be excluded from the description of a place, and he tries his best to include as much as possible without making the description boring. We notice his keen attention to detail from his descriptions of Nara and Kyoto and the various shrines he has visited during the course of his narrative. His de-

scriptions are poetic and there is an interesting presentation of historical facts which leave the reader desirous of knowing more about these places. His fascination and attachment to Nara is reflected in his words as he explains the historical background and significance of the city which is an odd mixture of ancient and modern. It remained the first permanent Buddhist capital for seventy-four years in the eighth century designed with broad avenues on the model of Chang'an, the then capital of China. A storehouse was constructed there at the end of the Silk Road which came to be known as the world's first museum. He describes the splendour of Nara in the ancient times:

Two and a half million people worked on constructing a central temple, Todaiji – or so the temple's administrators claim – and for twelve centuries it was the largest wooden building on the planet; inside is what remains the largest bronze sculpture in the world, a five-hundred-tonne, forty-nine-foot Buddha. A twelve-minute train ride brings you to the oldest wooden building in the world, and all around are the plains on which it's believed the sun goddess gave birth to imperial Japan, six centuries before the birth of Christ. (Iyer 2019: 20)

Their residential community Deer's Slope is laid out on a foreign model like something out of Universal Studio and people own German sedans such as Mercedes and Audis which are parked in the vicinity. Iyer says: "The two main axes of our ten-block grid, ruler-straight, are named Park-dori and School-dori, as if to assure my mostly retired, comfortable neighbors that they've achieved their life-time dream of migrating to Japanese rendition of California" (Iyer 2019: 18-19). Their modern neighbourhood has been cleansed of all shrines and temples. But amidst these modern houses there is one house with silver cornices, gargoyles and an ornamental garden. And as Iyer leaves the neighbourhood and goes down a secret flight of stairs and through a mini forest he feels he has emerged in another century with old houses and vegetable gardens and paddy fields. He confesses: "Yet what I love about Nara is its neglectedness, a slightly forlorn quality that makes it almost a monument to autumn" (Iyer 2019: 20).

The rustic atmosphere of the town is still tangible. There is a municipal park in the heart of the city and surprisingly twelve hundred wild deer frequent it. In the year 763 a white deer was seen carrying a Shinto god. When the people heard that Buddha delivered his first discourse in a deer park the belief that deer were god messengers was thereafter confirmed. Iyer feels that the town is still ruled by the deer and he feels their presence everywhere. He contrasts Nara with Kyoto which is barely half an hour away.

Only three generations after the capital came up in Nara, the court moved to the outskirts of Kyoto, twenty miles to the north, and it was Kyoto, capital for the

next 1178 years, that became the center of geisha culture, of Zen temples, of flower arrangement and garden design and kimono. More recently, it's supple, worldly-wise Kyoto that gave birth to the Super Mario Bros., to Haruki Murakami, to the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who helped invent blue LED lights. Hiroko's hometown is a silky courtesan who knows how to bewitch every newcomer, even in old age, with her natural sense of style, her lacquered designs; Nara is the absentminded older brother who's forever pottering around in his garden, wondering where he put the key." (Iyer 2019: 20-21)

Iyer talks about the prosperity and influence of Japan in the 1980's and mentions that when he first came to Japan in 1987 all major banks in the world were Japanese and Japan felt it could control the "planetary future". They decided to set up this futuristic enterprise in Nara to restore its ancient glory. "Where better, it was decided, to base this bold Tomorrowland than in the proud, ancestral heart of old Japan, where even the train stations use the ancient name for Japan, Yamato, to invoke its talismanic magic?" (Iyer 2019: 21) The town was smattered with concrete structures – a library, an Rand D centre high rise buildings but after their economic slowdown all their plans for development fell through and the buildings just remained deserted leaving the pristine beauty of cedar and cypress groves and the chastity of the mountains violated. So once again Nara was forsaken. Kyoto on the other hand is claimed to be the second most visited city after Mecca drawing fifty five million tourists, with attractions such as the International Manga Museum, its Golden Temple and Philosopher's Path and its Parisian Cafes.

