



## **Travel and Travel Writing in a Globalized World: A Reading of Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul***

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### **Abstract**

Travel books are literary representations of journeys across spaces of cultural difference. The genre of travel writing, in recent decades, has produced many interesting travelogues which are also significant studies in cultural heterogeneity in the context of a world post globalization. In their attempts at reading cultural differences, these travelogues consciously move away from the binary of western and eastern cultural divide to look at the so-called globalized world from the subjective ideological position of cultural hybridity. Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul. Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* (2000), a turn of the century travel book, is one such instance of recent travel writing which offers to take a gaze at the world from the subjective position of a hybrid cultural self. In this paper, the author proposes to read Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul. Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* as an experimental travel narrative charting new grounds in the genre of travel literature. Moving beyond the physicality of the journey, the idea of 'travel' operates as a multiply nuanced metaphor in the narrative. If, on one level, the travelogue records Pico's own subjective visceral responses and his reflections and observations, as he lives life on the threshold of cultures, on another deeper level, the book is a comment on the very idea that, living life as a transnational in today's world of cultural flux, is itself an act of continual travelling across cultural borders.

### **Keywords**

travel writing, globalization, transnationalism, multiculturalism

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Travel writings, in present times, are often literary endeavours, recording simultaneously two performances of travel – one, the physical or the geographical and the other, the traveller-writers’ journey inward into individual realms of thoughts. They no more function as mere descriptors of places or itineraries of travel, but are textual spaces which play out the complex dynamics between factual representations and subjective reflections that the journeys trigger. Travel writing as a genre had been an all-time favourite form, both in terms of reading and writing, but the recent resurgence of critical interest in the genre can certainly be dated back to the 1980s when it began to attract scholarly attention from several disciplines like Cultural Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Feminist Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Diaspora Studies and Ethnography, post the publication of two seminal works, *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (1973), edited by Talal Asad and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). Revisionist projects under these critical scholarly studies have since then recognized the values of many travel works as immensely important sociological documents, serving as politicized tools in the construction of the ‘Empire’ during the era of European colonialism and imperialist expansionism. Past the mid twentieth century decades of imperial dissolution, as twentieth century rolled towards the end decades, newly emerging phenomena like economic globalization, revolution in technology and the waves of interlinked things like global travel, cross-border markets and transnational migration began to encourage newer forms of travels and travel writings. The earlier exoticism associated with travel now gave way to an organized industry of tourism, a change which Paul Fussell, in his book of interwar decades travelling, *Abroad. British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980) points out as already a forthcoming reality felt in the thirties. However, even in the new era of technological advancements, mass tourism and armchair travelling, literary travelling and writing continue to thrive as a popular form, now engaging in more complex issues surrounding the relation of travel with a post-modern subject’s sense of exile, alienation and rootlessness. This turn in the genre has most spontaneously attracted many contemporary post-modern transnational writers like Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and Pico Iyer, to name a few, and before them, of course, V. S. Naipaul, to write about their immigrant experiences in form of travel writing. Their travelogues, as they delve deep into the multi-layered nuances of travel, result in, most of the times, complex forms of narratives in which ‘travel’ works as a metaphor and the traveller-writers’ physical travel and his mind’s journey of reflection and contemplation crisscross on a ‘space’, which is often not a landscape but a mindscape. The obvious thread that binds these

authors is their transnational identities and their unique positions as travelling subjects – post-modern, post-colonial, diasporic and multicultural. My interest in this paper is to read one of the contemporary travel writings, Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (2000) as a reworking within the genre of travel writing and to examine how this generic development can be understood in the perspective of globalization and the ensuing cultural politics. In this paper, I propose to read Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul. Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* as an experimental travel narrative charting new grounds in the genre of travel literature. The travelogue is unique in its structure as, unlike common travel books, it does not have a point of origin and a destination. Rather discarding the common binary of 'home' and 'away', it talks about 'travel', in the context of the post-modern globalized world, as an essential condition of the 'self', more specifically the culturally hybrid self. He labels this culturally hybrid self as a 'global soul', who is, apparently, continually engaged in a search for a home in the world. As the individual moves across the heterogeneous planes of cultural realities in the hope that he would feel at home in the world, the feeling of home remains elusive. His transnational travels back and forth between the geographical east and the west, in a world informed by the presence of globalization and the creature comforts of corporate globalism, finally ends him in a condition of being on perpetual exile, where the feeling of alienation is perennial. Thus, moving beyond the physicality of the journey, the idea of 'travel' operates as a multiply nuanced metaphor in the narrative. If, on one level, the travelogue records Pico's own subjective visceral responses and his reflections and observations, as he lives life on the threshold of cultures, on another deeper level, the book is a comment on the very idea that, living life as a transnational in today's world of cultural flux, is itself an act of continual travelling across cultural borders.

