

Cambodia as Spectacle: Dark Tourism, Historical Trauma and the Colonial Tourist Gaze in Pico Iyer's *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign*

Dr. Sneha Elcy Jacob

Associate Professor of English & Principal i/c
St. Thomas College, Ranni, Kerala, India

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Cambodia in Pico Iyer's "Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness" and "A Haunted House of Treasures," from *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign*, through the theoretical perspectives of dark tourism and postcolonial criticism. Drawing on Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon's essay "JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination," the study explores how historical suffering, memorialisation and cultural heritage become objects of tourist consumption. Chinua Achebe's critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provides a further framework for examining the colonial assumptions embedded in the representation of foreign societies. The analysis considers Iyer's portrayal of Tuol Sleng, the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, the poverty of Cambodian communities and the commercialisation of Angkor's temples. It argues that Iyer exposes the inequalities underlying tourism, particularly the contrast between foreign privilege and local suffering, while simultaneously employing images of darkness, haunting and exoticism that risk reproducing the colonial gaze. Ultimately, the paper positions Iyer's travel writing between critique and complicity, demonstrating how a narrative that challenges exploitation may also aestheticise suffering and make cultural difference an object of fascination for the foreign observer.

Keywords: Dark tourism, colonial, tourist gaze, historical trauma, Cambodia, suffering

Pico Iyer's *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign* presents Cambodia as a country where historical tragedy, cultural magnificence, poverty and commercial tourism coexist uneasily. In "Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness," Iyer explores the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, the difficulties of justice and reconciliation, and the exploitation of Cambodia's political and economic vulnerability by foreign visitors. In "A Haunted House of Treasures," he describes the architectural grandeur of Angkor alongside the poverty of local communities, the commercialisation of Cambodian heritage and the dilemmas associated with preserving ancient monuments.

Both chapters invite a critical examination of the relationship between tourism and the representation of a formerly colonised society. Although Iyer condemns the exploitation of Cambodia, his descriptions frequently present the country through images of darkness, haunting, disorder and exoticism. This creates a tension between his criticism of the tourist economy and the literary language through which he represents Cambodia to an international readership.

Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon's essay "JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination" provides a framework for analysing how historical suffering becomes a

tourist attraction. The authors examine sites associated with John F. Kennedy's assassination and demonstrate how commemoration, education, media representation, spectacle and commercial interests can overlap. "Dark Tourism" is the term adopted by the authors for these phenomena which encompass "the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites" (198). They question how far the educational mission of a historical attraction can be reconciled with its commercial development and the consumption of tragedy.

Chinua Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" adds a crucial postcolonial dimension. Achebe argues that Conrad's representation of Africa makes the continent a foil for Europe, reducing African people to a background against which European psychological and moral experiences unfold. Achebe writes: "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked" (1789). He argues that Conrad portrays Africa as a "setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor" (1790). For Achebe, the criticism of imperial exploitation does not automatically free a literary work from racist representation. A writer may expose the cruelty of colonialism while continuing to deny the colonised sufficient individuality and humanity.

This analysis argues that Iyer occupies an ambivalent position between critique and complicity. He exposes the commodification of Cambodian suffering and challenges the privileges of foreign tourism. Yet his representations sometimes risk reproducing the exoticising gaze that makes Cambodia appear as a mysterious, dangerous and damaged world for outsiders to explore. Foley and Lennon illuminate the commercial consumption of suffering, while Achebe helps reveal the colonial implications of the language through which that suffering is represented.

Foley and Lennon understand dark tourism in terms of the presentation and consumption of sites associated with real or commercialised death and disaster. Their investigation of the JFK Library in Boston, the Sixth Floor exhibition in Dallas and Kennedy's grave at Arlington National Cemetery demonstrates that such places are not simply neutral repositories of historical facts. Their meanings are shaped by displays, photographs, media images, visitor expectations and commercial decisions.

Three aspects of their argument are particularly relevant to Iyer's Cambodian chapters. First, the tourist gaze is constructed. Certain places are presented as extraordinary destinations because they differ from the visitor's everyday surroundings. Historical suffering, violence and death can become central features of this distinction. Second, commemoration can overlap with spectacle. A site may have an educational and memorial purpose while simultaneously offering an emotionally powerful experience that visitors consume as part of their leisure. The presence of an educational mission does not, by itself, eliminate the possibility of exploitation. Third, commercial interests influence the representation of the past. Sites associated with tragedy may become economic resources, raising questions about who controls their interpretation and who benefits from their popularity.

