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Translating the Tropical Tourist Gaze: Hyperreal Asia in Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu*

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Abstract

This article reads Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988) as a late–20th century travelogue that registers the rise of a global tourist-media economy by showing how tropics are manufactured as an image-world—portable, purchasable, and increasingly self-conscious about its own display. By extending Orientalism through the lens of tropicality, treating "the tropics" as an environmental Orientalism in which climate and landscape become cultural explanation, moral alibi, and commercial asset, the article argues that Iyer's most revealing scenes are not only about the circulation of American cultural forms but about the environmental staging that makes those forms feel natural to consume. Iyer's itinerary shows tropicality operating less as strict geography than as a traveling aesthetic: paradise-and-peril, sensual overflow, managed risk, and atmospheric authenticity, refitted for the age of package tourism, franchised leisure, and air-conditioned comfort. The article frames travel writing as an unstable practice of cultural and climatic translation, oscillating between domestication by analogy and estrangement by excess, and argues that *Video Night* is neither a simple critique of Americanization nor a lament for lost authenticity, but a reflexive account of how tropical environments are converted into consumable scenes—and how that conversion remains tethered to infrastructures, labour, and uneven vulnerability.

Keywords: traveling aesthetic, travelogue, tropicality, Orientalism, tropical tourist gaze, Pico Iyer, hyperreal Asia, cultural translation, package tourism

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Tropicality as Environmental Orientalism

The late twentieth century did not simply globalise markets; it globalised atmospheres. Heat, humidity, lushness, "paradise," danger, and excess—long-standing ways of imagining the tropics—did not disappear with the rise of satellite television, video cassettes, and package tourism. They were repackaged, rerouted, and made newly available as consumable experience. Here, tropicality functions as an environmental form of Orientalism: a discourse that turns climate and landscape into a cultural explanation, a moral alibi, and a commercial asset. Read this way, Pico Iyer's *Video Night in Kathmandu* (1988) (hereafter *Video Night*) shows how older colonial scripts of the tropics—paradise-and-peril, abundance-and-decay, seduction-and-discipline—are updated inside late-capitalist circuits of media, tourism, and leisure. The text does not merely record the circulation of American images across Asia; it reveals how the "tropical" becomes an affective and material stage-set through which global modernity is sold, inhabited, and improvised.

Since the mid-1980s, and more insistently after the collapse of the Communist bloc, globalisation has come to function not only as an economic rubric but as a general explanatory frame for political and cultural life. One of the emblematic statements of this turn appeared with the launch of the journal *Public Culture* in 1988, where the editors set themselves against what they called "outmoded forms of analysis such as neo-colonialism or Third Worldism," proposing instead that contemporary cultural flows require us to "conceptualiz[e] modernity as a multi-directional, open-ended process, in which the Euro-American experience is significant, but neither singular nor always the exemplary center" (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1988, p. 1). The proposition seizes upon mobility, mediation, and circulation as central facts of late twentieth-century life, undoing older binaries of centre and periphery and asking how power and representation operate when images, commodities, and people move with unprecedented speed. Arjun Appadurai's widely cited essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," first published in the journal in 1990 and later reprinted in *Modernity at Large*, supplied a theoretical language for this turn by insisting that the global cultural economy is "decentered," structured by disjunctures among economics, media, technology, and politics rather than by a single axis of domination (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 32–33). For Appadurai, the global is not a plane of smooth homogenisation but a field of frictions where desire, aspiration, and anxiety travel along different tracks.

Video Night enters this conversation as both testimony and provocation, but its most revealing "global" scenes are also unmistakably climatic and environmental in their staging. Appadurai singled it out as an index of the emergent order he mapped, remarking that if a global cultural system is indeed taking shape, it is "filled with ironies

and resistances," a point he dramatized through Iyer's portrait of the Philippines as a society where American popular music is not simply consumed but reproduced with "disturbing" fidelity, "rich testimony to the global culture of the hyperreal" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 29). That remark positions Iyer's book at a hinge: it documents globalisation's reach in the late Cold War era while foregrounding the local improvisations, parodies, and desires that complicate any straightforward tale of Americanisation. Yet what matters for the argument here is that "the hyperreal" in *Video Night* is not purely a media phenomenon. It attaches itself to place—tourist strips, entertainment districts, resort architectures, Eden/Paradise/Shangri-La branding—and to bodily experience: the promise of tropical ease, the management of tropical risk, the sale of tropical difference as sensation.

Postcolonial scholarship has long treated Edward Said's account of Orientalism as foundational, because many of the fantasies Iyer keeps encountering—Shangri-La, nirvana-on-demand, the spiritual guru for hire—are recognisable descendants of a Western tradition that produced "the Orient" as an object of knowledge and desire (Said, 1978). At the same time, Said's model does not explain every colonial landscape with equal force—especially those in which climatic difference did heavy ideological lifting (Lundberg et al., 2023). Tropicality sharpens this problem by showing how "the tropics" were constructed as an environmental and bodily opposite to the temperate West. Developed in dialogue with Orientalism, tropicality names the discourse through which the tropics were imagined not simply as a band of latitude but as a conceptual zone onto which Western science, travel writing, and popular fantasy projected exotic otherness. David Arnold (1995) captures this in his account of the tropics as an "imagined geography," akin to the Orient—an invented space produced through classification, description, and comparison rather than encountered as a neutral fact. The difference is one of emphasis and mechanism. Where Orientalism often foregrounds civilisational and cultural hierarchy, tropicality foregrounds environmental and corporeal hierarchy: heat and humidity as explanations for presumed indolence or excess; luxuriant vegetation as both abundance and threat; the tropical colony as a place where nature, body, and morality were thought to slip out of temperate control. In this sense, tropicality is environmental Orientalism: climate becomes a persuasive language for ranking peoples, regulating spaces, and justifying intervention.

