

A Contemporary Indian Expatriate View of Japan: Orienting an Indian in Japan by Pallavi Aiyar

M.V.Lakshmi*

Abstract– In recent years, with the movement of people across nations, be it for economic or political reasons, by choice or due to economic or political circumstances, the opportunities to interact with one another across borders of one's own country have increased. This can be seen in various milieus such as the workplace or socially, through informal and formal platforms, through person to person contact and social networking. Diaspora literature is one of the significant genres of literature that has emerged because of this movement of people across borders, and it has established itself as a genre of literature in its own right. Another related genre of writing, namely, 'expatriate writing', has also gained prominence. It would be important to note that expatriates, unlike diaspora, are people who move to another country by choice, for a limited period with a definite purpose or intention and are not permanent immigrants.

This paper will explore a work of contemporary Indian expatriate writing on Japan to understand Japan as seen through the eyes of an Indian expatriate writer. Expatriate studies can be studied as a specific discourse or given the distinction of a literary genre, much like the work that is called a feminist or a Marxist theory (Ilyas, 2018).

The above statement refers to expatriate writing as a literary genre like feminist or Marxist writing with a theoretical basis. *Orienting an Indian in Japan* by a female Indian journalist - Pallavi Aiyar, written in the year 2021, will be analysed for her perception of Japan. Before discussing the book and the author's insights on Japan, the paper would first elaborate upon the genre of expatriate writing and the unique perspective it offers vis-à-vis that of a tourist or a traveller's account or a work of fiction.

Keywords Expatriate writing · India and Japan · Non-fiction · Self and the other · Stereotypes ·

* Assistant Professor, Centre for Japanese Studies, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. E-mail: mvlakshmi@gmail.com

1. Literary and non-literary accounts of a country

Fictional literature has contributed immensely in defining and propagating images and stereotypes of a nation in the eyes of the other. When it comes to an understanding of the images of Japan or other Asian nations of the East, the perception has been primarily dominated by an 'Orientalist perspective' defined by the West.

Study of foreign literature for Images of one's own nation is significant in not only contributing to the understanding of the 'other' and the 'self' in foreign literature but also in bringing about some evaluation of the literature of another country from an outsider's perspective, as Peter Boerner states in his article,

"National Images and their place in Literary Research"- Germany as seen by Eighteenth-Century French and English reading Audiences" (1975).

Besides, it is felt that the process of writing about the 'other' helps in understanding one's own self as the writer compares, contrasts and evaluates the 'other' based on his or her worldview. This paper discusses how an expatriate does not just observe but, having lived within the society of the other, has a unique perspective of writing about the other through the case study of a contemporary Indian expatriate's account of Japan.

2. Defining the expatriate gaze and its significance

Even as diaspora studies have flourished with time, especially in recent years, the sub-set of expatriate writing remains relatively unexplored. It is essential to define the word expatriate and elucidate the term expatriation.

The term expatriate in common parlance is used interchangeably with diaspora, immigrant, or migrant worker. However, it is essential to note that the motivations and reasons for moving to another country define an expat as different from the diaspora. Expatriates are people who move to another country by choice with the intent to stay there for a defined duration or are unsure of the same. Unlike immigrants, they do not permanently shift their residence to another country.

The perspective of an expatriate is formed with the comfort and advantage of viewing and experiencing the country of her/his current residence at his or her own leisurely pace, unlike the more fleeting experiences of a tourist or a traveller. The length of stay and the breadth of the experiences of a life shared with the other expatriates and natives, while being immersed in the culture of the resident

country, lends them an opportunity to view and experience the country of their residence. The opportunity here refers to the range of day-to-day experiences, forming and reforming opinions, moving outside the limited scope of viewing a country as a tourist or even a traveller, in a relatively 'secure' environment with fellow expatriates who may be co-inhabiting another country. The confidence of knowing that one has a haven in the foreign land in the expat community would also perhaps encourage the expatriates to look at aspects of the country of their residence that may not have interested them as a tourist or a traveller who have limitations on time, and resources and a more well-defined and planned itinerary.

3. Prominent accounts of foreign nationals in Japan

When one talks of the broad genre of Japan's portrayal through the eyes of expatriates who set foot in the country and then went on living in it to make it their home, one finds that the tradition is richly decorated with prominent names such as Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo), Donald Keene, Donald Richie, and Pico Iyer among others. Each has contributed immensely in building an image of the country as someone who seeps in the experiences and not just catches fleeting images alone as a tourist may. An expatriate has the advantage of time on his/her side, where he/she gets an opportunity to live and experience the mundane day to day happenings in a country and capture personalised images of the country, besides what "ought to be" seen, explored, or perceived as, defined by popular notions or stereotypes. Moreover, on account of spending a significant amount of time in a country, his or her impressions and perceptions are unique in that while they may be reiterated due to repeated experiences during the period of stay, there is a possibility of them even being redefined because of the time and opportunities provided.