These arguments provide a way of understanding the tourist's encounter with Cambodia's genocide memorials and ancient temples. The connection between dark tourism and colonial representation emerges when their analysis of the tourist gaze is combined with

Achebe's account of how the foreign world can be represented as an object for Western consumption. Achebe argues that Africa becomes a contrasting background against which Europe can define its own civilisation and psychological identity. African people are frequently presented through physical movements, gestures and sounds rather than granted the individuality and meaningful speech that European characters possess. Achebe argues that Conrad portrays Africa as a "metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (1790).

This argument is useful for reading Iyer because a comparable representational problem can arise in travel writing. A travel writer may criticise foreign exploitation while still making a non-Western society a stage for the outsider's experiences of shock, wonder, danger or moral confusion. Cambodia's history and the particular subjects of Iyer's chapters are not identical to the colonial situation represented in Conrad's novel. Nor does Iyer simply reproduce Conrad's position. Achebe supplies a critical question rather than a ready-made verdict: Does the writer represent local people as individuals with their own histories and agency, or do they primarily become elements in the foreign traveller's experience?

The chapter "Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness" opens with Iyer's description of Tuol Sleng, a former school turned into a museum for the Cambodian genocide during Khmer Rouge rule. His description includes "rusted beds on which Pol Pot's men interrogated victims", the "U.S. munitions cans they used as toilets", "shovels and iron staves they used to beat people to death" and a "map of Cambodia made up entirely of skulls" apart from the photographs of hundreds of victims (57). The memorial makes the destruction of individual lives visible, transforming historical information into a disturbing encounter with material evidence. Foley and Lennon's concept of dark tourism is significant here. A visitor to Tuol Sleng encounters a place where the past has been preserved and interpreted as public memory. The objects and photographs connect the visitor with people whose lives were destroyed by political violence. Such an encounter may encourage historical understanding and reflection on the consequences of cruelty and authoritarian power. Yet Foley and Lennon's analysis also directs attention to the problem of consumption. Once historical suffering becomes an established tourist attraction, the visitor's encounter can be shaped by the expectations of travel and the desire for an intense experience. The memorial's educational purpose and the commercial context of tourism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but neither are they automatically compatible.

Iyer complicates the relationship between memorialisation and spectacle by describing the impoverished and disabled Cambodians encountered outside Tuol Sleng. The transition from the torture centre to the street suggests that the effects of violence do not end at the museum's boundaries. He remarks that "forty thousand Cambodians are limbless and more than 50 percent of the country's children are stunted" making their poverty and disability become another part of the tragic scene through which the visitor experiences Cambodia (59). The issue is not that the suffering of these people should remain unseen. Rather, it is that the tourist gaze can turn people with immediate economic needs into objects of observation. Achebe's critique helps us ask whose experience organises the narrative. The visitors' encounters with Cambodian suffering are described for the reader, but the people being encountered may sometimes appear chiefly as illustrations of a devastated country. Although Iyer tries to draw attention to the continuing consequences of violence, his narrative occasionally makes Cambodian bodies part of the scenery of historical tragedy. This is where Foley and Lennon, and Achebe complement one another. Foley and Lennon help reveal how

suffering can be consumed as a tourist experience, and Achebe encourages us to examine whether the representation of suffering grants the people concerned their full humanity.

Iyer repeatedly presents the city of Phnom Penh through images of damaged buildings, disorder, poverty and moral uncertainty. He says it is “a city of potholes and puddles where most of the elegant French colonial buildings behind gates look like haunted houses taken over by squatters too concerned with their survival tomorrow to worry about their upkeep today. Side streets are piled high with rotten garbage, and the small handmade signs above the open sewers say things like SAVING AIDS AND MADMAN VICTIM ASSOCIATION” (60-61). He continues to say that it is a city of orphans where “you still will not find doctors or teachers or lawyers of a certain age” (61). He describes a society still struggling to recover from the destruction of education, social institutions and family relationships under the Khmer Rouge. These descriptions communicate the profound consequences of historical violence. They also reveal Iyer’s criticism of foreign businesses that exploit the opportunities created by economic insecurity. Nevertheless, the accumulation of darkness, ruin and disorder can make Cambodia appear as a society fundamentally different from the world of the visitor. The country is represented as a place where the familiar safeguards of civilisation have collapsed, creating an atmosphere of danger and moral unpredictability. This is an important point of connection with Achebe. In his analysis of Conrad, the opposition between Europe and Africa depends on the representation of Africa as another world, the antithesis of European civilisation. Achebe argues that such a representation enables the European observer to define himself through the apparent strangeness of the people and landscape he encounters.