That temperate/tropical binary—moderate versus excessive, orderly versus proliferating, rational versus sensual—was consolidated across the eighteenth to twentieth centuries through a long archive of colonial writing. The tropics were repeatedly described as paradoxical paradise-and-hell. On the one hand, travelogues and expedition accounts marvelled at Edenic plenitude: landscapes always verdant, nature always lavish. On the other, the same texts framed tropical environments as

decadent and dangerous—zones of decay, disease, and moral laxity that supposedly tested temperate bodies and unsettled European norms. As Daniel Clayton puts it, this climate-world was cast as a domain of "allure, seduction, danger, riot and excess," the intemperate counter-image of everything the West wanted to claim for itself (2021, p. 55). These were not innocent descriptions of weather. Tropicality helped naturalise empire by turning conquest into "management": if the tropics were excessive, colonial rule could present itself as regulation; if tropical abundance was seductive, extraction could be reframed as rightful harvesting; if tropical life was imagined as fecund yet festering, intervention could be recoded as hygiene, discipline, and development. Climate, in other words, became an alibi for hierarchy.

This framing also clarifies why Iyer's itinerary matters even when it crosses spaces that are not "fully tropical." *Video Night* moves through tropical and temperate Asia, but the "tropical" operates in the book less as geography than as a portable aesthetic and expectation—an affective package marketed to travellers and recycled through global media. In practice, tropicality can spill beyond the tropics proper: it can be invoked wherever destinations are sold as lush, sensuous, risky-but-managed, "exotic" in a way that promises both thrill and comfort. The point is not to flatten climatic differences, but to show how a climatic imagination travels—how the idea of the tropics can be made to organise perception across a wider Asian itinerary, especially in tourist economies that trade on atmosphere as much as on history.

The pages of *Video Night* are saturated with devices of mediation: cassette tapes and rented videos; television sets flickering in backstreet cafés; travel guidebooks and airline timetables; hotel names that promise transcendence as branding and thereby expose transcendence as commodity. The "weapons of cultural warfare," as Iyer wryly calls videos, cassettes, and computer disks, do not simply invade from outside; they are installed by the desires and labour of locals who copy, sell, perform, and profit (Iyer, 1988). The copy travels as quickly as the original. In Manila's steamy nightclubs, Filipino singers perform American hits with a technical polish that makes the rendition feel more authentic than the source; in Tokyo's leisure spaces, the pleasure of simulation becomes an end in itself.

Read through tropicality, those scenes take on an additional charge. They are not only about cultural imitation or media saturation; they are also about how certain environments are framed as theatres of sensation. Older expectations persist inside the circuits of tourism and entertainment. The "authentic" spiritual encounter is still demanded, marketed, and performed; the paradise-and-peril logic of tropicality still flickers as destinations are branded, sold, and policed—made safe enough to consume while remaining different enough to justify the trip. What looks like free-floating cultural exchange is tethered to infrastructures: hotels, airlines, entertainment industries, advertising logics, and the state's development strategies that treat culture

as an export industry. Here the "environment" is not merely scenery; it is part of the commodity form. Heat becomes mood; lushness becomes promise; danger becomes managed thrill.

This is why Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the "contact zone" is useful for Iyer's itinerary, but only if we keep its asymmetries in view. The spaces he moves through—Kathmandu's Thamel, Kuta Beach in Bali, the entertainment districts of Bangkok and Manila—are contact zones: arenas of encounter structured by uneven power that generate transculturation, the selective absorption and transformation of imported forms (Pratt, 1992). Tropicality helps specify what kind of encounter this is. It is not simply cultures meeting; it is a system in which certain climates and landscapes are made legible as consumable difference, and in which the labour of performance—singing, selling, hosting, guiding, flirting, servicing—helps convert that legibility into profit. *Video Night* is at its most persuasive when it keeps political economy in frame—when the glitter of spectacle is read alongside the infrastructures that sustain it, and when "fantasy" is shown not as a private illusion but as an organised system with costs, beneficiaries, and uneven exposures. In that sense, Orientalism and tropicality are not just inherited storylines; they are operational scripts that still help decide what can be seen, what can be sold, and what must remain conveniently offstage.

A reading organised around tropicality also helps keep the book's tonal ambivalence from becoming an interpretive dead end. It is tempting either to celebrate Iyer as a prescient critic of global culture or to dismiss him as an elegant consumer of the very gaze he describes. The text refuses both outcomes. Its wry, self-aware posture often lets a scene speak instead of delivering a verdict, inviting a slow reading of implication. That choice keeps open a central question of late twentieth-century travel writing: can one sustain critique without turning critique itself into pleasure? Iyer's studied neutrality is not simply a stylistic tic; it is a way of inhabiting a saturated field where denunciation and celebration can quickly become new forms of consumption. Yet neutrality is not without cost. In chapters on sex tourism in Thailand or on the Filipino music scene, irony and poignancy can threaten to substitute for analysis of gendered labour, class, and the long afterlives of empire. The most compelling passages are those in which the writing edges past bemusement into acknowledgment of complicity, placing the authorial "I" inside the circuits of mobility and money that make the scenes possible.