### **Human Relationships**

Hiroko's father had officially become a member of his wife's family because his own mother had refused to look after his wife and kids if anything happened to him: "So he'd taken on the name of his wife's clan, and lived as a lone outlier from Hiroshima amidst wife and sister-in-law and mother-in-law, and all the constant whispers of a small, traditional Kyoto neighbourhood" (Iyer 2019: 15). Hiroko's parents live in a tiny wooden house which is sparsely furnished. His father-in-law has preserved the albums of his only foreign trip to California so that he could show them to visitors and the binoculars which he bought there with almost all his life's savings. Their existence is representative of the minimalistic attitude of the Japanese. Hiroko's mother has dementia and is gradually losing her mental faculties. Hiroko's father and mother have been married for 60 years. Her father either doesn't notice or chooses not to notice his wife's repetitiveness and degenerating condition although he uncomplainingly takes over the running of the household. Hiroko moves her mother to a nursing home after her father's death. Her mother cannot believe that she will be staying in the nurs-

ing home even though she has two children. Iyer describes the visit to the hospital where they take Hiroko's mother, which seems as if they are entering "a post-nuclear nightmare". Iyer, who has suffered from asthma most of his life, empathises with his mother-in-law, and feels that the problem is "a strange compound of conditions in the world and conditions inside the heart" (Iyer 2019: 17). The lady who no longer has control over her mental faculties tends to forget events and inquires about her husband and estranged son.

Masahiro, the name Iyer has given Hiroko's brother, is a Jungian psychologist. He decided to sever all ties with his family for no known reason and 23 years have elapsed since. He does not respond to any of the overtures made by his parents and sister even though he lives only 15 minutes away from his parents' home. When their father dies, Masahiro's wife is informed but they do not hear from him. His father had expected him to join a business course but he chose to study psychology as he was aware that after its defeat in the war Japan would be faced by endless problems of the soul. As he is a psychologist, his indifference to his family is all the more baffling. As a kid he had been Hiroko's protector in spite of being weaker than her. His father is so proud of him that he can talk of no one and nothing else even though the son has deserted him. Iyer wonders if he had broken with his family because Hiroko had decided to take a divorce and he was worried that he might have to support his parents and also his sister and children.

Iyer shows how complex human relationships are. Time and again his thoughts return to Masahiro. His inexplicable behaviour and indifference often bother Iyer and he tries to rationalize them. He wonders whether it is Masahiro's western education that made him like that. He asks Hiroko: "Do you think it was Jung? Or just that sense that therapy offers that there has to be an answer to everything, even a resolution?" If there's an arrow in your side, the Buddha famously said, you don't ask where it came from, or quibble about what kind of arrow it is; you simply pull it out" (Iyer 2019: 169). He is concerned that her brother must be lonely and Hiroko very simply says "So sad. I pity my brother" (Iyer 2019: 169).

### **Iyer and Religion**

Iyer appreciates the attitude of gratitude that the Japanese have towards their Gods and explains his own attitude towards religion:

I've never been a great one for belief, or for trying to put words to what's beyond us. Ten years in English boarding school was a lifelong training in skepticism, or at least in keeping to yourself anything you held sacred; every time I returned to my parents' yellow house on a hill in sixties California, the earnest,

open faces of their students betrayed the poignancy of a longing for certainties. (Iyer 2019: 9)

He says that just as he shows his gratitude to the lady at the post office for finding beautiful stamps for postcards to distant lands and his appreciation for the tasty bread at the bakery “So it doesn’t seem amiss to pay respects to the local spirits, who Hiroko assures me, are the ones who ensure our health and long life” (Iyer 2019: 9). So for his early morning walk he climbs up a steep slope to the temple of Susano, the bad boy god of waves and storms who was banished for smashing a hole in the hall of heaven belonging to his sister, the sun goddess. The shrine dating back to 1575 is open-fronted and derelict and all paintings and adornments are faded and neglected. He performs the rituals of prayer:

