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History into Mood: The Colonial Gaze in Pico Iyer's "The Khareef"

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Abstract— *This article examines the persistence of colonial modes of representation in Pico Iyer's "The Khareef", a chapter in Sun After dark: Flights into the Foreign (2004). It investigates how Iyer's travel narrative constructs Dhofar in Oman and Aden in Yemen through images of mystery, timelessness, urban decay and cultural difference. The central research question is how "The Kareef" reproduces the assumptions of colonial travel writing through its representations of Arabian landscapes, historical transformations and local populations. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, and "imaginative geography", Mary Louise Pratt's concepts of the "seeing-man", "anti-conquest", and "autoethnography", Johannes Fabian's notion of the "denial of coevalness", Renato Rosaldo's concept of "imperialist nostalgia" and Marc Augé's account of "supermodernity", the article analyses the narrative's descriptions of landscape, British imperial history, time and mobility, gender, bureaucratic encounters and migrant labour. It concludes that the colonial gaze can survive beyond formal empire through seemingly innocent acts of observation, description and interpretation, allowing the foreign society to remain visually compelling yet incompletely understood.*

Keywords— ***Pico Iyer, Sun After Dark, "The Khareef", colonial gaze, Orientalism, travel writing, imperialist nostalgia, denial of coevalness***

Pico Iyer's "The Khareef", a chapter in *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign,* offers a compelling narrative to investigate how colonial modes of representation continue to persist in the contemporary travel literature. Travelling through Dhofar in Oman and Aden in Yemen, Iyer creates an account of mist, empty roads, veiled women, decaying cities, migrant workers, and encounters with unfamiliar social practices. The fundamental argument of this article is that "The Khareef" reproduces various strategies of colonial travel writing by altering political history into atmosphere.

The article presents this argument in six phases. First, Dhofar appears as a dream like landscape rather than a historically constituted social space. Second, British imperial history in Aden is presented with a nostalgia that the histories of local populations do not receive. Third, the text's organization of time presents Arab societies outside the traveller's modern present. Fourth, women become objects of visual appeal. Fifth, encounters with tribal people and Yemeni officials are constructed through the language of menace and obstruction. Lastly, the migrant workers are depicted sympathetically, but they often remain inert figures whose experiences are subordinated to the traveller's ruminations.

The study rests chiefly on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, the body of Western imagery and knowledge through which the "Orient" has been constructed as irrational, mysterious and timeless, and the West, by contrast, as the site of rationality, modernity and historical movement. Fundamental to this critique is Said's notion of "imaginative geography": the way societies divide the world into 'our' space and 'their' space, and then fill the other space with meanings, images and assumptions that say more about the observer than about the place itself (Said

54). Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2008) shows how such geographies are produced within travel writing specifically. Pratt describes the "seeing-man" as one "whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" with an apparent innocence (9). She describes the "seeing-man" as "the main protagonist of anti-conquest", a term she uses to refer to the "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (9). Against this, Pratt sets "autoethnography": the ways subordinated people represent themselves in response to, and in dialogue with, the representations produced by dominant outsiders (9).

Three further concepts address the temporal and historical dimensions of the gaze. Johannes Fabian's "denial of coevalness" denotes the practice of placing observed people in an earlier historical time than the observer, even when both occupy the same present (31). Renato Rosaldo's "imperialist nostalgia" describes "a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (69). Finally, Marc Augé's account of "supermodernity" associated with accelerated movement, excessive information and spaces of transit, helps explain the conditions of the contemporary traveller's mobility (29).

In "The Khareef" the traveller's gaze organizes the landscape, while the people within it frequently appear as objects of that gaze. The narrator's encounter with the region becomes the principal source of meaning, even when the region itself possesses histories that extend far beyond his visit.

One of the most revealing features of "The Khareef" is its representation of Dhofar as a landscape emptied of ordinary social meaning. Iyer's description of the long roads captures the impression of isolation through the phrase "camels, and sand, and nothingness" (84). The landscape is not simply sparsely populated; it becomes a space defined by absence. Such language fits to a familiar tradition of colonial travel writing in which unfamiliar regions are presented as empty spaces awaiting interpretation. Iyer extends this effect through descriptions of worn-out trees, colourless surroundings and a place in which the "world has sloughed off proportion and dimension" (84). Geography becomes psychological experience, and the traveller's perception supplies the dominant meaning of the landscape. Later, during a journey into the mountains, he describes following "a group of shadows, all in black disappearing between the trees" (86). The people are transformed into apparitions and their physical presence is subordinated to the mystery of the scene. They do not emerge as individuals with distinct histories, opinions or purposes. Instead, they become part of the visual texture of the landscape.