Travel, Tourists, and Tropical Otherness

Western travel writing about Asia has long been entangled with Orientalism, the discourse Edward Said describes as a way of producing "the Orient" as a knowable object—an imaginative geography onto which Europe (and later the Euro-American West) projects desire, fear, and superiority (Said, 1978). Classical Orientalist writers repeatedly framed the East as mystical, sensual, backward, or timeless, and that

framing did cultural work: it stabilized the West as modern, rational, and authoritative by contrast. What later critics of colonial discourse add, however, is that the "East" was not only made different through culture. It was also made different through environment. If Orientalism names a regime of representation organized around civilizational and religious difference, tropicality tracks how climate and geography became political categories—how heat, humidity, lush vegetation, altitude, monsoon, and disease were folded into ideas about bodies, labour, morality, and governability. Tropicality insists that this was never just metaphor, but climatic imaginaries travelled with material projects—plantations, timber extraction, port economies, coercive labour regimes, and the infrastructures that made extraction and circulation possible. Geography mattered because it was worked, reorganized, and policed, and because the distribution of mobility and risk was never equal.

By the late 20th century, however, the context of travel writing had changed: former colonies had become independent nations, global media connected continents, and tourists rather than imperial officers were charting the routes. Yet the older scripts did not disappear; they were refitted. *Video Night* emerges in this postcolonial, globalized milieu. Iyer's approach to the "exotic East" is markedly different from that of, say, early 20th-century Orientalists who sought spiritual enlightenment or colonial adventure in Asia. Instead of finding a timeless Orient, Iyer finds an East in flux, grappling with Western cultural imports and mass tourism. Still, the tourist gaze he documents is in many ways a descendant of Orientalism, updated for the age of Lonely Planet guidebooks and package tours. What presents itself as "innocent" leisure can replay older patterns of consuming alterity without the overt language of conquest: travellers go looking for "authentic" difference—nativeness, colourful tradition, unspoiled nature—while their presence and spending power steadily reshape what can be shown, sold, and performed.

Iyer is acutely aware of this paradox. Early in *Video Night*, he explicitly frames his journey as a search for "where Haight-Ashbury meets the Himalayas" (1988, p.77)—in other words, a "cultural crossroads" where Western counterculture and Eastern tradition intersect. The phrasing evokes a collision of two stereotypes: Haight-Ashbury (symbol of the 1960s American hippie movement) and the Himalayas (emblem of ancient, spiritual Asia). By expecting to find "Hippiedom and Hinduism" (1988, p. 77) intertwined in Nepal, Iyer reveals that he carries a mental map shaped by prior narratives: he imagines Nepal as a liminal space where Western youth have long gone to "find themselves" among gurus and drugs (as famously documented in Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* (1979), a book Iyer alludes to by inversion). In Pratt's (1992) terms, Iyer the traveller comes not as an imperial surveyor, but as what she calls the "anti-conqueror"—he does not seek to dominate the land, but his gaze is still informed by expectations set by earlier travel accounts and the global hippie trail lore. He is looking

for "the exotic and unknown", yet significantly, he is looking for a Western imprint in the East. This self-aware twist—searching for Westernized experiences in the Orient—is Iyer's way of deconstructing the classic Orientalist quest. Instead of coming to Asia to confirm an orientalist dream of pure otherness, he comes to inspect how the East is changing under Western influence. With this, Iyer signals a departure from the old paradigm: he is not trying to find the pure Orient to bring back knowledge (or empire); rather, he is tracking the footprints of the West itself through tropical and subtropical Asia.

Tropicality sharpens what is at stake in that inspection. Nepal is not simply a cultural archive; it is also an environmental and geographic one, marketed through altitude, air, mountains, monsoon, and the promise of "elsewhere" that landscapes carry. The Himalayas do a specific kind of work in the Western imagination—purity, remoteness, spiritual height—but that image sits beside another climatic script that has travelled widely through South and Southeast Asia: the permissive zone where ordinary rules loosen, where bodies are remade through heat, intoxication, and temporary escape. When Iyer reaches Kathmandu, he describes the city as "delirious, a kaleidoscoped subconscious of an opium freak…a 'freewheeling psychedelic fun house'" (Iyer, 1988, p. 79). The phrasing is telling: psychedelic, opium, fun house. Kathmandu appears not as the Orientalist's timeless sanctuary but as a sensory apparatus—exactly the kind of environment Debord would recognize as spectacle, a space arranged as thrills, distortions, surfaces (Debord, 1994). Read through tropicality, the "fun house" is also a climatic and geographic fantasy turned consumable: a place imagined as naturally disposed to excess, where the visitor can buy transformation—spiritual, chemical, or both.

Iyer then punctures his own expectation by lingering on what does not fit the script. The monks he meets display "schoolboy zest" rather than "spiritual zeal," one child-monk sporting Dracula fangs; exiled Tibetans confess homesickness rather than offering a neatly packaged lesson (Iyer, 1988, p. 81). These moments are small but decisive because they refuse the tourist demand for legible "depth." They insist on ordinary affect, displacement, and history—on the fact that "spiritual Asia" is inhabited by people living the consequences of geopolitics, exile, and economy. The scene also hints at what tropicality keeps in view: bodies and environments are not symbols alone. They are lived conditions—cold, altitude, scarcity, illness, work, migration—often hidden behind the visitor's desire for uplift.

