

# Decentralizing Travel: An Analysis of Pico Iyer's Video Night in Kathmandu

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**Abstract:** *Travel writings traditionally recorded the experience of a person undergoing travel. It has since expanded its domain by maturing into a coherent narrative, a reliable source of information. Questions have always been posed regarding the relationship between the experience and writing of travel and whether travel writing is mere fiction which does not contain truth or sometimes partial truth. The continuing canon of travel writing has tried to answer these questions. The present paper titled Decentralizing Travel: An Analysis of Pico Iyer's Video Night in Kathmandu aims to explore travel writing as a narrative while attempting to analyse Iyer's travel within larger issues related to globalization, neocolonialism. It particularly focuses on Iyer's journey through Nepal. The western impact destroyed Nepal's traditional roots and the people were forced into a state of in betweenness. The seeds of globalization paved way for the instability of the nation. The economy of Nepal was terribly hit as tourism became one and major source of income. Coupled with burgeoning drug abuse Nepal's society went in a downward spiral. Pico Iyer, the celebrated travel writer toured Nepal in the 1980s. The aim of his quest was to find tradition in coexistence with modernity, but he finds a nation decaying in front of him. In addition, it looks at the narrative as a report of the nation in the era with help of necessary statistics.*

**Keywords:** *Travel writing, neocolonialism, narrative, cultural colonialism, globalization, Occidentalism, postcolonial hybridity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The paper intends to analyse the travel narrative of Pico Iyer concerning Nepal's 'Video Night in Kathmandu' while also looking to ascertain various facts put out by the author with the support of quantitative data. It also looks to analyse the impact of western culture on Nepal with the analysis of this data. On a critical point of view the narrative offers a deviant version of the Eurocentric travel writing. Nepal as a significant culture in the east has been sought by the travelers for many reasons. In the second half of twentieth century was a traveler's paradise. An ancient culture with deep roots in religion saw a bombardment of cultural change from the west as the tourist influx to the little nation increased. The cultural conflicts at the beginning transpired into mirrored adaptations of the west. Nepal once an epitome of tradition became a facsimile of the west. The paper also analyses how the travel writing can also be interpreted as a mainstream source of information. The structural organisation of this paper is as follows.: The second section of the paper focuses on the methodological aspects implemented in the analysis. The succeeding part details data analysis and representation. There are two sub topics here.

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One sub topic analyses Iyer's experiences in Nepal, while the other discusses the impact of the cross-cultural conflict. The fourth section details the author's findings of his travel and how he addresses this conflict. Finally, the conclusive part explains the analysis and observations in a capsule.

## II. METHODOLOGY

During the course of investigation, I have come across certain questions which I intend to answer through the course of this paper. These are related to the travel narratives and the cultural conflicts that are discussed in the work. Certain parameters in the form of quantitative data are also utilised to explain the same.

1. How was the culture of Nepal affected by the tourist influx?
2. What were the negative impacts that over reliance on tourism had caused?
3. How does the narrator articulate these issues?
4. How travel writing serves as an authentic source of state of society?

## III. DATA REPRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section explores the data that is chiefly related to Western influence through quantifiable data and also comparing it with the data put forth by the author.

**Table 1: Growth of Real GDP: 1970-2004**

(Periodic average growth rate per annum, in percentage)

	1971-	1981-	1991-	2001-
Real GDP	2.8	4.5	4.7	2.9
Population	2.1	2.3	2.4	2.3
Per capita	0.8	2.2	2.4	0.6

Sources: World Bank (2005a), Table 1.1; Asian Development Bank, Key Indicators 2005.

Iyer turns to some facts in his narrative which can be further analysed to depict the plight of the country in those decades. In this sense travel narrative serves as a medium of information. This can be further supported by data obtained from trustworthy sources. Iyer puts the illiteracy rate of the period at a staggering 80%, there was only one doctor for 10,000 people, average life expectancy in Nepal was only 40. 75% of GDP on tourism

**Budgetary Trends, Money Supply and Inflation: 1970-2004**

(Periodic averages)

	1971-	1981-	1991-	2001-
Total revenue as	6.5	8.5	9.8	11.3
Total expenditure	11.0	17.6	16.5	17.2
Development	8.7	12.6	10.1	6.9
Budget deficit as	2.2	6.5	5.3	5.8
o/w	1.1	2.8	1.5	2.3
Broad money as	16.2	27.2	37.5	53.9
Rate of inflation	7.5	10.6	9.3	3.7

Sources: World Bank (2005a), Table 1.1; Deraniyagala et al. (2003), Table 3.9, and MOF (2004).

In Nepal progress came at a cost. The west left Nepal with a problem of its own. There were around some 15000 heroin addicts as Iyer records in his narrative which roughly translated into one in every twenty youths.

**Trends in Health Indicators: 1970-2001**

Indicators	1970-	1980-	1990	2001
Life expectancy	45	51	54	60
Infant mortality	160	115	99	64
Under-5	234	180	143	91
Underweight	69	n.a.	n.a.	48

The western quest to Nepal for religion left the nation to think of religion in material terms. Western culture as Iyer suggests “left Nepalis with an expanded sense of horizon, diminished sense of wonder” (p 100). Prices for commodities shot up as the tourist was always willing to pay for the product at a higher rate. Goods were only reserved for the foreigners. Eventually what started with food sellers was followed suit by all other traders. Per capita income of the citizens fell drastically, an average Nepali was only earning around 15 cents a day.