Iyer’s description of Cambodia is not equivalent to Conrad’s representation of Africa, and the historical causes of Cambodian suffering must not be confused with racist stereotypes. Nevertheless, the representational risk is similar: Cambodia can become the extraordinary, disordered place through which the foreign observer experiences moral shock. In this sense, the colonial gaze can persist without an explicit defence of colonialism. A writer may condemn corruption and exploitation but still employ an opposition between the orderly outside world and the supposedly chaotic foreign society. A critical reading must therefore distinguish between exposing genuine social suffering and suggesting, through imagery and narrative structure, that the society itself is inherently primitive or uncivilised. Iyer’s most persuasive passages identify the political and economic conditions that produce suffering; his more problematic moments allow darkness and disorder to become defining qualities of the country. The title “Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness” expresses the central contradiction of Iyer’s chapter. “Happy hour” suggests pleasure, leisure and social enjoyment, while “Heart of Darkness” evokes danger, moral uncertainty and a threatening foreign environment. Together, the words suggest that Cambodia’s crisis becomes part of the attraction offered to certain outsiders. Iyer describes the “half-illicit thrill” experienced by some foreigners who enjoy living in a place where drugs, prostitution, weapons and opportunities for profit flourish alongside poverty and political instability (62). The Heart of Darkness bar becomes a symbol of a leisure economy that feeds on the appearance of moral disorder. The phrase “Happy Hour” is deeply ironic because the enjoyment of some visitors coexists with the vulnerability of local people. The visitor can experience Cambodia as a place of excitement and indulgence, while Cambodians continue to live with the consequences of violence, economic deprivation and exploitation.

Foley and Lennon's framework, clarifies the relationship between tragedy and consumption. Their study demonstrates how sites connected with death can become attractions where commemoration, spectacle and commercial activity overlap. Iyer extends this concern beyond a single memorial: Cambodia's perceived lawlessness becomes an attraction in its own right. Achebe adds another layer to the title's irony. The phrase "Heart of Darkness" invokes the literary tradition through which a non-European society can be made dark, mysterious and threatening to the outsider. Achebe argues that Conrad's representation of Africa is problematic not simply because imperialism is cruel, but because African people and landscapes become instruments in a European drama. Iyer's title can consequently be read in two ways. On one level, it criticises foreigners who exploit Cambodia's wounded condition for pleasure and profit. On another note, it borrows an inherited vocabulary of darkness that can make Cambodia appear fascinating because of its apparent distance from the visitor's familiar world.

In the chapter "A Haunted House of Treasures," Iyer shifts his attention from Phnom Penh to the temples of Angkor. His descriptions include "darkened doorways", "carvings of devils and gods", "skeletal" Buddhas, ruins and the jungle surrounding the monuments (172). The children selling souvenirs and amulets are frequently described through language that associates them with the uncanny atmosphere of the temples. He writes: "Every time I got out of my car, wild and dusty children swarmed around me, like spirits of the jungle, waving Buddha amulets at me, waving fans and postcards . . . and if I said no to one, her features would scrunch up till they looked like a howl, and her eyes themselves a hiss" (173). This imagery is central to the chapter's literary effect. Angkor appears not merely as an archaeological site but as a world in which the past remains alive through religious imagery, architectural ruins and the continuing presence of the natural environment. Yet the language also risks exoticisation. Cambodia becomes a mysterious world to be discovered by the traveller, while the people living around the temples are sometimes represented as part of its atmosphere. Their poverty, physical differences and commercial appeals blend into the imagery of spirits and demons. Achebe's critique of Conrad is pertinent here. He objects to literary representations that turn African people into symbols of a strange landscape rather than recognising them as individuals whose lives possess meaning independently of the outsider's experience. A comparable danger arises when Cambodian children become part of Angkor's haunted appearance. They are not the creators of the atmosphere the visitor experiences; they are children attempting to earn money within a tourism economy. When their faces and movements are repeatedly associated with demonic carvings and spirits, their material circumstances risk being transformed into an aesthetic effect.