That concealment becomes explicit in Iyer's account of Kathmandu's tourist economy. He distinguishes Nepal's "paradise" from an easy Arcadian leisure fantasy; what is marketed is a stricter, higher paradise—Nirvana—made legible through things that can be bought, packed, and carried. In this economy, spirituality becomes the bargain: prayer wheels, thankas, calendars, and other devotional goods circulate as saleable

"accessories," even as branded (and mock-branded) Western sweatshirts command inflated prices (Iyer, 1988, p. 82). Orientalist desire doesn't vanish here; it is repackaged. And tropicality helps clarify the mechanics of that repackaging: the environment itself—mountain air, "pure" landscapes, the romance of remoteness—is part of the commodity form. The "natural" becomes a guarantee of authenticity, even when authenticity is being staged through retail and performance.

Pratt's (1992) contact zone is useful precisely because it refuses to romanticize exchange. What looks like a colourful marketplace of cultures is structured by asymmetry: the tourist arrives with money, time, mobility, and the power to define what counts as "real"; locals respond within the constraints of income, employment, and national development strategies. Iyer reads the glitter of the spectacle against the scaffolding that holds it up. When he folds stark indicators—illiteracy, low life expectancy, and the fragility of the economy—into the narrative, he pushes the reader away from postcard consumption toward a political economy of tourism (1988, p. 94). These figures do not function as sociological garnish; they sharpen the contradiction. Nepal becomes a playground for wealthy foreigners even as structural underdevelopment persists. The tourist gaze can linger on "aesthetic images of nativeness"—colour, costume, smiling peasants—while filtering out hardship, displacement, and the costs of dependency. Iyer does not fully escape the pleasures of spectacle, but he repeatedly interrupts them with reminders of what spectacle edits out: drugs, fraying traditions, poverty, and the way a place can be reorganized around the visitor's appetite.

Intertwining orientalism with tropicality, then, lets us link two operations at once. The first is representational: Asia is made into an image, a portable expectation, a set of scenes. The second is material: particular environments—tropical, subtropical, highland—are made into infrastructures of extraction and later into infrastructures of tourism, where climate becomes amenity, landscape becomes brand, and local labour becomes the invisible condition of the visitor's "freedom." *Video Night* tracks that transition in real time. The "exotic East" is no longer only a temple or a guru; it is an economy of managed difference, where older fantasies survive by adapting to new circuits—airlines, guidebooks, souvenir markets, and the staged purchase of transcendence.

Hyperreality and the "Not-So-Far" East

"Asia," like "the East," persists less as a geographic certainty than as an inherited projection—an image-world assembled from fantasies, desires, and long-circulating clichés. Edward Said's account of Orientalism clarifies how an "imaginative geography" can harden difference into spectacle; late-twentieth-century media only thickens that archive with new circuits of images, commodities, and mobilities. *Video*

Night arrives at precisely this hinge. Iyer's essays stage an "Asia" increasingly taught to see itself through Western eyes while also returning the West, refracted, through Asian forms.

But if Orientalism helps explain how "the East" is made legible as, tropicality presses a related question: how was "the tropical" made legible as nature and body? Scholars of tropicality insist that geography is not merely backdrop to representation. Climate mattered materially because it shaped the forms of colonial rule and the labour regimes that accompanied it: plantation agriculture, timber/frontier extraction, port-city economies, slavery and indenture, and the ecological violences that followed (Arnold, 1995; Lundberg et al., 2023). In this sense, tropicality names both an ideology and a history of infrastructure: the tropics were imagined as excessive and dangerous, but they were also reorganised—through plantations, roads, rail, ports, and "development" —into extractive landscapes. That legacy is not separate from the late-century tourist world Iyer describes; it is one of its preconditions. The beaches, hotel strips, entertainment districts, and airline corridors that make the "Not-So-Far East" so accessible are built atop older routes of capital and coercion.

What Iyer offers, then, is not a monolith but a relay of contact zones in which American popular culture, tourist infrastructures, and local aspirations collide to produce hybrid artefacts—Rambo knockoffs in Indian cinemas, fast food in Nepal, Hank Williams in the Philippines, baseball naturalized in Japan (Iyer, 1988). These are not simple tales of Americanization. They are closer to what Pratt names "transculturation," the process by which subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from metropolitan materials, determining to varying extents what to absorb and to what end (1992, p. 6). Yet Pratt's contact zone is never just cultural traffic; it is also a zone thick with political economy—wage differentials, visa regimes, tourist currencies, and the uneven distribution of mobility itself. And in tropical locales, those asymmetries have longer genealogies: the "service" economy that caters to visitors does not appear from nowhere, but often grows out of prior colonial arrangements that organised land, labour, and coastal access for external markets.

Iyer sometimes leans into counterflow: Tokyo-made Plymouths, Bangkok-styled American bars in Los Angeles, Chinese dishes engineered for Western palates, and North American everyday life repopulated by Japanese country-and-western bars, Korean groceries, Vietnamese French restaurants, and Indian-run motels (1988, p. 360). He caps the flourish with a period prediction, "the twentieth century [has been] American, the twenty-first century [will] surely be…Asian" (1988, p. 363), that flatters talk of ascendancy while risking a reduction of cultural relation to market share. Iyer's broader frame is McLuhanesque: "communications had sent the world spinning around so fast that every wheel came around full circle," so that one could "go across the globe and…find that you had never left home at all" (1988, p. 102). The paradox

is clear. Media simulations and instantaneous flows create an illusion of proximity and understanding even as they saturate perception with prefabricated scenes. Under those conditions, cultural difference is not abolished; it is packaged.