I pull the thick rope, clap my hands twice to summon the gods and close my eyes, hands joined. “Thank you”, I think, “for looking after our home, and our family, this community, while I was gone. Thank you for protecting my mother and me in California. Thank you for keeping Hiroko safe. And her brother not so far.” (Iyer 2019: 10)

Iyer’s feeling of identification with Japanese beliefs and customs can be understood in the context of the following definition of identity and how it is distinct from and connected to identification. Even the people who inhabit the very modern “Disney-worthy Californian houses along School-dori” follow the farmers calendar with its cycle of the nine harvests and petitions to the sun goddess. On a visit to Mount Koya, where the Shingon temples are situated, he observes that monks continue to carry fresh meals every day for Kobo Daishi the founder of the temples, “who passed into deeper meditation in the year 835.” He has seen a similar practice in Ise, where meals are taken for the sun goddess twice a day. Hiroko still goes to her grandmother’s grave on the Equinox to communicate with her. She fills buckets of water and leaves them at her grave in case she’s thirsty. She comes back and purifies the house with salt and showers and changes into fresh clothes.

My neighbours all bow before the seasons here, as before the larger forces which keep us in our place. And autumn is at least more radiant, and a little less abrupt, than the earthquake that set off three hundred fires in Kobe, thirty miles way to their deaths. The season is a kind of religion, I think, to which we offer poems and petitions, but it’s not one you believe in so much as simply inhabit. (Iyer 2019: 33)

Till the time it was believed that the emperor was a direct descendant of the sun goddess, he was worshipped, but once he was declared a mortal, “it was other forces that the people of Japan could more dependably rely upon, the

‘eight million gods’ of rice paddy and wind, maple tree and constantly changing sky, whose presence we can never forget” (Iyer 2019: 34).

He describes Hiroko’s morning routine of prayer. She rings the bell and then sits stock still for twenty minutes in front of her homemade shrine before leaving for work dressed in a black leather jacket and cat-cool shades – the place she works sells over priced English punk clothes. Hiroko, along with the other people he sees around him there, are representative of the ways in which the local captures global influences, but in the process transposes only those that are compatible with indigenous traditions.

### **Theme of Impermanence**

Ping Pong is the game through which Iyer connects to the community at Nara. It has always been his favourite game and his only claim to any sport. At every stage in life he has taken recourse to the game. As a boy he would play alone in his solitary home in Santa Barbara, in school he and his friend would try to show that they too had a sport as games were a very important part of the education system and in graduate school it was an escape from the dreary bits of the curriculum and a return to “carefree boyishness” (Iyer 2019: 23).

The Deer’s Slope Ping Pong Club and the Health Club, which is appropriately and symbolically named Renaissance, is peopled with old energetic people who play agilely and with speed to whom age is no detriment. Although Iyer misses all the warming up exercises and calisthenics in the gym and only joins when the actual games begin his stamina is much lesser than his much older adversaries. His companions in the gym comment on his tiring so quickly. Ms Teraki, who is 72, has dark hair, wears red lipstick and is coquettish, plays like a man, and Mrs Fukushima, who is eighty-three, picks up the strewn balls in the court like a teenager and can outsmart him in the game. Mayumi-san is also a greying-smiling woman – he calls her an ‘entertainment center’ for whom life is a constant delight. People there are energetic; they remain active and look younger than they are:

I walk back to collect one of her lightning returns, and wonder whether I could ever have foreseen, in bright youth, that my ideal of an exhilarating Saturday night would one day involve hitting ping pong balls to an eighty-three year old grandmother who says, so softly I can barely hear it, “I’m so glad I came today.” (Iyer 2019: 13)

Iyer registers that the number of absentees is increasing. He realises that “The seasons keep on circling around us, even as I seem to step into the same space again and again” (Iyer 2019: 166). He notices that several people disappear sometimes, some totally and some for a while, because now they need either medical care or they can no longer survive on their own

and move to live with their grown-up children as they are mostly octogenarians. Iyer reflects on the unpredictability of life. The Empress, a very stately lady, as he likes to call her, who has always been an active sportswoman, is suddenly afflicted by a stroke and is now recovering slowly in a rehab centre where she is gradually regaining the use of her limbs.