**Pico Iyer’s Travel Through Nepal**

From enchantment to disillusionment- Iyer’s quest to Nepal is to find a place with cultural hybridity. He expects to find an intersection of Hippiedom and Hinduism “Where Haight Ashbury meets the Himalayas” (p 82). He hopes to find cultural crossroads and discovers that Kathmandu is both a time machine and a magic carpet. His intention on reaching Nepal is to get ‘transported’ but not to the ancient civilisations or the Himalayas. Iyer wants to go two decades back, a society immaterial in nature with regards to money and that which considered youth as the preparation for the middle ages. Those were the times of great western influx in Nepal. In essence he is trying to find Western imprints in the society of Nepal. Eventually in his travels he comes across a society that is almost western except the people. An imperial traveler seeking for the western society in an eastern civilization is an ironic yet curious quest. The traveler always looks for the exotic and unknown places or at least the Eurocentric notion of travel has been the same. Especially the imperial travelers’ looks forward to unfathomed ‘pristine’ lands and bring it under the map of imperialism. Here Iyer is dismantling the imperialist notion

of the travel by seeking a place that have been well visited from abroad but at the same time he is focusing on the cultural impact that the west had on the east. Where other foreign travelers would seek to point towards the shortcomings of the culture in relation to the west, Iyer forges a critique of the west by condemning its impact on Nepalese society. This paper analyses Iyer’s travel from this perspective supporting it with necessary data. With the notion of a critic, Iyer begins his journey in Kathmandu. His first impression of Kathmandu is described as ‘delirious’, “kaleidoscoped subconscious of an opium freak” (p 84). He observes that everything possesses chaos but moves on in Kathmandu, a ‘freewheeling psychedelic fun house’. The ever-present sales of drugs and consumption is met with curiosity and contempt from Iyer. He observes that a pound of Hashish is cheaper than cooking oil. The people of Kathmandu according to Iyer is intuitive but of unsundering dignity. Believers of wisdom are absent there. Even the Tibetan monks they encounter in the journey yearns to go back to their roots in Tibet. This is in stark contrast to the religious and conservative society that Iyer was expecting. He observes the first imprints of the western free spirit. Yet the free spirit appeared to come at a cost of the loss of cultural consciousness.

**Cultural Conflict In Nepal**

Iyer portrays Nepal as a place selling paradise filled with ‘unfallen fruit and unfallen seeds. Spirituality is the nucleus of life in Nepal, yet it takes the form of a commodity which is being sold as per consumers economic status. The degradation of spirituality is a glaring symbol of the capitalist notion of west finding its place in Nepal. There’s a distinct charm in Nepal which makes it being compared with Tibet. While Tibet represented remoteness, Iyer observes that Nepal was ‘available’. The notion of ‘availability’ is a contradiction itself as Nepal was known for its exotic nature in the tourist’s world. Iyer considers Nepal as ‘second hand Tibet’. There was a continuous availability of products at cheap costs. The second-best deal in Nepal according to Iyer is “instant mind expansion” (p 88). This was essentially achieved through drugs. They were seen as a stairway to religion. 25 pounds of hashish cost only 30 cents. Religion and drugs were the cash crops of Nepal. Religion drug to some, drugs religion to others. Drugs and gurus are anagrams. The charm about Nepal indeed, was the very fact that spiritual and secular trips could hardly be distinguished and this itself had become a major selling point. Thus, he notes “the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Kathmandu” (p 89). Yet this mix of cultures only resulted in confusion. The more he travels in Nepal, the more he realises many of his viewpoints are mere presumptions. His viewpoints get changed when he stays longer in Kathmandu. Religion and drugs when closely observed was absent. His search for spirituality yields unfruitful results as he concludes towards the end of part II that “We had travelled 8,000 miles only to end up, so it seemed in a facsimile village” (p 90) The character of Lobsang whom they encounter having sort of one foot in New York and the other in Nepal sums up the author’s experience.