This produces an asymmetry between the observer who describes and the people who are described. The chapter gives thorough visual impressions but little direct speech from Omani people. They are viewed, defined and interpreted, but they rarely describe themselves. In Pratt's terms, the autoethnographic voice, through which subordinated people respond to the portrayals made of them, is mostly absent from this part of Iyer's narrative. (The migrant workers discussed later are a partial exception, though, as that section maintains, their voices remain closely framed).

Iyer also mentions the presence of "spotless tarmac stretching in every direction" and "the new port, to receive container ships" (85). These details suggest infrastructural development and economic change. Yet modernity and apparent timelessness coexist uneasily in the narrative. The modern port does not become the starting point for a sustained investigation of political and economic transformation. Instead, they are absorbed into the same descriptive field as camels, mist and myth (85). Ports and military training facilities, in fact, belong to histories of state formation, trade, strategic interest and economic development. The most significant of these histories is the Dhofar War. Between the mid-1960s and 1975, the province was the site of an armed insurgency against the Sultanate. The roads, garrisons and development projects that Iyer passes through are in large part products of that war and of the counter-insurgency that followed it. Yet the war barely registers in the chapter. Without that history, modern infrastructure becomes a picturesque interruption in an otherwise timeless world.

If Dhofar is rendered as a dreamlike space outside history, Aden becomes the site where history is remembered selectively. Iyer's treatment of the former British possession is especially revealing because the city's colonial past is not absent from his narrative. On the contrary, it is central to the way he establishes its former significance. Aden, the major port in Southern Yemen is described as a place that "once had seemed a center of the world", where ships travelling between Britain and India stopped to refuel (86). Iyer recalls its importance as "Victoria's first imperial acquisition" and its status as an enormous harbour in the age of the Empire (86). His description evokes a period when Aden occupied a strategic position in the maritime networks connecting Britain with India and other parts of Asia. From the outset, then, the city's significance is measured by its place in the imperial system.

The narrative then moves through subsequent political developments: Soviet influence, civil war, Yemeni

unification and the siege of 1994. Iyer traces the successive destruction and transformation of hotels, culminating the passage through the Frontier Hotel, the Mövenpick and the Aden hotel (88). The effect is to represent the postcolonial period as a cycle of loss. The colonial world had order, international importance and recognizable symbols; the world that followed appears fractured, unstable and incapable of sustaining what it inherited. Empire becomes an object of elegy, while postcolonial history becomes an account of deterioration. Such a contrast can reproduce a familiar colonial narrative: the colonizer departs, and the society that remains appears unable to govern itself. Renato Rosaldo's concept of "imperialist nostalgia" is noteworthy here, though it needs adaptation (69). Iyer is not himself a colonial agent. What he carries, however is an imperial view: a mode of seeing Aden through the lens of the Empire that created it, in which British rule is the yardstick with which the city's greatness is measured, and its departure is treated as the starting point of its decline. The nostalgia is imperialist not because the traveller altered Aden, but because it mourns the city as Empire fashioned it, while the agency of those who terminated that rule goes unmourned and mostly unacknowledged.

The Crescent Hotel deepens this nostalgia. Its replica of Big Ben, portrait of Queen Elizabeth and military ceremonial atmosphere preserve the visual relics of British authority (87). These entities are compelling because they symbolize a vanished political order. They also make the city look like a museum of the Empire, a place in which the traveller encounters colonial history through identifiable symbols. The portrayal of Aden as "a biblical waste-land" extends the aestheticization of the decline (87). Goats forage outside broken shops, women draw near passing cars, children play in streets because there is nowhere else for them to play, and the city seems to be "sitting on debris" (87). These images create a striking picture of deprivation, but the language also renders a lived urban environment into a spectacle of disintegration.

The selective treatment of Aden's history fits to a wider pattern in the way "The Khareef" organizes time. The traveller moves through regions that appear to belong to different historical periods, and the journey develops a passage through layers of antiquity. Arabia is associated with Eden, biblical desolation, medieval fortresses and a present seemingly incapacitated by practice and tradition. This is what Fabian calls the "denial of coevalness" (31). Rather than recognizing that the observers and the observed occupy the same contemporary world, the account places the latter in an earlier stage of history. The people may be physically present before the traveller, but they are depicted as belonging to a past.