Now as I look around me, at these neighbours older than my uncles and aunts, everything is upended: a reminder that Japan has the oldest population in the world—more diapers are sold to the elderly here than to the babies—and a vision of how the characters around me are twirling the seasons around like dance partners. (Iyer 2019: 23)

There is a lot of activity in the park and the children are enjoying themselves. As he looks out at them Iyer remembers that soon the trees are going to be red and golden like a 'vivid symphony' with the advent of autumn, which will be followed by winter. He cannot escape the consciousness of the inevitability of the end and all around he notices the elderly. When he goes to mail some letters he sees the tiny old lady who gives persimmons to the post office lady from the farmers' market, the old men sweeping leaves off the path, two grandmothers on the bench in the park, a very old man doing push ups, and the gray-haired lady who steps slowly out of a cab.

The shopping centre he visits is crowded with elderly people watching the various TV screens placed all around – Iyer feels it is better to be surrounded by bright faces than to sit all alone at home. Similarly, he sees the old men competing to enter first at the town's main library to grab the newspaper and the best seat. He goes to Mac Donald's at the local train station and manages to find the last vacant seat. While sitting among the "abandoned elders" he is reminded of Yasujino Ozu's classic film "Tokyo Story" which he found on the video monitor even though it had been released 60 years ago which depicts the plight of old people in Japan (Iyer 2019: 73).

Iyer's job as a writer on world affairs such as "reporting on foreign conflicts and globalism on a human scale" requires a great deal of travelling. He needs to spend time with his mother who is in her eighties and lives alone in California. He loves Japan in the autumn and tries "each year to be back in Japan for the season of fire and farewells" (Iyer 2019: 13). Although people associate Japan with pink and white eroticism of the cherry blossoms, Iyer feels that Japan's "secret heart" are the ceramic blue skies and the reddening maple leaves:

We cherish things, Japan has always known, precisely because they cannot last: it's their frailty that adds sweetness to their beauty. In the central literary text of the land, *The Tale of Genji*, the word for "impermanence" is used more than a

thousand times, and bright amorous Prince Genji is said to be “a handsomer man in sorrow than in happiness”. Beauty, the foremost Jungian in Japan has observed, “is completed only if we accept the fact of death.” Autumn poses the question we all have to live with: How to hold on to the things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth. (Iyer 2019: 14)

There is a perpetual consciousness that time is fleeting. At the age of 62 he is conscious of time slipping away, but he also realises and advocates that the best use has to be made of this life whichever phase we are in. He sees the spirit of the old people around him and realizes that every moment must be savoured as there is no time to be wasted.

### **Hiroko and the Japanese Sensibility**

Iyer is in Florida when Hiroko informs him of her father’s death. He senses how shattered she is and is regretful that he cannot be with her. The conversation between them is as follows: “You’re okay?” I ask Hiroko. “I’m so sorry I can’t leave until Monday.” “Okay”, says Hiroko, who seems to have emerged from a fog. “Now must make new life” (Iyer 2019: 7).

It is hard to accept the death of a parent even if he is 91, but at the same time there is a realization and resignation that life has to go on. And Hiroko has absolute clarity that her mother will have to be moved to a nursing home as she would not be able to look after her. When Iyer asks her about it, her response is brief: “*Shikatagani*” (*i.e.* it can’t be helped) is all Hiroko says about her mother’s condition. Iyer is impressed by Hiroko’s practicality and at the same time he honestly confronts the problems between parents and their children.