Jean Baudrillard's vocabulary of simulacra helps name this packaging. A hyperreal environment is one in which copies, models, and scenarios circulate indifferently to any stable original; authenticity becomes irrelevant or unknowable (Baudrillard, 1994). *Video Night* repeatedly documents such hyperreality. In the Philippines, for instance, Iyer notes an "uncanny affinity" for American popular music, cover bands performing Kenny Rogers ballads or mid-century doo-wop with a fidelity that outstrips many American venues. As Arjun Appadurai observes, this becomes "nostalgia without memory": a careful re-enactment of a foreign past never lived by the performers, and scarcely lived any longer by the original audience (1996, p. 29). The copy becomes more "authentic" in style than the source, even as it floats free of the social worlds that first gave those songs meaning. That is Baudrillard's hyperreal: a simulation that eclipses the original, its meaning unmoored.

Yet hyperreality in these settings also has a climatic and geographic grain. Beach tourism, for example, is not simply an image; it is enabled by coastlines, seasonal weather, and the long remaking of littoral space into leisure space—often through dispossession, ecological engineering, and labour arrangements that echo earlier colonial economies. The "tropical" here is not only a fantasy of sun and sensuality; it is a worked environment, maintained by invisible labour and by infrastructures that channel water, electricity, food, waste, and bodies. The spectacle rests on material conditions—some contemporary, some inherited.

In Nepal, hyperreality arrives as "instant mind expansion", religion packaged as quick fix alongside the tourist economy's other stimulants. "Religion and drugs were the cash crops of Nepal. Religion drug to some, drugs religion to others. Drugs and gurus are anagrams," Iyer quips, compressing the collapse of sacred/profane into a single joke (1988, p. 84). He adds a sardonic gloss on imperial botany to capture the scene: "the wildest dreams of Kew are the facts of Kathmandu." Once, Kew Gardens curated colonial flora as a genteel simulacrum for British visitors; now, in 1980s Kathmandu, Western fantasies of "the mystic Orient" are sold retail. Hashish, gurus-for-hire, and boutique spirituality circulate as themed attractions. The point is not that "real" spirituality is nowhere to be found, but that tourist-demand scripts its visibility and timing. In such zones the copy precedes the thing: the expectation of revelation produces its own stage, a choreography of incense, signage, and salesmanship.

Tourism here is not simply an industry; it is a pedagogy of seeing. Guy Debord's spectacle, "social relations between people…mediated by images", becomes literal when itineraries and interactions are organized to satisfy the optics of difference

(Debord, 1994/1967, p. 12). Dean MacCannell's notion of "staged authenticity" adds the familiar twist: the "backstage" offered to visitors as proof of the real is itself a front designed to gratify the hunger for the real (1976). Iyer is alert to these devices, and at his best records the thinness of the backstage with amused fatigue. Thamel, Kathmandu's tourist quarter, aims to be everywhere at once, Mexican tacos, Viennese pastries, Chinese stir-fry, Italian pasta, yet almost nothing recognizably Nepali. The menu, he jokes, could put the United Nations cafeteria to shame. It is diversity as simulation: a café engineered to eliminate the need to adjust to local life at all. The result is a mirror, not an encounter; Nepal returns the traveller's habits to the traveller.

The same logic governs Kuta Beach in Bali, "the poor man's Club Med," staffed by sales assistants whose jeans, sunglasses, mascara, and "proudly Australian" T-shirts announce the theatre of affiliation (Iyer, 1988, pp. 47, 68), alongside the annex-towns that bloom beside tourist havens to "cater to the overflow" (Iyer, 1988, p. 53). What changes, once tropicality is kept in view, is how we read the setting: Bali's "tropical paradise" is not only a brand; it is a landscape historically shaped by external appetites—first for resources and agricultural value, later for leisure and image-value. The tourist strip is a late chapter in a longer story of tropical space being reorganised for export. Hyperreality, here, does not float above geography; it is anchored in it.

None of this is to claim that Iyer simply capitulates to surface. He repeatedly slows the prose to insist that whirling veneers are "no more than surfaces," pointing to "deeper rhythms" in places like Kathmandu (Iyer, 1988, p. 105). His critique falls less on "Asia's" supposed provision of "post-post-Modernist chic" to America, than on the terms by which both spaces, East and West, collude in their own self-simulacra. In a register that recalls Italo Calvino's cool, schematic city-making, Iyer writes that "everything, in fact, approximated to its Platonic image," as if Zen gardens, emperors, and geishas appeared pre-sorted into their ideal forms (Iyer, 1988, p. 386). The sentence parodies the perfected replica and registers the exhaustion of a world bent on resemblance. Still, hybridity is not innocence. Mobility remains unevenly distributed; the freedoms of the airport lounge are not the standing conditions of the visa line. The contact zone is structured by who can move, who must stay, and who labours to make mobility feel frictionless.