Lafcadio Hearn, also known as Koizumi Yakumo, is a prominent expatriate who chose to live in Japan and make it his home. His representative works, prominent among which is *Kwaidan* are about Japanese Culture, ghosts, spirits. His work provides a 'western' perspective on Japan and brings it to the fore. Amongst the other prominent names, there is Donald Keene. His contribution as a Japanologist who has written in English and Japanese and translations is well recognised in academia. He also chose to stay in Japan after the Tohoku earthquake in 2011 and stayed there for as long as he lived till the year 2019. Other names of expatriates who made Japan their home for a long time and are known to have contributed significantly to understanding Japan is Pico Iyer-an English expatriate born to Indian parents who also chose to live for a prolonged time in Japan and wrote

books such as *A Beginners Guide to Japan: Observations and Provocations* (2019) on it as well.

The reason for citing such examples is to emphasise the relevance of understanding the 'other', which is even more significant today where the geographical lines blur when working with and socially interacting with the other, especially when opportunities for working overseas arise in today's world. In this scenario, travellers, tourists, and fiction writers provide perspectives on Japan, which help us in comprehending a country, a people and her culture. The paper adds to these by analysing the expatriate gaze of an Indian, who has the advantage of living with the insider if it can be called that, using the example of one contemporary work *Orienting an Indian in Japan* by Pallavi Aiyar, while touching upon perspectives on culture, society and people of Japan as covered in the book.

4. *Orienting an Indian in Japan* – about the book

The book *Orienting an Indian in Japan* is a contemporary non-fictional account of an Indian expatriate woman's experience in Japan written by Pallavi Aiyar. The author is well-travelled, having lived in many countries such as the United Kingdom, Indonesia, China, and has written about her experiences in China, where she spent around seven years in a bestselling work titled *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China*.

Aiyar talks about her experiences and observations during her near four-year-long stay, mainly in Tokyo from 2016. Early in the book, she documents her impressions of the place with the following quote:

"In many ways, it was more inscrutable and less familiar than China had been to me before I moved there. In China, there had at least been the fried noodles and chilly chicken beloved to Indians. But encouraging raw fish was not an appetising, or even particularly intelligible, moment for an Indian "(Aiyar, 2021).

Even though she had prior knowledge of J-pop songs, vending machines, Haruki Murakami and had a reading list of many authors such as Soseki and Tanizaki, recommended to her before she left for Japan. She even enrolled on Japanese language classes beforehand. What follows are ten diverse chapters that touch upon her observations, experiences and perceptions of Japan and her understanding of it through witty and interesting anecdotes and some thought-provoking incidents that she shares through the book.

4.1 Reiterating pre-existing notions and breaking stereotypes

When we take any single work of literature, be it fiction or non-fiction, to interpret a country or understand her culture, there is a danger of stereotyping it. One of the most critical aspects of the definition of the word 'Stereotype' as given by Lippmann, is in the expression of 'our' beliefs. The word 'our' refers to an undefined entity of people who collectively think of something similar, thereby stereotyping it. However, it is essential to note that such stereotyping also causes people to think of things the way they do, binding them in a cyclical relationship.

Lippmann argues that the Stereotypes thrive and are based on building consensus, as has been pointed out by Richard Dyer in his article the "Role of Stereotypes", and thereby the 'collectives' of what 'we' think of 'them' are used to build the argument for consensus. However, what is important to note is that the consensus is not real but rather the very stereotypes that help build consensus (Dyer,2002).

If the experience contradicts the stereotype, one of two things happens. If the man is no longer plastic, or if some powerful interest makes it highly inconvenient to rearrange his stereotypes, he poohpoohs the contradiction as an exception that proves the rule, discredits the witness, finds a flaw somewhere, and manages to forget it. However, if he is still curious and open-minded, the novelty is taken into the picture and modified. Sometimes, if the incident is striking enough, and if he has felt a general discomfort with his established scheme, he may be shaken to such an extent as to distrust all accepted ways of looking at life and to expect that usually, a thing will not be what it is generally supposed to be (Lippmann, 2008).