Pico Iyer is a well-known name today in contemporary travel writing, the book that established him as a travel writer was *Video Night in Kathmandu: And Other Reports from the Not-So-Far East* (1988). A British born essayist, columnist and novelist of Indian descent, Pico, in his travelogue, *The Global Soul*, writes about 'travel' as an experience of moving globally across cultures as a way of living life, in an era which thrives on global connect, global business, mass tourism, borderless mass media, hybridity and fusion of cultures. He looks at the interface between the indigenous local cultures of a multicultural world and the overwhelming forces of globalization, how indigenous local cultures, in spite of retaining their heterogeneity, gradually undergo a

process of integration into the forces of global popular culture. A subject produced by such a condition of cultural fusion and cultural hybridity he calls a 'Global Soul' – a post-modern subject who is transnational by identity, so called cosmopolitan in outlook, someone whose life's choice is to live on the thresholds of several cultures. For these subjects, the definitions of 'home' and 'away' are problematized by their condition of permanent rootlessness and their life being one of perpetual exile. In his book *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home*, Pico studies these 'global souls' as representing this particular condition of existence in contemporary times, even identifying himself as one among them. The travel book, for that matter, is a generic variant and is considerably different from usual travel books. It does not describe any travel or trip undertaken with a specific and charted itinerary, but constitutes of several patches of the travel-narrator's reflections as his life takes him from one city to another, from one continent to another, from the West to the East. The itinerary of his global travel consists of the airport transit lounge of Los Angeles and the most modern and cosmopolitan cities like Hong Kong and Toronto. These places like the airport transit lounge or the cities like Hong Kong and Toronto are not mere 'places' which he describes as he travels, but they are represented in the narrative as 'sites' of cultural blending, often peopled by individuals who live life cross borders, whose jobs make them frequent flyers and who live in multi-city homes. Such transnational subjects fill most of the urban spaces of today, according to Pico, making such urban spaces appear as essential melting pots of cultures. However, as Pico charts his journey from the West to the East, from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, back West to Toronto and then, back East to Japan, and talks of the global culture that he observes across these cities, the icons of the global culture, the apparent homogenous blend, are all, interestingly, dominant cultural icons of western import. The urban spaces which he describes during his travels showcase a form of global culture, the form being very much a representative of western cultural domination. Far from being essential cultural melting-pots, the 'spaces' actually bear marks of western cultural imperialism, masking themselves as places of global culture or sites of cultural fusion. Observing and experiencing the so called homogenizing forces of cultural globalization as just a variant of western cultural imperialism, Pico arrives at a feeling of consequent 'uneasiness'. He ends at a realization that, for a subject, whose 'home' is located globally, finally no place assumes the identity of his 'home' in the real sense. Unable to identify with any one 'place' as home, the subject continues to live in a condition of cultural flux until he feels an alienation everywhere. He becomes an

individual for whom the sense of ‘home’ is lost and living life, an experience of being on perpetual exile.

Pico begins his travel, which is a kind of a metaphorical journey, in search of a feeling of ‘home’, from the city of California, after encountering an accidental and sudden homelessness, when his house is burned down. The physical ‘homelessness’ caused by the burning down of the house gradually develops into a consistent metaphor in the narrative, as Pico hops around the globe trying to connect his experiences in different locales and in a variety of settings with a singular thread – the quintessential feeling of rootlessness, characteristic of a diasporic existence of a transnational subject. He says:

I’d often referred to myself as homeless – an Indian born in England and moving to California as a boy, with no real base of operations or property even in my thirties. I’d spent much of the previous year among the wooden houses of Japan, reading the burning house poems of Buddhist monks and musing on the value of living without possessions and a home.

