
February 9, 2003

Magical Mystery Tour

By Pankaj Mishra

ABANDON

A Romance.

By Pico Iyer.

354 pp. New York:

Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.

IN Pico Iyer's new novel, "Abandon," John Macmillan, an English graduate student of Islamic mystical poetry, is determined to "see the world in a Sufi light." It is why he has escaped from England: "Anything," Macmillan feels, "can be forgiven there except the longing to be better." He tells an English friend over dinner that he wants desperately to show "that what we have inside us are not just repressed demons and all that, but something radiant. Exalted." The difficulty of his task is made clear when his dinner companion appears "suddenly fascinated" by the lettuce on her plate. "Wherever," she asks, "did you get this dressing?"

It isn't just the English with their antispiritual irony who stand in Macmillan's way. Even in Santa Barbara, that sleekest of Californian idylls, said to be the original home of the hot tub, he finds himself struggling to make sense of the more obscure works of the prolific Sufi poet Rumi while fighting off his attraction to an elusive young woman named Camilla. He lets himself be further distracted by a futile search for a rare manuscript in the centers of the old Islamic world: Syria, Iran, Spain, India.

In much contemporary European and American fiction, the Westerner looking for consolation in the religions of the East usually invites a sententious kind of irony: wisdom can't be had, or so the message goes, for the price of an airline ticket to India or a weekend at a meditation retreat in the Catskills. But Iyer treats Macmillan's spiritual confusion and hunger with sympathy, even tenderness. This may partly reflect his own weariness with an aggressively secular Western modernity whose encounter with the traditional societies of Asia he first described in his 1988 travel book, "Video Night in Kathmandu."

Iyer, who was born to Indian parents, educated in England and now lives in California and Japan, wrote about how the vulgar energy of mass tourism and Western consumer culture had transformed such remote and antique parts of Asia as Bali: "I ran across a pizzeria, a sushi bar, a steak house, a Swiss restaurant and a slew of stylish Mexican cafes. Eventually, however, I wound up at T.J.'s, a hyper-chic fern bar, where long-legged young blondes in tropical T-shirts were sitting on wicker chairs and sipping tall cocktails."

Occasionally, however, Iyer's tone of wry worldliness gave way to ambivalence. In Bali, he found a paradise overrun by tourists. He couldn't help noticing the three kinds of evil defined in a pamphlet handed out to foreigners: "too much money from tourism, or the imbalance number between locals and visitors, or the local people who think about moneymaking work." He also went beyond the cliché of an Eden despoiled by tourism to wonder whether Bali, which struck him as "too lazy, too easy," could be a "real paradise." According to Iyer, a real paradise, "like a god or lover, must have an element of mystery about it; only the presence of the unknown and the unseen -- the possibility of surprise -- could awaken true faith or devotion."

This was the incongruously mystical side of the stylishly homeless and multicultural observer -- someone fascinated with newness and generally optimistic about peoples and cultures getting mixed up under the auspices of an American-led globalization. Iyer's feeling for old religions and spiritual traditions was more visible in "The Lady and the Monk," a 1991 memoir about Japan and Zen Buddhism. And in "The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home," published in 2000, Iyer seemed to be moving toward a melancholy skepticism about globalization and multiculturalism. "Everywhere," he wrote about Hong Kong, "I felt a crush of multicultural props offering one goodies that answered every need except for the ancient, ancestral ones that convenience and speed could not wish away."

Iyer included himself among the "entirely new breed of people, a transcontinental tribe of wanderers" or "transit loungers"

who "pass through countries as through revolving doors." He worried about the "new kind of soul that is being born out of a new kind of life," asking: "What are the issues that we would die for? What are the passions that we would live for?"

It would be too easy to dismiss these anxieties of the global soul because they exist at a high level of frequent-flier mileage. But they are nevertheless acute for those who have them -- those like John Macmillan in "Abandon," as he sits in California in sight of the "bodies stretched out on the beach like pagan offerings" and "the Frisbees winging through the bright, blue day."

In an interview that Iyer's publisher included with the review copy of "Abandon," he speaks of California as symbolizing "the postmodern swirl (where everyday life can seem eerily like a movie script -- in development, rewrite or turnaround)." Clearly, California lacks the austerity Iyer found in Japan in the concluding chapter of "The Global Soul": the "ability to draw a strict line around itself -- to sustain an unbending sense of within and without." Not surprisingly, Macmillan can't figure out the poems of Rumi. Nor can he commit himself to the mysterious Camilla, who seems to know quite a bit about Sufism and who disappears from -- and reappears in -- his life with unsettling frequency.

Iyer charts Macmillan's dilemmas and his slow journey to mystical insight with a sensitivity to mood and landscape reminiscent of that other book by a religiously inclined writer about a lonely Englishman in California: Christopher Isherwood's novel "A Single Man." But it is apparent that Iyer wishes to do more than gently usher Macmillan and Camilla toward a Sufi-style redemption: the letting go of fears and certainties and the embracing of passionate love and ambiguity. In the aforementioned interview, he presents his new novel as enacting a central "conflict" of values between postmodern California and Islam, which Iyer thinks "has become a kind of shorthand for referring to those with a strong religious commitment."

Iyer's knowledge of Sufism equips him well to unsettle commonplace prejudices about Islam. With admirable tact and subtlety, and through some intriguing Iranian characters, he discloses the original meaning of "jihad" and reveals Ayatollah Khomeini as the author of delirious love poetry. But the clash of values that Iyer invokes is really a clash of unexamined abstractions; it has become an intellectually glamorous way of not talking about messier and deeper conflicts of a political and economic nature.

In any case, broad generalizations about the complex cultures and societies that exist within California and Islam may be the stock in trade of television pundits and realpolitik experts, but the novelist disregards social and historical specificity at the risk of undermining belief in his delicate illusion. Iyer rarely considered history or politics in his travel writings; he himself appeared in them as the perpetual outsider who had, in Salman Rushdie's words, "floated upwards from history" and now found himself at home nowhere and everywhere. In "Abandon," Iyer's main characters appear similarly weightless, defined as they are mainly through their emotional and spiritual concerns.

Iyer does not spend much time exploring their affiliations of class, race and nationality, or how they came to be so free of them -- things that feel essential in a novel aiming to say something important about the contemporary world. So it is that "Abandon," although a wise and graceful novel in many ways, can begin to seem, when striving for geopolitical significance, the work of a gifted travel writer who knows the surfaces of many societies and cultures but the depths of none.

It may be that like Macmillan, Iyer is interested only in the radiant and the exalted, and has little use for the murky past, for childhood traumas and repressed demons -- all the tangled private and social histories that constitute an individual self and tie it down to a particular place and time. "Abandon" ends with Macmillan and Camilla traveling through Iran, arriving at a new understanding of both Rumi's poems and their own selves. They are finally beginning, or so it seems, to see the world in a Sufi light.

There remains, however, something abrupt and unexplained about these breakthroughs. This is probably because the private, imprecise language of mysticism fits uneasily in the secular form of the realist novel. The last sentence of "Abandon" reads, "Poems are what we make of them." At least some fastidious readers outside California might think this sounds too much like "Well, whatever."

Drawing (Vincent Kirsch)