The paper has chosen the book *Orienting an Indian in Japan* with the premise that it provides a new lens for an expatriate to view, understand and experience Japan. The book reveals what may be already known to those who have heard or read about Japan, reiterating some notions about the country while revealing more nuanced aspects based on the author's own experiences and observations.

The book starts with the chapter 'Lost and Found' and talks about how most things that one may leave behind in public transport or even mistakenly lose, such as umbrellas, lunch boxes, or even wallets, are often found back in Japan- a phenomenon rarely possible in most other countries as she mentions. Aiyar talks about the innate trust that people have in one other, which is inculcated from a very young age and cites the example of witnessing a primary school child commute to school by herself on the local train. The safety of neighbourhood convenience stores-*Konbini* and the police posts-*koban*, acting as safe havens for

lost children to wait, of fostering interdependence is reiterated, enabling even small children.

"Over the years, I have concluded that trust bred trust, good deeds encouraged good deeds... It was the result of the normalisation of civic behaviour. This normalisation accounted for the village-like levels of public faith in the urban jungle of one of the world's biggest cities" (Aiyar, 2021).

Interestingly, the chapter glorifies aspects of Japan that may be unique to her. The author is very perceptive of a possible fallout that these facets of Japan may have. She mentions that while the strength in the "collective" may foster interdependence and encourage mutual trust and civic responsibility, it may also result in the suppression of 'idiosyncrasies and spontaneity' amongst people.

Such examples bring out the uniqueness and rarity, if not impossibility, of such things happening anywhere. That, however, intersperses the chapter with examples of how mundane and routine jobs such as opening bank accounts getting a phone or internet connection are somewhat tedious and unexpectedly time taking unlike other countries she had lived in, highlighting a contradiction as far as living with ease was concerned in the highly advanced country. The author sums up the chapter, 'Japan is a blend of first-world societies with an anthropologically complex society.'

4.2 Contradictions within Japanese society, as in any other

The book throws light on contradictions that the author experiences in Japan. One of the first things a foreigner may notice in Japan is how well planned and clean the public spaces are. Spaces and cleanliness are aspects that the author, too, cannot help noticing. She contrasts how Japanese temples are pristine, clean, and calm, while Japanese homes do not mirror the same philosophy. The homes are places where people hoard things in small, constricted spaces, making them *Gomi Beya* (loosely translated as garbage rooms), where the problem worsens with the rigorous implementation of norms for garbage disposal. Minimalism and planned public spaces as against excessive consumerism and hoarding at homes, in other words, are things that bring to light the contradiction in varied spaces in Japan as the author sees it.

The author even dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of hygiene in Japan and how toilets in Japan are those that she has seen which are more advanced than anything she had seen in any part of the world, which is also antithetical to how

these spaces are seen or maintained in India. She thinks the Japanese people excel in making beautiful what is usually not considered 'beautiful spaces' whether it be the precision and detail paid to toilets all over the country or to the utility (man) hole lids that make the utility hole art a piece of aesthetically pleasing thing to look at than just a utilitarian item to cover utility holes. She talks about how cleaning and taking responsibility for one's surroundings is inculcated into their daily regimen right from school.

Even as the book provides exciting perspectives on Japan, it does touch upon some defining features of the country by alluding to notions of Japanese aesthetics, sensitivity to nature and seasons, and artificial things such as vending machines that offer a wide range of examples that showcase Japan for the reader through the author's eyes. The ease of living on a day-to-day basis in Japan because of the many amenities and ease of procuring them is contrasted with the difficulty for a foreigner like her to get a phone or internet connection or even open a bank account owing to the many rules that exist.

She also dedicates a significant number of pages to how Japanese people have engaged in the practice of *Kintsugi*- Japanese art that heals the broken ceramics with gold, a practice that resonated with the author, and she gives the title 'Breaking and healing' to her second chapter. While talking about the various aspects of modern westernised Japan and lifestyle, she also perceives Japan as more Asian than a Western nation despite Japan having modernised infrastructure to match or even surpass any Western Nation. This concerns mental health and the stigma associated with the condition in Asian societies, which she talks about by referring to the social problem of *hikikomori* (social withdrawal).

Towards the end of her stay in Japan, the author experiences the COVID -19 pandemic in Japan at its start and reveals that Japan was perhaps better as a nation with social distancing and masks already in place much before the pandemic started, braced to face the odds of the pandemic than most other nations were. However, she is surprised by the handling of this unexpected turn of events, whether the switch from offline to online education in schools for a few months or work from home policies that exposed the inability to improvise or try new things at short notice. The continued use of *hanko* (stamps engraved with names which are essentially used as signatures for official documents) which needed people to still go to the workplace, which is where they were placed, or of many public schools relying on hard copies of work sent to students through snail mail are examples of this reluctance she cites.