By rendering poverty through Gothic imagery, the narrative may make Cambodian suffering aesthetically compelling while also making Cambodian people seem strange or less familiar than the visitors who observe them. Foley and Lennon's analysis helps explain why this matters. The tourist gaze constructs a place as extraordinary, distinguishing it from everyday experience. Iyer's descriptions similarly transform Angkor into a landscape of mystery and haunting, creating the atmosphere through which visitors and readers experience Cambodia. Achebe's contribution is to direct our attention to the human cost of this aesthetic construction. The crucial question is whether the Cambodian child remains visible as a person with economic needs and aspirations, or becomes an element in the traveller's experience of the exotic.

One of the most revealing episodes in “A Haunted House of Treasures” occurs when Iyer and other visitors walk through Preah Khan by lamplight before emerging into a space with “white-cloth tables and all appurtenances” for a lavish New Year’s champagne breakfast organised by the Grand Hotel d’Angkor (174). The movement from religious ruins to luxury hospitality brings together ancient heritage and commercial spectacle. The visitors are offered a staged encounter with the past. The darkness, candles, ruined architecture and gradual appearance of the temple create a sense of revelation, while the champagne breakfast converts the experience into a luxury event.

Foley and Lennon’s discussion of the presentation and consumption of tragic history offers a useful comparison. They show that a site’s educational or commemorative purpose can coexist with the demands of leisure and commercial development. Angkor is not identical to the JFK assassination sites studied by Foley and Lennon, but Iyer’s description reveals a related tension: historical and cultural significance becomes part of an organised visitor experience.

The colonial dimension becomes particularly visible in Iyer’s representation of the Grand Hotel d’Angkor. The restored French colonial palace is marketed through nostalgia for Indochina, with its elegant furnishings and luxurious atmosphere. Iyer contrasts the hotel’s manicured grounds with the poverty beyond its walls. He observes: “Sometimes I stood on the terrace of my beautifully appointed room . . . and watched the four formal gardens, the jogging track, the twenty thousand trees around the swimming pool and pavilioned spa immaculate. As soon as the hotel walls ended, the overgrowth began again, and there was nothing in the distance but a rusty-looking Ferris wheel” (177). The building transforms colonial history into a consumable aesthetic. The visitor can enjoy the architecture and atmosphere of the colonial past without necessarily confronting the inequalities and power relations associated with that history. This is not simply tourism involving an old colonial building. It suggests a form of colonial nostalgia in which the past is reproduced as an image of elegance and refinement. The historical experience is shaped by the desires of visitors who can pay for a carefully arranged encounter with an imagined Indochina.

Achebe’s essay helps illuminate the danger of this form of representation. He argues that literature can reproduce a colonial worldview even when it appears critical of aspects of imperialism. Similarly, commercial nostalgia can make colonial heritage attractive while obscuring the unequal relations that gave the colonial world its structure. Iyer exposes this contradiction through his comparison of luxurious tourist facilities with Cambodian poverty. Yet the contrast also becomes part of the literary spectacle of his chapter. The hotel is both an object of criticism and an element in the exotic landscape through which the reader experiences Cambodia.

A balanced postcolonial analysis makes it clear that Iyer does not simply portray Cambodians as passive victims. He includes local voices that welcome tourism because it provides employment, opportunities to learn languages and a possible source of economic improvement. Phalla, for example, regards tourism as a significant change from the years when violence and insecurity dominated his experience and Iyer’s guide also acknowledges the importance of tourism for the economy and temple conservation (178). These perspectives complicate any argument that the moral solution is to reject tourism entirely. For Cambodian people whose lives have been devastated by war and economic hardship, tourism can provide essential income and opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable. Iyer

writes: “And when I looked at the little girls selling postcards for a dollar a set, I wondered what alternatives they really had. If they weren’t living off visitors, how would they be living at all. . . . Tourism was turning the children into parasites, yet the absence of tourism might turn them to skeletons” (179).

Foley and Lennon’s emphasis on considering visitors, victims and local communities is valuable here. The ethical assessment of a tourist attraction cannot rest entirely on the visitor’s emotional response or the manager’s commercial interests. It must also consider how the people who live around the site understand its value. Achebe’s critique similarly encourages a reading attentive to agency. If colonial representation turns local people into scenery, a more responsible approach must recognise their voices, interests and capacity to interpret their own circumstances. Iyer partially achieves this by including conversations with Cambodians who see tourism as a source of employment and conservation. These accounts prevent the chapters from becoming a simple narrative in which foreign visitors act while local people merely suffer.

Nevertheless, the power relationship remains unequal. Foreign visitors can leave Cambodia after their encounters with its monuments and suffering, while local people must continue to live with the social and economic conditions the visitors briefly witness. Local residents may welcome tourism without accepting every form of commercialisation or every representation of their country. The issue is therefore not whether tourism is inherently colonial. It is whether tourism distributes resources fairly and represents local people as active participants in their own society rather than as picturesque sellers, victims or symbols of historical tragedy.

