

Book Review

Pico Iyer's *The Man Within My Head*

Reviewed by:

Anshita Deval

Research Scholar, NET-JRF, SET Qualified

University Of Rajasthan

India

Pico Iyer (Siddharth Pico Raghavan Iyer) is a british-born travel writer and journalist of Indian descent who presently, stays in Japan with his Japanese wife. In his work *The Man Within My Head* (2012), the novelist explores and explains the mystical kinship which he has felt with the British writer Graham Greene whom he never met. In his non-linear narrative, he seems to be taking an outward as well as inward journey. The book takes us to the realm of that inexplicable influence Greene exerted upon him, within and around.

At the beginning of the novel, is a self-explanatory quote from Henry David Thoreau – “What means the fact – which is so common – so universal – that some soul that has lost all hope for itself can inspire in another listening soul an infinite confidence in it, even while it is expressing its despair?”

The novel divided into three sections, namely, Ghosts; Gods; and Fathers chronicles the manner in which Greene haunted the novelist unwittingly. It begins with the writer citing his experience in Bolivia, when at the Plaza Hotel, he felt an inexplicable urge to write as if an emergency message had to be conveyed. He wrote in his sketch about a school boy named Greene who counts the number of days he would have to wait to cherish his term holidays. Quite surprisingly, the British novelist Greene too had written near the end of his life about “twelve endless weeks till his holidays.”

Another weird presence of Greene that Iyer illustrates is when the latter had taken his mother to Easter Island, where too, for no reason as such, he began to write about a young man in Italy who becomes a priest, dreaming of bringing comfort to the suffering people and light to the darker places in the world. He is sent to Pacific where gets himself converted and soon is sitting on a terrace with his cocktail and his children playing around. Iyer claims that this tropical story had not been taken from anywhere or anyone – wittingly or unwittingly.

However, had this story been read by his mother, she would have directly seen this priest to be a version of Graham Greene.

The paths of Greene and Iyer seem to have crossed in unexpected and metaphysical ways. One afternoon, Iyer and his friend step out of the Casa Granda Hotel in Santiago de Cuba, and, as soon as they get into a car, a stranger slips in and promises to show them around; a few years later Iyer read about how Greene had had the identical experience 35 years ago.

Even on the superficial and factual level, Iyer had felt a connection with Greene. Greene lived for a while five minutes away from the house in which Iyer was born, Iyer was born in the same hospital as Greene's daughter. To explain one of his works to his friend Louis, Iyer quoted lines of Hamlet which coincidentally were the epigraph of Greene's novel *Monsignor Quixote* – "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Iyer visited Saigon, and stayed in the Hotel Continental, a central site in Greene's novel *The Quiet American*. He hardly found it any different from what Greene had seen in 1951. He could actually feel all the characters of this novel around him. He writes, "I can almost imagine Greene, raincoat buttoned tightly around his throat, slipping around the next corner. It is like stepping into his Vietnam novel." A lonely protagonist in a turbulent place picks up a local kind companion, her sweetness reminds him of his unworthiness and hence he protects her even from himself – this restlessness is the essential theme of Greene's fables with tensions, fugitives, friendship, follies of moralism and compassion. There is a pervading sense of foreignness, displacement, innocence, uncertainty and disenchantment.

Iyer believes that Greene was the "patron saint of the traveller alone", as they sit with their complicated minds full of doubts, and their rooms barren. As soon as he started travelling, Iyer continues, that he began to observe that no one caught the places he visited – from Cuba to Vietnam to South Africa to Haiti – and the emotions experienced -- as accurately as Greene did. In his day-to-day conversations, Iyer senses 'Greene'ian themes. In the novel, Iyer talks of his experience, when, on being asked about his life in Japan by a tourist guide in an island of Lake Titicaca, Iyer could sense in his eyes the lure of the far-off – a theme which echoes in every page of Greene; the way a foreigner by going to another country brings a whiff of a different of a different world into the lives of the locals he meets. Also, while being driven down across the highlands of Ethiopia, when Louis, his friend shouted at the swift and rash driving of the driver, Iyer marked its resemblance to the London merchant from Greene's *Stamboul Train*. Thus, for Iyer, every person, related or unrelated; every experience, casual or novel has Greene not only surrounding it, but also permeating within. In the Mexican town of Merida, Iyer meets a person of Indian descent. He feels as if he had

been walking through a plot Greene had dreamed years before and written about it in his nonfictional account of a trip across Mexico in 1937, in *The Lawless Roads*. Iyer, in this novel, exposes the enigmatic persona of Graham Greene, who had devised an ‘other’ of his own, whom he called Hillary Trench. Greene too, gave the name Dr. Trench to an exiled dentist living in a Mexican village in *The Power and the Glory*. Iyer takes us to an altogether different level where we meet Greene – lofty and deep at once –different from the way Greene’s official biographer Norman Sherry does.

However, the real merit of the writer also comes forth as it is not a blindly biased influence. Iyer even with all the threads of connect, is aware of the fallibility of his alternative father figure. He considers Greene neither a wise man nor an exemplary travel writer. He never sought Greene’s manuscripts or letters or tracking down the latter’s acquaintances to meet him. Iyer believes to have got the best of Greene through his writings, as he can feel his heart, commune with his soul and gets to know the most intimate parts of Greene, his doubts, terrors, secret habits etc on the pages.

In the soul-stirring section ‘Fathers’, we are introduced to Iyer’s fathers, the biological as well as the ‘adopted’ father. His ‘chosen’ father, he knows will always be at his disposal, will never grow old, lose his memory or die. Greene, for Iyer is a presence, a shadow associate, a secret companion and the unofficial alter ego. Iyer holds deep value for Greene’s *The Quiet American*, which is more than just a book to him, he carries it wherever he travels. In every book of Greene, Iyer feels, he can read another text written in invisible ink between the lines. He inadvertently knows, what Greene’s protagonist will say or do, word for word, pages before the character actually says or does it.

Iyer had a very composed reaction to his father’s death. Similarly, when he turned on his radio one morning and found that his counter father Greene was dead, he felt, “Now our exchanges were safer – more intimate –than ever.” Greene, in an effortless and smooth manner sinks in our hearts to stay – the way Iyer provides his strengths as well as vulnerabilities, both as a person and as a writer. Greene looked at the target’s viewpoint, the conflicting emotions, conscience and selflessness of a sinner excited him more than an act of folly in a priest or saint. Iyer claims that as a person, Greene taught him honesty and kindness; and as a writer, the necessity of understanding the Other and keeping spaces for possibilities. He further immortalizes Greene, when he writes about the kindred restlessness of two souls, “He knew that some things make little sense, like the fact that...a scruffy mongrel living in Japan can feel that his deepest life story is being told by an Englishman of two generations before.”

This novel is more than any one particular form of writing, it is a fascinating and challenging form that propels the reader from memory to literary criticism to travel vignette to biography – all in one. It moves like a dream, a non-linear experience embedded in the subconscious, but the clarity and depth of vision and experience is remarkable at the same time.

Above was the ‘Greene’ shade of Pico Iyer, the residence of Greene in Iyer’s cerebro-emotional territory, which influenced his life and sensibilities. It was a pleasure – both literary as well as emotional to envision and explore this divine fellowship and connection to be found in the community of eloquent strangers, an eternal emotional and literary companionship. He has served well, with dutiful commitment and emotional investment, the father he has chosen for himself.