The doubleness that results is constitutive of late-century postcolonial travel writing. It seeks to counter old imperial optics even as it trades in the visibility that tourism and publishing afford. Iyer interrogates "Coca-colonization" while writing for the same circuits that make Coca-Cola ubiquitous. Simon During's account of the "global popular" is instructive here: a commercial culture in which exoticism, normality, and a mood of sharedness fuse, and whose openly commercial humanism is persuasive precisely because it feels like ethics while remaining salesmanship (1997, p. 342). Iain Chambers' phrase, "Eurocentric domestication of space", names another risk:

destinations parcelled into divisible "chapters," neatly discriminated by scenic motifs or leading ideas, with the traveller's self-stabilized by incongruities that should unsettle it (1990, p. 31). *Video Night* knows these traps and sometimes stumbles into them. An essay on the sex trade in Thailand, for instance, lets irony stand where analysis is due; elsewhere the thrill of juxtaposition, Kathmandu as a "facsimile of the East Village" (Iyer, 1988, p. 103), threatens to become an end in itself. Yet even these lapses can be read as symptoms of the system the book records. A world organized for circulation, of people, capital, entertainment, signs, trains both writer and reader to move by modules. The task, as the book intermittently shows, is to ask what that modularity conceals and what it illuminates.

From this angle, *Video Night* is neither a hymn to global convergence nor a lament for lost authenticity. It is a field report from an environment where cultural forms travel light and fast; an account of how places are made for looking and how looking makes places. The feedback loop matters: the West's self-image is reprocessed in Asian circuits and returned to the West as product. Iyer states the loop baldly and then catches himself in it. Nepal's most telling gift to Western travellers may be the revelation that "they have everything foreign but nothing indigenous," a café society that persuades visitors they have found the world while sheltering them from the place. Hence the bitter epigram: "Travel far East and end up in the West." The tag line extends to the metaphor that closes his Nepal reflections: after 8,000 miles, he lands in a "facsimile of the East Village", a copy that knows itself to be a copy and sells the comfort of that knowledge (1988, p. 85). Hyperreality, in this idiom, is not a theoretical excess; it is a vernacular infrastructure.

To name the dynamic is not to step outside it. Iyer's own prose style, epigrammatic, alert to brand names and signage, amused by its own quickness, can feel tailored to the market it anatomizes. That is not necessarily a flaw. The style, "first impressions and second thoughts", keeps two things in play: the world as spectacle and the work behind the spectacle; the appetite for scenes and the structures that script them; the pleasure of wit and the discipline of critique (1988, p. 24). And tropicality adds a final insistence: infrastructure is never purely symbolic. The "Not-So-Far East" is made near through airports, coastal resort zones, service labour, and the ecological management of tropical space—the smoothing of heat, rain, insects, and risk into "comfort" that can be sold. In that sense, the hyperreal does not cancel geography; it metabolises it. The climate that colonial discourse once treated as threat or temptation is now re-scripted as amenity, while the old asymmetries—who owns land, who profits, who serves, who is displaced—remain disturbingly durable beneath the glow of neon and the shimmer of the beach.

The (Un)Translatability of Tropical Asia

Contemporary travel writing trades in the rhetoric of authenticity while repeatedly showing how "truth" is staged—by foregrounding the traveller's shaping consciousness, by revealing the economies that underwrite mobility, and, crucially, by converting environments into readable scenes. That last move matters, as the "tropics" are not only a latitude or a climate band, but also a representational regime—an inherited set of expectations about heat, abundance, disease, sensuality, and temporal lag that travel narratives have long helped to circulate. Nancy Leys Stepan (2001) names this process the "tropicalization of nature," the packaging of tropical environments into images that often misrepresent the region and its peoples even when they claim to describe them. In other words, travel writing does not merely translate cultures; it also translates weather, vegetation, light, and bodily sensation into legible signs for readers trained (often in temperate imaginaries) to treat the tropics as either paradise or pathology.

Video Night is useful here precisely because it refuses to keep "culture" and "climate" separate. The book's signature textures—neon, humidity, power cuts, cassette music, air-conditioned interiors, crowded streets, hotel lobbies—stage a world in which the tropical is never simply "natural." It arrives already mediated by tourism, media infrastructures, and imported forms. Iyer is often read as a diagnostician of American cultural reach; yet the more productive emphasis, for the purposes of tropicality, is how his scenes show the tropics being made and unmade through a volatile traffic between atmosphere and apparatus: between monsoon nights and video glow, between heat and refrigeration, between street life and the cool enclosure of global consumer spaces. If travel writing is translation, then Iyer's object is not "Asia" as essence, but the unstable conversion of tropical environments into consumable knowledge.

Tropical studies treat the tropics as an entanglement of nature, culture, and society rather than a mere setting. Tropicality, in this sense, is not something a traveller "finds" in Bangkok or Manila and then reports back; it is something a text produces through choices of description, metaphor, pace, and focalization—through what it renders visible and what it smooths over. The trouble is that older tropical scripts remain readily available to the genre: the lush overfull landscape; the "primitive" economy of bare life; the eroticized street; the threatening microbe; the indolent time. Even when a writer intends critique, the quickest route to intelligibility can be the most familiar trope.

