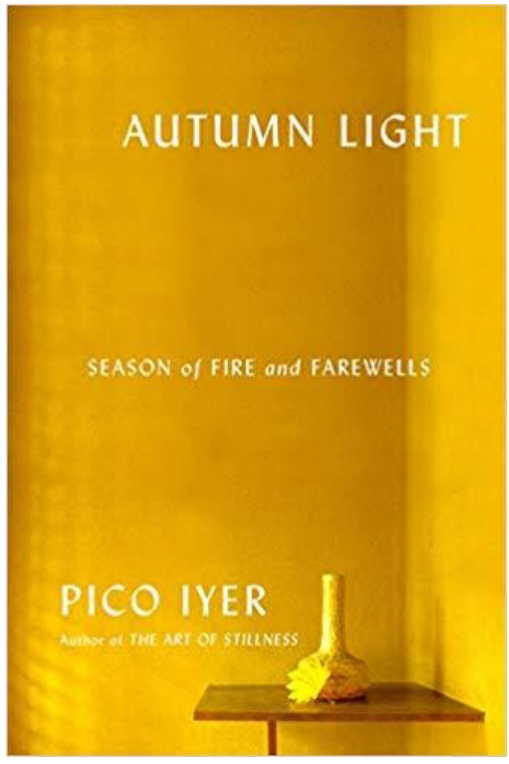
Pico Iyer, *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2019. 236 pp. ISBN 978-0-670-09221-5.



Pico Iyer's latest offering, *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells* (2019) is described as "non-fiction/memoir." Elements of a memoir are very much prominent in the book. It is in a sense a narrative of "settling down," an idea that goes against the general trend of his writings. It is a book about his life in Japan for a period of almost thirty years – enjoying a simple life, close to nature, with his Japanese family. Most of all, it is a reflection on life's many seasons, with an emphasis on autumn.

The book reveals how his "fantasy" of living a year in a Japanese monastery materialised. This fantasy is described in detail in an earlier publication titled *The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto* (1992). In different interviews Iyer talks about how he left his job in New York in order to live in Japan, searching for "silence and stillness" (Fuery). This book describes how he found this "silence and stillness" not only in the religion of peace and prayer (Buddhism) associated with the word "monastery" but also in his new family comprising his wife Hiroko and his two stepchildren. They live in a tiny two-room flat in Nara which is an

ancient city with old temples and shrines. Nara is also home to thousands of deer roaming about freely; they are generally seen as the messenger of gods. There are places in Nara that are still untouched by the frenzy of tourism. Writing is Iyer's vocation and in the new place he writes daily on his daughter's study desk – it becomes both his office and his meditation room. *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewells* is perhaps more of a spiritual successor to his last book (*The Lady and the Monk: Four Seasons in Kyoto*) on the subject of trying to explore the culture of his "secret home" – Japan. In an interview with Patrick Fuery (April 1, 2015), Pico Iyer refers to everybody having one or several "secret home(s)," places such as Japan in paintings which, for some inexplicable reason, speaks to one instantly – places which are unfamiliar in reality but for some reason seem intensely familiar, even like home.

The first time Pico Iyer arrived in Japan it was for an overnight layover in Narita airport. He explored the area as much as he could during this brief stay, and it left an indelible impression on him. He was amazed at how a high-tech country like Japan could, at the same time, retain its reverence for nature. He writes, "It was hard to tell where the forests ended and the buildings began" (*Autumn Light* 28). He decided that he must explore this country, this culture more fully. The next time he arrives in Japan he meets Hiroko who is an active woman, an "ultra-chic, motorbike riding wife" (*Autumn Light* 5). She is modern, yet respects her culture's ancient ways and mores. She felt suffocated in the narrow confines of a marital relationship with her Japanese husband who conformed to every patriarchal tradition of his culture. Therefore, she dusted off the failed marriage to be with her new-found globe-trotting soulmate whom she now marries. It is quite clear from the way he describes her in the book that they are both still very much in love even after more than twenty-five years of their married life.