The distinction is particularly relevant because Iyer's journey is marked by extraordinary technological speed. He recounts arriving after a thirty-three-hour sequence of flights from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles, London, Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Salalah (85). Against this mobility, the places he visits appear almost immobile. Dhofar's landscape dissolves into myth, while Aden turns out into a city in which time seems to have stopped. Iyer writes: "Time slips away in a place like Aden; space itself dissolves, as if the whole city is drifting away on the narcotic *qat*" (90). By correlating the city's temporal disintegration with qat, the narrative associates the whole place to a larger image of paralysis. The city seems unable to uphold a stable relationship with modern time, while the traveller's itinerary shows the contrasting measure of movement, efficiency and global connection.

Augé's concept of "supermodernity" helps describe this itinerary: airports, hotels and international routes link distant territories while encouraging travellers to experience them as provisional points along a journey (29). Augé presents this as a general condition of contemporary life, but "The Khareef" shows that it is unequally distributed. The traveller's freedom to move quickly across the world is a privilege formed by access to money, transport, documents and international mobility. As the section on migrant labour demonstrates, many of the people Iyer meets are themselves highly mobile, but they move under conditions of economic need rather than choice.

Gender offers another significant dimension to the colonial gaze in "The Khareef". Iyer's depictions of Omani women are strikingly visual, repetitively stressing the black veil, the eyes, and the hands. The women become the most memorable figures in his narrative, but their visibility does not translate into narrative presence. On arriving in Dhofar, Iyer observes that it is "hard to see anything but women veiled in black from head to toe, only their mascara'ed eyes looking out" (83). The description maintains the veiled woman as a symbol of the region. Her appearance conveys cultural difference, and the concealment of her body becomes the source of the traveller's fascination. The same tendency appears when Iyer describes the Omani women "dressed in black, so intense that they seemed apparitions of suggestiveness" (85). Elsewhere, he isolates details such as "a curling hand", a "kohl-lined eye", "handbags swinging from their shoulders" and "white clogs emerging occasionally under their robes" (85). The body is encountered through fragments rather than through the woman's own account of herself.

This method of description has a long history in colonial representations of women from societies regarded as culturally distant. Concealment is made to signify

mystery, and mystery becomes a source of fascination. The woman's body may be covered, but the observer's imagination moves freely around it. Iyer writes that the women's kohl-lined eyes "carried everything. A spark, a light of mischief" (85). The phrase attributes an interior life to the women, but it also illustrates the limits of the encounter. The suggestion of mischief is not established through conversation or the women's own reflections; it is inferred from their eyes.

The women of Aden appear differently but no more fully. Where the Omani women are sources of fascination, the women who approach passing cars in Aden are absorbed into the spectacle of urban ruin, alongside foraging goats and broken shops (87). In both places, women serve the account's larger mood: mystery in Dhofar, decline in Aden.

The women therefore occupy an ambiguous position. They are portrayed as elusive and difficult to know, yet their supposed mystery is made available to the reader through the traveller's self-confident descriptions. They remain mysterious as individuals while becoming highly legible as emblems of an exotic culture. The colonial gaze is reproduced clearly here: women become evidence of cultural difference rather than subjects whose lives possess meanings beyond the observer's interpretation.

The chapter's treatment of Yemen shows another facet of this representational pattern. In his descriptions of the encounters with the officials and that of the difficult journey through the highlands, the narrative increasingly projects the traveller as an efficient individual confronted by an obstinate and potentially dangerous environment.

When Iyer's flight to Jeddah is cancelled, he approaches the Yemenia office for help. His meeting with the officials is described through a vocabulary of confrontation. One clerk appears to be "preparing for hostilities", while another becomes "this new adversary" (89). A routine administrative problem is presented as something resembling a military engagement. Such language may be understood as an expression of the traveller's frustration. Delays, uncertainty, and unhelpful service can be truly exhausting in an unfamiliar terrain. However, the difficulty arises when the individual encounter becomes part of a broader pattern. The clerk who "stirred, and yawned" becomes an embodiment of bureaucratic indifference, and the narrator's observation that "no one was going anywhere in Aden" extends this impression from one office to the city as a whole (89). A particular inconvenience becomes evidence of a general social condition.