(Blurred image of Nepal often mixing his personal fantasy with what was seen around)As he travels further Iyer is able to articulate a better analysis of Kathmandu. The food serves as an important marker in identifying and understanding the cultural colonization of Nepal. It is not a domination imposed but rather self-adopted by the people of Nepal. Iyer notes that Nepal had adapted to Western tastes and fashions with unparalleled skill and swiftness. He learns from a foreigner that Westerners struggling in India would often go to Kathmandu when they feel homesick. Iyer observes the menus of the cafeterias which he remarks “could easily have put the United Nations cafeteria to shame” (p 92). There were foods of every variety; Mexican, Italian, Chop suey, Vienna, Continental. He finds “everything of every nationality was available here. Except things Nepalese” (p 92). The experience with vendors further reveal the dilemma of Nepal. They have everything foreign but nothing indigenous. Likewise, every sort of wisdom was available except Nepalese. The golden temple and quest for astrologer further reveals the utilitarian and economist nature of spirituality in Nepal which had turned religion as a business industry. This transition from immaterialism to capitalism is symbolic of Nepal’s plight. He learns that there are classes to one’s fortune telling. Economy, business and luxury classes, all transporting to the same destination. Still Iyer’s quest stuck onto finding a place he had imagined. Nepal revealed itself to Iyer when he least sought it. The chaos in the streets made him feel like he was taken back in time machine to Dickensian London. Iyer felt mysterious and homesick. The alleyways reminded himself of his plight as a child in Oxford. But even though this is the case Iyer seems to appreciate this western nature of Nepal instead of critically commenting on the cultural neocolonialism. The encounter with Pappy as a voice in the city earning to go abroad while the West seeks East as a means of self-relishing sets the tone of the narrative. The real Nepal behind closed doors is not very different from the Nepal that every foreigner could see. Nepal really opened up only to the wealthy. The western notions of profit and loss invaded the immaterial streets of Nepal. The west lacked what the east had, but also built a sense of awareness in the east, what it didn’t have. The west had come to the East to shed its belongings and become native; the east scrambled in the dust to pick up as the things fell. This act although committed unwittingly had caused great damage to the society of Nepal. What appeals to the native eye most often differs from what the foreigner likes. Nepal, had itself adapted to foreign tastes and this eventually led to the degradation within the society.

#### IV. NEOCOLONIAL IMPACT IN NEPAL

Iyer carefully observes that there’s always a sense of equilibrium that exists in Nepal. Nepalis were not hardcore hucksters nor was the west hardcore hustlers. Iyer finds a state of peace and calmness in Nepal, a ‘ragamuffin charm’, the attractiveness of Bali or Bangkok it lacked but Nepal was still a traveler’s paradise and a place for ‘getting high’ through the medium of drugs, as many of the advertisements proclaimed. Unlike many neighboring countries drug possession and consumption was more open and the

advertisement for the same was more direct. Eventually Iyer notes that cuisines offered by restaurants were diverse in names but every dish was pretty much the same. In a conversation with a fellow foreigner, the person reveals that Nepalis are so keen to adapt to western culture they “are so keen to adapt to Western tastes, that they make dishes they don’t have a clue how to cook” (p 101). But what was interesting to note is that often the Westerners turn the back on these Nepali adaptations. Everything was available but Nepalese. Iyer seems to observe a cultural in betweenness in Nepal that grows large day by day, but never wanes. El Parador, a part of Kathmandu forms a significant element in Iyer’s narrative. The setting of the restaurants, the music that was played in the restaurant, everything had an occidental touch to it. Everyone in Nepal seemed very eager to accommodate Western demands however strange it was. El Parador makes Iyer feel that Nepal is out of sync with the world. The unintelligible ads all in broken English appeals to the tourists, and the gambling center never allows entry for Nepalis. Dreamland Nepal remains a concept in the imaginations of Iyer. Iyer becomes accustomed to the rhythm of the place eventually but at the same time he is disillusioned with the fact that he cannot find any magic in the place he yearned for. The streets in Nepal were also given western names. Kathmandu of the dreams stays one for Iyer. Nepal becomes an example of the hybrid culture it got itself into. In Thamel Iyer encounters a Nepal that is completely a facsimile of the west. Instead of critiquing the colonial nature Iyer seems to appreciate the change in Kathmandu indirectly. The book store in Thamel, Iyer mentions ‘smarter version of the Harvard book store café’(p 105). One more reality that Iyer confronts in Kathmandu is that westerners haven’t left everything behind and come to Kathmandu for solace. Their purpose no longer is to be the native but to remain a tourist. As the author narrates “they weren’t interested in communing with nature. They just wanted to do lunch with someone” (p 106). The material attraction that Nepal offered to foreigners was not the same anymore. The actual people he sought in Nepal, the freaks, was flushed out from the country a decade back. Iyer criticises the absence of sensitivity that drove people to drugs. What he sought in Kathmandu perished a decade back. In Kathmandu social conscience came after every single pleasure. The ending notes of Iyer are important from the traveler’s point of view. He had come to Kathmandu hoping to find a refuge from the western culture the likes of Cambridge and Manhattan but was left disappointed. He remarks that Nepal’s great skill lay in “mirroring western ways; Keeping up with western times” (p 107). Travel far east and end up in the west; this was the imprint that Nepal left on Iyer and the quest becomes a trek

#### V. CONCLUSION

Pico Iyer is attempting to find out imperialism spread through world’s most ancient civilisations through his travels. As a traveler he often observes that the tourist notions of a traveler make it impossible to travel. He finds out that the encounter between east and west is aggressive but nonviolent.



He utilises travel writing as an analytical tool that identifies the status of travel in global world. The city dweller in theory may fit in anywhere in the global travel map, but ultimately, he is comfortable only in urbane surroundings. One significant contribution that Iyer contributes is to dismantle the Eurocentric travel narrative, and makes one realise the notion that the place one leaves behind is not superior to the destination headed towards.

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