(5)

The fire incident lands him in a situation of crisis, a loss of a house to live in, and he begins to reflect on his life till the point of the burning down of the house to think whether he ever had anything he could call a ‘home’. His musings make him reflect on several things, from Emerson’s ‘transcendentalism’ to the kind of modern day realities that is talked about in the writings of contemporary diasporic writers like Kazuo Ishiguro. For that matter, it is not just Ishiguro whom he mentions, but several other diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and Michael Ondaatjee, all of whom, Pico says, share this identity of ‘global soul’. It is a metaphysical feeling of oneness that these individuals on perpetual exile share commonly, and Pico very uniquely connects this to Emersonian ‘transcendentalism’ and the idea of the ‘One Soul’. It is not the spirit of nationalism which can bind them, they being all transnationals, immigrants and diasporas; yet, as if they perceive a kind of ‘kinship’ amongst themselves, a common feeling of being essentially rootless is what binds them all. This is the present world post ‘Empire’, post imperial dissolution and post Globalization and about it, Pico comments:

... in the modern world, which I take to be an International Empire, the sense of home is not just divided, but scattered across the planet, and in the absence of any center at all, people find themselves at sea. ...

Reflecting on all this, I began to wonder whether a new kind of being might not be coming to light – a citizen of this International Empire –

made up of fusions (and confusions) we had not seen before: a “Global Soul” in a less exalted (and more intimate, more vexed) sense than the Emersonian one. This creature could be a person who had grown up in many cultures all at once – and so lived in the cracks between them – or might be one who, though rooted in background, lived and worked on a globe that propelled him from tropic to snowstorm in three hours. She might have a name that gave away nothing about her nationality (a name like Kim, say, or Maya, or Tara), and she might have a porous sense of self that changed with her location. Even the most ageless human rights – scattering his father’s ashes, or meeting the woman who might be his wife – he might find himself performing six thousand miles from the place he now called home. (18-19)

Such kind of ‘Global Soul’, Pico elaborates, lives in the ‘metaphorical equivalent of international airspace’, that is, in those airports which look like cosmopolitan, transnational cities and in cities which look like international airports. As he walks down the terminals of the Los Angeles International Airport, he observes that it has all the amenities of a modern metropolis – it is literally a modern day miniature global city. These modern airports, for Pico, are metaphorical equivalents of quintessential modern urban spaces, harboring the fluidity and borderless existences of modern day individuals, and representing a world without borders.

Pico travels through many of these global spaces of cosmopolitanism and culture-fusion, through ‘world cities’ like Hong Kong. His travel takes him to the most iconic ‘global marketplace’, Toronto, the single most cosmopolitan city in the world and also to Atlanta, during the Summer Olympic Games in 1996, a city with an uneasy concoction, according to him, of corporate business, populist enthusiasm, nationalist pride and international harmony. He travels to his birth place, London, which today bears the so-called signs of globalization, post a transition from imperialism to post-imperialism. In Hong Kong, he meets his frequent-flyer friends, who for Pico are also the iconic ‘global souls’ of the digital age. One of them is on a job of an international management consultant in a global market, a work that demands him to move as fast as the market does. In Toronto, Pico reviews contemporary fictions from several contemporary authors of the city and interviews residents about their experiences of living in Toronto –the city officially recognized as the most multicultural and the most cosmopolitan city of the world. About his choice of Toronto, Pico says:

The hope of a Global Soul, always, is that he can make the collection of his selves something greater than the whole; that diversity can leave him not a dissonance but a higher symphony. In Toronto I wondered whether the same could be true of a Global City. And I felt, at another level, an instant kinship with this place where people seemed to speak a language I could understand. (121)