This is where Iyer's stylistic weave becomes more relevant than his stated cosmopolitan identity. In *Video Night*, anomaly, nostalgia, and the spectacle of American portability are allowed to overlap rather than resolve. Instead of offering the tropics as either untouched nature or fallen modernity, the book repeatedly catches tropical space mid-conversion—between older sensory clichés and newer media

surfaces. That formal hesitation matters: it makes tropicality show up not only as content ("heat," "palm trees") but as a friction in representation, a place where description cannot proceed without exposing its own framing. Susan Bassnett's point about travel narratives exposing the subtexts beneath "apparently innocent details" is especially apt once the "details" include air-conditioning, sewage smells, wet heat, unreliable electricity—material conditions that are easy to aestheticize and equally easy to ignore (1998, p. 93). What looks like local colour is often an index of infrastructure, class, and uneven vulnerability.

To cast travel as translation is to admit that the traveller's reading is never neutral. Tejaswini Niranjana's insistence that translation is an interventionist act—choices that carry political weight—applies as much to environments as to languages (1992, p. 172). Derrida's reminder that "reading" is an intervention into future circulation sharpens this further: the travel writer does not only interpret a place; he helps decide what, later, will count as the place. The tropics become legible through that decision-making. A humid night can be rendered as romance, menace, lethargy, fecundity, or sensory assault; each option draws on a repertoire with a long imperial afterlife.

Iyer's travel writing repeatedly moves between two translational impulses that shape how "tropical difference" becomes legible on the page. At one moment, he leans toward domestication by analogy, translating unfamiliar textures through recognisable—often American—reference points: songs and films, franchises and brand routines, the ready-made grammar of pop culture that offers readers a quick handle on what they are "seeing." At another moment, he veers into estrangement by excess, allowing the tropics to register as sensory overflow—too crowded, too wet, too loud, too insistently alive—so that the scene resists tidy labels and appears to exceed the reader's interpretive comfort. What matters is not choosing one mode over the other, but the slippage between them: the way a place is alternately made familiar and held at a distance, producing a restless oscillation in which tropicality is neither fully translated nor safely cordoned off as pure otherness.

Michael Cronin's discussion of translation strategies helps name what happens in such oscillations: periphrasis and direct translation each carry risks of naturalizing or exoticizing the foreign (2003, pp. 159–160). The tropics, in travel writing, are especially prone to this seesaw. When the prose "explains" heat through metaphors of delirium or abundance, it may be repeating an old tropicalist code. When it "simply presents" heat as brute sensation, it can slide into spectacle. What resists both is not an ineffable remainder in the mystical sense, but an unassimilated materiality—those aspects of tropical life that cannot be translated without acknowledging the conditions that structure who sweats, who cools, who gets sick, who moves freely, and who must stay put.

Iyer's distinctive contribution is that he makes mediation itself part of tropicality. The book does not give us the tropics as pure landscape; it gives us the tropics as screened landscape—lit by television spill, filtered through tourism's itineraries, reorganized by imported consumer architectures. This is not a minor thematic detail; it shifts the object of translation. Instead of translating "the tropics" into a set of timeless natural images, Iyer keeps encountering what might be called second climates: air-conditioned malls, hotel rooms, airports, video parlours, franchised eating spaces—enclosures that produce temperate comfort inside tropical heat. The tropical here is not simply outside; it is something unevenly distributed, something that can be kept at bay if one can pay.

This is where the rhetoric of authenticity runs into infrastructural reality. The classic travel-writing promise—"I will show you the real place"—becomes strained when the traveller's access to "realness" is itself an artifact of mobility regimes: visas, money, English-language networks, hotel geographies. John Urry's "tourist gaze" helps name how expectation structures perception (Urry, 1990), but tropicality adds a further twist: the gaze is also trained by climatic fantasy. The tropics are expected to look and feel a certain way; when they do not (when they are fluorescent, refrigerated, franchised, dubbed), the narrative must decide whether this is loss, parody, or evidence of local invention.

This is why Pratt's account of transculturation matters beyond "culture." Transculturation is not only bands selecting and inventing from metropolitan music; it is also cities selecting and inventing from metropolitan infrastructures and comfort technologies, producing hybrid climatic arrangements (1992, p. 6). A "faithful copy" of an American form—note-perfect pop, imported sport, replicated consumer space—does not prove Americanization so much as it reveals local calibration: a refunctioning of imports under different pressures of density, heat, rainfall, labour, and aspiration. The tropical becomes the condition under which copying must change.

If the tropics are mediated, they are also materially stubborn. What "won't translate" in Iyer's best pages is not cultural mystery but structural exposure. The remainder appears in small frictions: the pause when electricity fails, the sudden wetness of a street after rain, the smell that refuses to be aestheticized, the crowding that turns movement into negotiation. These are not merely sensory flourishes; they are signs of uneven development and unequal risk—conditions that tropicality scholarship repeatedly insists we keep in view.

Here, Iyer's candid admissions of partial knowledge (short stays, language ignorance, reliance on first impressions) can be read in two ways. They can function as alibi, a way to disown responsibility for what the text nevertheless authorizes. But they can also be read as formal ethics: a refusal of the older travel writer's sovereign voice. Maxine Feifer's "post-tourist" figure—the tourist who knows he is a tourist and cannot

pretend innocence—helps interpret Iyer's self-mocking posture (Feifer, 1985). Yet tropicality raises the stakes: self-awareness does not automatically break the older scripts if the descriptive economy still leans on tropical excess as entertainment.

So, the question becomes: when does Iyer's critique become structural rather than performative? One answer is: when the prose cannot move forward without registering the cost of circulation. "America" in *Video Night* is often presented as startlingly portable—carried by music, film, franchising, tourist circuits. But the tropics are not equally portable. They cling: in sweat, in illness risk, in infrastructural breakdown, in the latency that delays movement. These are the moments when translation fails productively—when the text is forced to show that exchange is not symmetrical, that cultural forms travel more easily than bodies, and that comfort travels more easily than those who produce it.