I’m humbled by Hiroko’s emotional efficiency; I wouldn’t have had the courage to tell this eighty-five-year-old woman, who’s just lost her husband and much of her mind, that she’s now losing her home as well, for an anonymous cell. But if mother and daughter tried to share a space for even a month, we all know, neither would make it to the second week. (Iyer 2019: 17)

Iyer admires Hiroko’s quality of not stopping to think. She lives in the moment and never looks back with regret and neither does she worry unnecessarily about the future. Except for Sachi, her daughter, she doesn’t worry about anything. She has a nonchalance when she comes to cleaning and unscrupulously cleans everything she finds irrelevant notwithstanding its relevance to him. He writes: “Sometimes this radical freedom from care as if my wife were herself as implacable as autumn winds, can make for problems in quiet, over-cautious Japan; but a part of me can’t help admiring her fluency in the realm of action” and he accepts: “That’s who she is, of course; dust never settles on her for long” (Iyer 2019: 62). Although she is ten



months his senior she looks much younger and is mistaken to be his daughter or a much younger mistress. His unconditional love and admiration for Hiroko and deep commitment to her can be seen throughout the book. He refers to Hiroko's children as his own.

### **Iyer the Outsider**

Iyer calls himself a "strange foreigner" and is conscious about not being a Japanese (Iyer 2019: 58). At the club, he is introduced by Ms Teraki to a newcomer as a writer who lives in Deer's Slope and has a Japanese wife. She mentions that he is a journalist with New York Times. He knows that the neighbourhood has nicknamed him Isoro or "parasite", because unlike the other men who dress in their suits and leave home early, he hangs around the locality unshaven while his wife goes off to work.

He enjoys a better relation with his step daughter after her return from Spain and after she has become fluent in English, but initially he feels:

Through most of our lives together, my step kids and I have been quiet friends across the dinner table; they, being Japanese, are unwaveringly tolerant and polite with the strange, dishevelled creature their mother has brought home—he might almost be an exotic pet who doesn't seem quite fatal—and their limited Japanese English and my limited Japanese has left us in a peace of smiling courtesies. (Iyer 2019: 171)

He knows when to pretend that he knows no Japanese and does so when the inquisitive women at the club who are always gossiping ask him irritable questions. For a long time, Iyer feels, the Japanese men in their neighbourhood were like an "alien species". They are too busy in their jobs which require long commutes to find time to exchange niceties with him, although the women have always been very pleasant. But now that most of the men have retired they meet every weekend to play ping pong and exchange pleasantries with him. Iyer is still a bit wary of the attitude of the Japanese towards him, he is not very sure of them or himself in relation to them. While playing ping pong at the health club when someone says "Lucky, lucky" in English, he is not too sure how they learnt it:

I lose all sense now of whether that's a strange phrase I pocked from them or whether the English-language mantra is something they picked up from me. Quite often these days, even the least friendly of the men, wispy hair flying as he spins the ball illegally with his hand when serving, says "Oh no!" when he nets it, partly in parody of me, perhaps, but also a tribute. (Iyer 2019: 168-169)

And as the game grows intense Iyer cries "Da-me!" cursing in Japanese. And while pointing out whose turn it is to serve he says "It's Mother's turn",

I say, “because she received after rock-paper-scissors last time.” Hearing myself I wonder who I am” (Iyer 2019: 168).

In an interview with Brenner Angie when asked if he feels rooted and accepted as a foreigner regarding his current life in Japan, Iyer replies:

Japan is therefore an ideal place because I never will 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 everywhere I go; my home is both invisible and portable. But I would gladly stay in this physical location for the rest of my life, and there is nothing in life that I want that it doesn't have. (Angie 2007: 2)

I think of my friends in the West and despair of ever being able to convey the bounty of this life to them. They have their own equivalents, in every case, but the details of mine would make no sense to them, as if delivered to them in some version of Japlish. Some of them have grown to the same rhapsodies every year—my words and excitement barely alter—and simply assume that I'm drunk on the foreign substance of exoticism. Or lost in some paradise in my head. (Iyer 2019: 178)

### **Carpe Diem – Seize the Day**

“Outside the autumn is getting brighter, louder, if anything more resplendently bright. Like the sign eager merchants place on their front windows: ‘Closing Sale! Everything Must Go! Come Soon While It Lasts!’” (Iyer 2019: 176), Iyer is aware that time is passing by and he cannot afford to lose it. He cannot evade the issues which prey on his mind because he cannot pretend to be preoccupied with anything else and is forced to confront them. Hiroko's habitual spontaneity and impulsiveness are a constant reminder and indication that the correct choices do not require pre-meditation and deliberation although Iyer cannot surrender his “hopes and careful designs” to achieve that sort of freedom (Iyer 2019: 178).