Pico's experiences at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games at Atlanta however are quite unsettling for him. He notes how the corporate ventures try desperately to make the whole world appear to have come closer. For example, the iconic and the stunning AT&T Global Olympic Village (with the advertisement billboard crying out loud "Imagine a world without limits") sitting at the heart of the new Centennial Olympic Park, surrounded by a labyrinth of gleaming theme parks – Bud World, the World Sports Jam, the World Party, seem to tell us, as Pico points out, 'we were all one', that the world as if has united to celebrate the oneness, the true spirit of the Olympic Games. This idea of the celebration of oneness, however, is severely devastated as Pico recounts his memory of the Atlanta Olympic Games, which took a nightmarish turn with the terrorist bombing at the Centennial Park. Pico recalls that particular moment saying:

I remembered how, the previous night, when I'd raced out into the street in the chaos after the bomb exploded – sirens whirling around me and people crashing through police barricades – I'd seen a man grabbing someone else as people flew all around. He'd been a white man, and the man he's grabbed looked like a visitor from the Middle East (here, no doubt, to enjoy the festival of nations). "You see," the local had all but spat in the bewildered foreigner's face, "you see what happens when we let you people in?" (230 – 231)

What he realizes in that momentary experience is that such global events as the Olympic Games may apparently celebrate global unity, through their grand ceremonies and their displays on the advertisement billboards, of 'the whole world under one roof', but they actually fail to connect. It is in moments of crisis that the lacuna becomes starkly visible, the idea of a globalized world, supposedly based on multiculturalism and cultural tolerance, falls apart.

In today's nexus of corporate capitalism, the ideologies of globalism/globalization are made tangible to its subjects in terms of multinational businesses, global brands, common markets and linked networks. Pico notes, as he travels, how cultural

homogenization in urban spaces has worked to transform cities like California, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Toronto, Atlanta, London and Japan into model global cities. His world-wide travel offers a feeling of belonging to a homogenized world, where even the most geographically distanced cities are connected by the common presence of the McDonalds, the KFCs or the Burger Kings and their dazzling advertisement billboards commonly displaying the Coca Cola bottle cap, the Nike, the Reebok or the Gucci. Needless to say, these apparent signs of global cultural homogenization are also the most visible forms of western cultural imperialism, something which operates through nourishing a worldwide culture of consumerist capitalism. However, the problem is that even in these apparently culturally homogenized urban spaces Pico continually feels an 'unease' as a traveller. Being a subject of transnational identity and a so-called global citizen, neither does he feel a sense of belonging to any particular place, culturally identifying with it, nor does he feel unequivocally at home in the world. This feeling of 'unease' is symptomatic of a deep metaphysical condition of alienation; an outcome of a life lived in an existence of continual flux. Even if his passport endows him with an identity of a 'multinational' and the markers of modern popular culture – the media, the fashion, the internet, the T.V., the ease of international travel, continually try to impress upon him the fact that all the world's a 'global village', he still acutely faces a crisis of belonging. In his alien home, Japan, Pico confesses:

I am reminded of how little I belong here – how alien I am to Japan's image of itself – each time I return to the place I like to treat as home. At the Immigration desk, the authorities generally scrutinize my passport with a discernible sense of alarm: a foreigner who neither lives nor works here, yet seems to spend most of his time here; an alien who's clearly of Asian ancestry, yet brandishes a British passport; a postmodern riddle who seems to fit into none of the approved categories. (275)

This place, which Pico calls his 'alien home', is a suburb of Tokyo, where he is never at home with the local cultural heterogeneity, yet this neighbourhood is the only place which gives him a sense of peace, even as he is forced to accept his social status in that place as a 'foreigner forever'.

*The Global Soul*, other than being a narrative of worldwide travel, is a poignant socio-cultural commentary by the author, blended into an autobiographical and confessional writing. An attempt of reading cultural difference in the perspective of globalization's homogenizing forces leaves the narrative with many ambivalent self-