Conclusion

Reading *Video Night in Kathmandu* through tropicality clarifies something that accounts of spectacle and hyperreality sometimes leave under-theorized: the "hyperreal" does not arrive as a purely semiotic fog. In Iyer, it clings to place. It gathers around tourist districts, resort architectures, hotel names that promise transcendence as branding, and entertainment economies that sell "difference" as sensation. The book's signature environments—neon against humidity, air-conditioned interiors set against wet streets, the flicker of screens inside unreliable infrastructures—stage global modernity not as a flat plane of media saturation, but as a set of uneven climatic arrangements. This is why tropicality matters here. It names a representational regime that turns weather, vegetation, and bodily sensation into legible signs, but it also insists that such signs have material histories: colonial governance, extractive infrastructures, and the longer organization of tropical space for external appetites. Iyer's travelogue may not narrate those histories directly, yet it repeatedly walks across their afterlives—coastal strips remade for leisure, cities reorganized around visitor flows, and service labour that keeps the promise of "ease" intact.

Seen in this light, Orientalism and tropicality operate in *Video Night* as complementary scripts. Orientalism organizes the expectation of cultural depth—gurus, nirvana, timelessness, the purchasable "spiritual encounter." Tropicality organizes the expectation of atmospheric intensity—lushness, excess, permissiveness, danger made safe enough to consume. What Iyer discovers, again and again, is not the disappearance of these scripts under globalisation, but their repackaging. The "authentic" becomes a managed product; the "elsewhere" becomes accessible through itineraries, menus, and décor; the climate-world becomes an amenity, with comfort technologies (air-conditioning, enclosure, transport) distributing relief unevenly. If the twentieth century's travel writing often promised access to the "real,"

Iyer shows a world in which the real is increasingly offered as a scenario—available on demand, accompanied by souvenirs, and staged in zones designed for looking.

That emphasis helps resolve a recurring interpretive dilemma around Iyer's tone. It is easy to treat his wit and self-awareness either as critical distance or as stylish complicity. Tropicality lets us read the ambivalence as structurally produced rather than merely personal: the travel writer is lodged inside the circuits he describes, and the genre's pleasures—juxtaposition, quick recognition, epigram—are themselves trained by a world organised for modular consumption. The question, then, is not whether Iyer "escapes" the tourist gaze, but when the prose is forced to register what the gaze edits out. Those are the moments when irony thins and the text must acknowledge costs: the asymmetries of mobility, the gendered and classed labour that sustains leisure, the infrastructural fragility that sits behind the fantasy of seamless circulation. Here, the "contact zone" is not a cheerful marketplace of exchange but an arena structured by wage differentials, visa regimes, and the power to define what counts as "authentic."

Framing travel writing as translation sharpens this further. Iyer's "Asia" is produced through repeated acts of conversion—turning environments into readable scenes for distant readers. Yet the conversion never stabilizes. The book oscillates between two impulses that shape how tropical difference is made legible: translating by analogy (making unfamiliar textures intelligible through Western pop-cultural reference points) and estranging by excess (allowing sensory overflow to exceed interpretive comfort). The slippage between these modes is not a stylistic quirk; it is where tropicality appears as friction in representation. The tropics are alternately made familiar and held at a distance, and the text's most telling "remainders" are not mystical mysteries but stubborn materialities: heat that cannot be fully aestheticized, infrastructural breakdowns that interrupt the scene, crowding that turns movement into negotiation, the uneven distribution of who can purchase cooling, enclosure, and mobility.

This, finally, is the article's central claim: *Video Night* is best understood as a report on how environments are metabolised by late-capitalist spectacle. Hyperreality here does not cancel geography; it consumes it, converting climate into mood, landscape into brand, and risk into managed thrill. Tropicality names the persistence of an older climate imagination inside newer circuits of tourism and media—an imagination that travels beyond the "tropics proper" as a portable expectation that can be invoked wherever destinations are sold as lush, sensuous, and safely excessive. In showing this portability, the essay also suggests a way to read Iyer's itinerary without reducing it to a simple story of Americanisation: the reproductions and "faithful copies" he encounters are better grasped as local calibrations—transculturations shaped by different pressures of density, weather, labour, and aspiration, even when the surfaces look uncannily familiar.

If the book's bitter epigram—travel far enough East and end up in the West—captures the exhaustion of a world bent on resemblance, the tropicality frame insists that resemblance has conditions. Someone maintains the beach, cleans the hotel room, keeps the power running, cools the air, and performs the night. The tourist gaze may treat these as background, but they are the infrastructure of the scene. But the article also does not simply accuse travel writing of stereotyping; it asks how stereotypes are powered and monetised, and how climatic fantasy becomes a practical design principle for tourist modernity. The larger implication is methodological: studies of spectacle and hyperreality gain precision when they stay close to the environmental grain of the texts they read because those elements reveal where representation meets political economy. They position *Video Night in Kathmandu* as neither a celebration of global convergence nor a nostalgic lament for lost authenticity. It is an account of how looking makes places and how places are rebuilt to accommodate looking; how tropics are translated into consumable scenes and how that translation is secured by climate imaginaries, service labour, and infrastructural arrangements that remain unevenly lived.

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