### **Iyer and the Dalai Lama**

Iyer has enjoyed a long association with the Dalai Lama and although overtly he does not profess to be Buddhist, he feels a great affinity for the religion. He admits that he doesn't want to set himself apart or create a distinction by defining himself as a Buddhist. Iyer had first met the Dalai Lama when his philosopher father had taken the teenage Iyer along to meet him at Dharamsala, after he had been exiled. When in India he visited the Tibetan monk and on his honeymoon, he had taken Hiroko to meet him. Every year for the last eight years he and Hiroko accompany the Dalai Lama and his closest associates on their annual visit across Japan. Iyer and Hiroko travel from Nara through Sadaiji, where the Great Western Temple of the

eighth century is located and then to Takeda, near the eighth century pagoda in southern Kyoto to the conference-centre hotel in the northern part of the old capital where they meet the Dalai Lama and his companions who have travelled there from Dharamsala. Iyer is privileged to sit in during the private audiences of people who come to the Dalai Lama for blessings because he writes about Tibet.

It's always a tonic and liberating experience insofar as the Dalai Lama is offering the world, in effect, a fresh pair of glasses. A change of perspective that is human, universal, not connected with any religion. When his long time teacher died, he tells us this morning, he really felt sad. As if he'd lost his "ground", the foundation of his life. But then he realized that sadness was not going to do anyone any good. Better by far to try to bring to life the ideas his teacher had passed on, and to honor him in some more practical way (Iyer 2019: 181).

The Dalai Lama claims that the Tibetan form of Buddhism is more philosophical and believes in a more analytical understanding of the central Buddhist texts compared to the Japanese practice. Iyer is certain that Japan has been free of belief in abstractions and theories since long and in practice it is the Tibetans who are more ritualistic.

Iyer shares the same world view as the Dalai Lama and respects and admires his practical and rational approach to the problems of the people who confide in him and seek help. He asks people to view their problems with "a global perspective" because the realization of the universality of life's problems makes their own less unique (Iyer 2019: 184). When Hiroko had expressed her concern for her aging parents, he had told her very directly to spend time with them rather than wasting it in Dharamsala. "Karma means action", he reminded Hiroko. "Not praying for blessings or good health, but working for them. You make your own karma every moment" (Iyer 2019: 184). When some wealthy Japanese men approach him with a proposal for setting up a Buddhist centre, he tells them to set up a general learning centre where people can learn basic human kindness and understanding with no relation to anything Tibetan or Buddhist. "In meeting the most visible Buddhist on the planet, they may have forgotten that his most recent book was called *Beyond Religion*, and stressed the universal values that lie beyond any one tradition" (Iyer 2019: 182).

## Conclusions

There are several life lessons to be learnt in the book and in Japan. He remembers himself as a young boy who was so convinced that purity, kindness and mystery existed only inside temple walls and everything outside was impure or impious but had found that this was a very narrow minded thought and Japan teaches you that all around there is grace and compas-

sion whether it is the convenience store the ping pong table or even the bar. But the book deals with deeper philosophical issues. As John Butler has pointed out *Autumn Light* is not a travel book in the conventional sense but it can be read as a mental and psychological journey or specifically Iyer's journey of self-discovery as he learns to reconcile his concern about impermanence of life with an attitude of practical confrontation and acceptance. The book which is contextualized in Japan teaches how "to live with what you can never control?" He is an outsider but he helps the Western readers understand the Japanese viewpoint. The book does not progress in a linear manner but as thoughts and events gradually churn around in it, Iyer develops an optimistic attitude and acquires a sense of equilibrium. "Hold this moment forever, I tell myself; it may never come again" (Iyer 2019: 231). He has finally learnt the answers which have been taught to him by Dalai Lama, who preaches that suffering is a universal truth; and Hiroko, who represents the Japanese sensibility which demonstrates resilience in the face of adversity.

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