The narrative's treatment of tribal checkpoints and the possibility of kidnapping deepen this sense of menace. Iyer refers to the claim that the main source of income in the region is the kidnapping of foreigners (91). The account of armed men, "turbaned boys", and "clamour of faces" reduces individual people to a menacing and hostile collective presence (91). The description offers little distinction between the people encountered, their motives and their positions within local social structures. Their presence becomes an experience of disorder.

A critical reading should not dismiss the likelihood that the traveller faced genuine dangers. The question is not whether danger existed or not, but how the narrative presents it. In "The Khareef", political and social complexities are less prominent than the atmosphere of uncertainty they generate, and the people encountered have few opportunities to explain themselves. This is where the chapter's relationship to colonial travel writing becomes particularly evident. The foreign society is presented as a challenge to the traveller's movement, comfort and security.

If Yemeni officials and tribesmen appear as obstacles, the migrant workers whom Iyer meets earlier in the chapter, in the hotels of Dhofar, receive gentler treatment. Returning to these scenes reveals a further hierarchy of representation. Iyer observes western tourists, South Asian workers, Filipina employees and African service workers in the same international environment, yet the degree of individuality granted to these figures varies considerably. The Western visitors are sometimes objects of satire. Iyer describes "tired blond Germans" and American men debating the plural of "fish" (84-85). These observations expose the triviality of certain tourist conversations, but they also give the Westerners recognizable habits and personalities. They are individuals whose behaviour can be interpreted and criticized. The workers, by contrast, are frequently presented through brief descriptions that emphasize nationality, age, displacement or emotional resignation. A Filipina employee is introduced as "a tiny Filipina" serving drinks (84). Indian workers are portrayed as though they were still in Cochin, and a migrant appears through the image of a "defeated smile" (84). Another figure is a homesick man from Kerala who is expected to marry a woman he has never met (85). He is one of the few figures in the chapter whose circumstances are conveyed from his own side, and in this respect, he partly answers the silence noted in Dhofar. Yet even his story is framed by the narrator, and its meaning settles into homesickness and resignation. The migrant turns out to be someone to be pitied rather than someone whose decisions, ambitions and strategies deserve scrutiny. This also complicates the article's earlier contrast between the mobile traveller and the people he observes. The workers from Kerala and the Philippines have crossed oceans as surely as Iyer has, but their movement is shaped by labour markets,

contracts and remittances rather than by curiosity. The chapter registers their movement as melancholy, not as a form of mobility with its own logic. Mobility is therefore unequal not only in degree but in kind.

Iyer's own position adds a further layer. Born in England to Indian parents, educated in Britain and the United States and long resident in Japan, he is not a straight forward heir to the European "seeing-man" whom Pratt describes, and much of his writing reflects on cultural hybridity and displacement. His encounter with the workers from Kerala is in some sense an encounter with a shared ancestral geography. Yet the scene shows that shared origins do not dissolve the asymmetry of the gaze. The narrator who travels by choice writes about those who travel out of necessity. Iyer is no ordinary traveller. His cosmopolitan identity imbued with privileges serves as a vantage point from which he looks at other cultures with a colonial gaze.

Therefore, in Pratt's terms, it can be argued that the migrant workers remain subjects of ethnography rather authors of autoethnography: their lives enter the text, but chiefly as material for the traveller's reflections. Dhofar becomes a space of emptiness and dream, while its history remains at the margins. Aden's former importance is recalled through its place in British imperial networks, while its independence passes almost unremarked and its postcolonial history is organized around images of destruction and decline. The temporal structure of the journey places the traveller in the modern present and repeatedly associates Arab societies with antiquity, stagnation and imagined past. Women become mysterious visual figures, Yemeni officials and tribal communities are framed through obstruction and menace, and the migrant workers are rendered sympathetically but without substantial agency.

In conclusion it can be argued that colonial gaze need not express itself through an explicit defense of conquest. It can operate through apparently innocent act of describing a landscape, interpreting a face or narrating a difficult encounter. In "The Khareef" Iyer turns history into mood. Wars become traces in the landscape, colonial rule becomes a collection of evocative relics, postcolonial upheaval becomes a succession of ruins, and people become images that intensify the traveller's wonder. The result is a literary world in which the foreign society is richly visible but only partially understood.

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