Read together, the three writers provide a framework for understanding the ambivalence of Iyer’s Cambodian chapters. Foley and Lennon reveal how places associated with death and tragedy can become attractions shaped by the tourist gaze, the media and commercial interests. Achebe asks how the literary representation of foreign societies can deny their inhabitants individuality by turning them into scenery for the outsider. Iyer’s chapters bring these two problems together: Cambodia’s suffering and heritage become objects of international attention, while his narrative seeks to expose the inequalities underlying that attention.

In “Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness,” the tourism economy coexists with the memorialisation of genocide and the exploitation of a vulnerable society. The title makes the foreign visitor’s pleasure appear morally compromised by the suffering that surrounds it. In “A Haunted House of Treasures,” the monuments of Angkor become objects of wonder and commercial activity, while the lives of local people are sometimes incorporated into the atmosphere of mystery surrounding the temples. The restored colonial hotel further suggests how the foreign visitor can consume an idealised image of the past.

In both chapters, Iyer criticises inequality and exploitation. Yet his descriptions also employ imagery of darkness, ruin, haunting and disorder that can make Cambodia appear exotic and unsettling. The traveller’s experience remains an organising force in the narrative. This is the point where Achebe’s critique becomes most important. His argument is not merely that a writer should avoid negative descriptions of a foreign society. Rather, a writer must examine the representational structures through which that society is made meaningful. When local people appear primarily as signs of suffering, mystery or disorder, they risk

becoming instruments in the outsider's experience, even when the writer's intention is sympathetic.

It would be an overstatement to conclude that Iyer simply reproduces Conrad's colonial ideology. His criticism of foreign exploitation, his attention to historical trauma and his inclusion of Cambodian perspectives demonstrate substantial differences. A stronger conclusion is that his travel writing occupies a position between critique and complicity: it exposes the damaging effects of the tourist gaze while sometimes borrowing the language and imagery through which foreign places become objects of fascination.

The distinction is crucial because it directs attention away from a simple judgement of authorial intention and towards the effects of representation. A writer may oppose the exploitation of a society and still contribute to the aesthetic consumption of its suffering. Similarly, a tourist may visit a memorial with sincere educational intentions while participating in an economy that commodifies tragedy.

Malcolm Foley and J. John Lennon's "JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination" provides a valuable framework for examining the commercialisation of Cambodian suffering and heritage in Pico Iyer's *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign*. Their discussion of dark tourism demonstrates that commemoration, education, spectacle and commerce may coexist within sites associated with death and tragedy. Achebe's "An Image of Africa," in turn, makes it possible to examine the colonial assumptions that can shape the representation of a foreign society, even when the writer intends to expose exploitation.

In "Happy Hour in the Heart of Darkness," Cambodia's traumatic history and contemporary poverty coexist with the pleasures and profits sought by foreign visitors. The title's irony exposes the moral contradiction between the visitor's leisure and the suffering of the people who inhabit the destination. In "A Haunted House of Treasures," the monuments of Angkor become objects of aesthetic wonder, conservation and commercial tourism, while colonial nostalgia and the poverty surrounding the temples reveal the unequal distribution of the benefits of heritage.

The colonial dimension of Iyer's writing lies not simply in the presence of foreign visitors but in the relationship between the observer and the observed. When Cambodian people become symbols of tragedy, exoticism or mystery, their individual experiences risk being subordinated to the visitor's narrative. Nevertheless, Iyer also challenges this pattern by exposing economic exploitation and acknowledging the ways Cambodians themselves understand tourism and its consequences.

Ultimately, the two chapters reveal that criticising the exploitation of a foreign society is not the same as escaping the representational habits through which that society becomes an object of consumption. Foley and Lennon help identify the commercial and experiential dimensions of this problem; Achebe reveals its postcolonial and human consequences. Read together, their critical perspectives show that Iyer's Cambodian chapters are strongest when they recognise the agency and historical realities of Cambodian people, and most ambivalent when suffering, darkness and cultural difference become the sources of the foreign gaze's fascination.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *The Massachusetts Review* 18.4 (1977): 1783-1794.

Foley, Malcolm, and J. John Lennon. "JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2.4 (1996): 198–211.

Iyer, Pico. *Sun After Dark: Flights into the Foreign*. New York: Vintage Departures, 2004.