questionings and the writer's own moments of self-doubts. The idea of the world as one global village where one can have a sense of simultaneous belonging to 'one place and all places', he realizes, is too fragile to sustain. This crisis is at the core of today's idea of a borderless world. This new world, post the age of imperialism and territorial colonization, shapes out of an illusory promise of understanding globalism in terms of multicultural bonding. However, as Pico sees it, the ideas of globalism and global cultural ties, although it might outwardly leave a satisfying impact on a post-modern subject's experience of living and working in a world of corporate capitalism, it cannot really make him feel culturally identified to a place, thereby nurturing deep within him a sense of cultural crisis. For a postcolonial subject, the experience of living in this globalized world of corporate capitalism is further problematized as he discovers the new cosmopolitanism as just another variant of western cultural imperialism and domination. In *The Global Soul*, Pico's reflections on the story of his own life and the story of those writers, who share or have shared the same reality that he does –like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Murakami and such others, are clearly suggestive of this acute sense of cultural crisis. It is this sense of crisis that often leads a diasporic transnational subject to a condition of metaphysical alienation and exile, when he starts feeling forever lost in a place. Rather than living comfortably in the apparently globalized world of homogeneity, uniformity, harmony and mutual understanding, the relationship of the subject to his world becomes and remains as one of 'unease'.

Travel writing as a genre is characterized by an intrinsic plurality or hybridity in terms of textual forms. As Barbara Korte has described it:

Travel writing characteristically fuses various modes of presentation: in very different proportions, narration is intermingled with description, exposition and even prescription. ...It is hardly surprising, then, that travel writing has been characterized as an essentially 'hybrid' or 'androgynous' literary form. (Korte, 9)

It is the characteristic fluidity or hybridity of the form which opens up spaces for the traveller-writer's subjective reflections within the narrative space, in spite of the genre's apparent claim to be objective representations of truths experienced. Since travelogues as a literary form is characterized by this instability and lack of fixity in terms of generic boundaries, travel writing in its cross-over with other forms opens up several possibilities for generic fusions. Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul*, I argue, is a travelogue which experiments with the generic form of travel writing by dealing with the idea of travel, less

in the sense of a physical experience of displacement and more as a reflective travelling of the mind. The travelogue does not operate along the usual binaries of a travel work like 'home' and 'away' or the 'self' and 'the world', but rather engages more closely with the formation of the 'self'. He gazes at the world of contemporary times to conclude that, today, for a subject of the postmodern world of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, a transnational subject position and the consequent feelings of cultural alienation and homelessness are universal conditions. For such subject positions, as Debbie Lisle points out, if there is 'a different sense of the self (as he/she is both hybrid and homeless), it also has a different sense of otherness' (Lisle, 117). They being individuals perpetually in transit, their reading of that 'other' world of cultural difference takes a very different and unique standpoint. For them, as Pico's travelogue underlines, the act of travelling is actually a metaphor of the perpetual movement of their own culturally hybrid selves. As Pico as a traveller-writer identifies himself as one of these subjects, his travel writing continually engages in making meaning of this 'self' in the perspective of the world, which ultimately turns into a feeling of 'unease'. Neither can he completely dissociate his 'self' from the cultural 'other' and assert a position, nor can he completely identify with the 'other'.

The travelogue, *The Global Soul*, thus, engages us to look at a very different and complex subject position, hybrid, fractured and perpetually in flux. This complex subject position places Pico's travel writing in *The Global Soul* in a unique position within the genre, neither aligning with the western tradition of travel writing nor in complete sense a form of a counter-narrative to the western tradition. As Holland and Huggan have pointed out in their book, *Tourists with Typewriters*,

... traveller writers such as Iyer, cosmopolitans from mixed cultural backgrounds, are no longer the exceptions they once were; on the contrary, they might yet in time become the general rule. Thus, while their travel books might be seen in a sense as *counter* narratives, insofar as they pit themselves against the various forms of Western cultural imperialism still dominant in the genre, they also reflect on a world that increasingly accords with their own experience – a diasporic world... (Holland and Huggan, 63-64)

Reflecting on 'travel' as a consistent metaphor in today's transnational, hybrid experiences of urban cosmopolitan life, Pico's travelogue, *The Global Soul*, therefore, charts new ground in the genre of travel writing. It is not a travel work where the 'self'

negotiates with the 'world' as the travel itinerary unfolds, but rather the 'self' negotiates with the 'self' to identify a subject position and find a sense of belonging in a world which is apparently a curious mix of cultural hybridity, flux and disjuncture. Pico's continual search for a sense of 'home' finally ends in his finding an 'alien home' in Japan, where he discovers peace and a sense of belongingness. In spite of his foreigner identity in that place, the place nurtures deep within his fractured self a sense of peace and ease.

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