Pico Iyer dwells in travels but, interestingly, in many of his travelogues he has been in search for the meaning of "home." In the book under review he seems to have found his home. He is convinced that home is "not a piece of soil," but a site wherever one's heart is (Fuery). Japan, a new home in the making, has slowly but surely entered his bloodstream. He ruminates over how his life took on a new meaning when he found his soulmate after his failed attempt at living in a monastery for a year. After a week of living the life similar to that of a monk, his preconceived "Western" notions about silence and meditation started to change. The reality of an intensely disciplined way of life did not exactly match his fantasy of a Japanese life in a monastery. He met Hiroko at the famous Tōfuku-ji shrine in Kyoto. Once he accepted her invitation to her daughter's birthday party, his life changed forever. As if by fate's decree, Roshi Fukushima of the Tōfuku-ji shrine becomes a kind of a spiritual guide to them, giving them counsel in times of distress. Iyer discovers the spirit of Zen from him. He recounts an instance where, during her parent's severe illness, Hiroko approaches

Roshi looking for kind words of consolation but gets sternly reminded of the impermanence of life, "Everyone dies…. That's the law of existence. Every life concludes in death" (*Autumn Light* 208). He writes about his regular visits to a health club and the ping-pong matches he has with local septuagenarians and octogenarians there. People with nicknames like "Mr. Joy" or "Empress" are regulars of the club. They are the other side of Japan a tourist would hardly know. The extreme politeness and decorum often make way to sporting jests and leg pulling. He is often reminded by the frequent reduction in the numbers of the club members that autumn is finishing its cycle. As the winter approaches, the trees start shedding their leaves and the good natured, aged companions of the author start to disappear from the ranks one by one.

Japan has four distinct seasons – spring, summer, autumn and winter. Seasons are quite important in the Japanese culture; the significance of autumn lies in the fact that it

> poses the question we all have to live with: How to hold on to the things we love even though we know that we and they are dying. How to see the world as it is, yet find light within that truth. (*Autumn Light* 14)

After autumn, bitterly cold winter sets in, the trees turn white from snow instead of the vibrant and fiery colours one is used to during summer and autumn. Life too, according to Iyer, follows that unbreakable cycle. When one enters the autumnal age, one can appreciate all one has, all one had; but at the same time, it is inevitable that everything will soon fall apart when the wintry years of old age approach. This knowledge somehow deepens the appreciation of all one has now. The title of the book, one can easily say, is quite apt.

Iyer's books often deal with the very Japanese concept of *mono no aware* or "the pathos of things," which is an integral part of Japanese aesthetics. The ephemeral nature of life evokes a feeling of gentle sadness, the kind of sadness that at the same time evokes a feeling of enjoyment. This bittersweet feeling of the transient nature of things makes one more aware of the beauty that lies within us, whether it be the fleeting cherry blossoms or relationships one cherishes so much. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The acceptance and celebration of impermanence goes beyond all morbidity, and enables full enjoyment of life…." In Iyer's book under review this philosophy is clearly manifested. This theme is ever present in the book: whether it is in the burning down of his parent's house back in California, surviving the scare of his wife's brief period of "transient global amnesia" (a neurological disorder) or the death of his father-in-law. They even face an unbearably tense moment in their life when they find out that their daughter Sachi has Hodgkin's lymphoma. She eventually wins the fight against the oft-fatal illness, but Iyer can never forget the fact that it may sometimes reappear. Iyer speaks of his own affinity to Yasujiro

Ozu's film, in many of which the philosophy of *mono no aware* is found. Iyer refers to the theme of the transient nature of parent-child relationships in Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) where the parents come to visit their children in Tokyo, only to find most of them have distanced themselves. The parents are sad, but they take things in their stride without complaint. Iyer observes,

> No hearth, no storm, no explosions of rage in this version of *Lear*. Things are as they are, and every year people go out and watch the autumn, because it's always the same, and always not. (*Autumn Light* 134)

It is perhaps because of the very nature of *mono no aware* where impermanence is natural. *Autumn Light* indicates that the author has internalised the wisdom of Japanese culture: life and all its little pleasures should be savoured fully before they evaporate. The following lines from a haiku by Basho which appear as an epigraph to *Autumn Light* adroitly sums up this spirit:

> How happy
> to see lightning
> and not think, "Time is fleeting!" (1)

Pico Iyer's prose, as in many of his previous works, offers a lucid, even poetic style of writing. The reader gets to acquaint herself intimately with his life in Japan, with its ups and downs and cultural nuances. He also dwells on the fact that although Japan is changing with the times, it still retains much of its spiritual depth that initially attracted him to the country. In *The Lady and the Monk*, the tone is intensely romantic and optimistic; he looks at everything in wonder. In *Autumn Light* the tone is more sombre, although never cynical. Travelling opens up his eyes to the world's multicultural wonder. Now he has decided to take a pause, as one can also deduce from his book *The Art of Stillness: Adventures in Going Nowhere* (2014). *Autumn Light: Season of Fire and Farewell* manifests how "the art of stillness" can be achieved.

Works Cited

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Hiranmoy Lahiri
Independent scholar, India
Email: pozzo.lahiri@yandex.com