Even as she acknowledges how any country, for that matter even India or China has their contradictions and that no single truth is enough to comprehend them, the fact that she is not overwhelmed by the 'unique Japanese ways' and is perceptive to the many shades of reality that lie therein is significant in shaping her perceptions of Japan, and for not falling for the usual and typical tropes that may be associated with a country.

She summarises her understanding as follows- "It was this contradiction that made it real, not the Orientalist stereotype of a land full of people gazing at the moon, or a humourless dystopia of overworked salarymen, neglected wives and cluttered apartments. It was sometimes both and at times neither, and mostly it was in-between."

4.3 Japan and the Gaijin gaze

The book traverses a path where the author tries to present Japan as seen through the eyes of a foreigner during her stay. While the book's focus is clearly on Japan, what is also significant is the author's self-awareness about her being an Asian, an Indian in Japan and is perceptive of perhaps the Japanese gaze back on her as well.

The chapter 'No Foreigners please, we are Japanese' in the book talks about how Japan tries to maintain its homogeneity and harmony. In the process of doing so, certain sections classes of Japanese society, whether it be foreigners such as Chinese and Korean people, or the Ainu or even *burakumin* (outcastes occupying the lowest level of Japanese social strata) who get side-lined or even discriminated against, are treated differently as the 'other'. Even though *burakumin* has been equal from the legal point of view since the Meiji era, their access to education or engagement in public life is seen to be limited. This aversion to and denial of diversity in Japan for the sake of harmony is perhaps the reason for the discrimination against these classes. Even problems of *Kikokushijo* (returnee children of repatriated families) manifest how the Japanese people are not open to diversity even if one of their own lives long enough in another country and returns.

However, Aiyar's meeting with an Indian politician in Japan makes her rethink her perception and acknowledge that Japan was perhaps finally opening up to diversity and cites examples of how people of mixed Indian descent won a beauty pageant in Japan in recent years, even though some people did not wholeheartedly accept the winner; or the increasing number of foreign employees in Japan. Interestingly, however, the author is not someone who jumps to judge the

Japanese for this selectiveness or bias. Instead, it triggers self-introspection, and the author writes about the class system in India, which makes her more self-aware of how there were cases of discrimination by Indians against their own, based on region, religion, caste, or caste colour.

When talking about language, the author refers to the complexity of the three scripts in the Japanese language, the complexity of counters that change with the kind of object they are used for, and variation in address terms depending on whom one is talking to, besides politeness and the very discreet and meaningful silences that intersperse conversation. Silences and pauses, as she observes, are an integral part of Japanese aesthetics, whether in painting or architecture or even savouring rice wine or Japanese social behaviour. She does persevere in learning the language for nearly a year.

4.4 India and Japan- bridging the differences

While some incidents and experiences make the author aware of differences and similarities between Japan and other countries such as China and India, the author predictably alludes to instruments that have brought the two countries closer over time. Starting with Buddhism, which she talks about, she refers to more recent exports from India which have been welcomed by Japan, i.e., Indian movies.

To cite some of the famous Japanese impressions and Images of India, she mentions monks, movie stars, revolutionaries, and elephants (Indira). Some of the prominent names she mentions are Rajnikanth for movies, Radha Binod Pal as a prominent judge whose favourable judgement for Japan was welcomed and is remembered by many, Rash Behari Bose and the many Indian deities that are still worshipped in Japan.

The one characteristic that is hard to miss for anyone is perhaps the Japanese pursuit of perfection, which is reflected in many facets of life, such as the Japanese work ethic and observed in the making of Japanese meals by the author. While the author contrasts the *Shokunin* (craftsman) culture of Japan with *Jugaad* (making do with) of the Indians, she also rightly points out the similarity between the relation of a *shisho-deshi* (Teacher-disciple) in Japan with the *Guru-shishya Parampara* (tradition of the Guru and disciple) in India. The comparison may be simplistic in that it does not touch upon the very rigorous facets of how Indian people may train, primarily via arts, music, and even to become a professional chef. However, perhaps the author's vision is clouded by how this pursuit of perfection is much more readily perceptible in Japan in every field, including

cooking, and it is possible to witness for an ordinary person than it is in India, perhaps.

5. Conclusion

What can one conclude from analysing one expatriate writing in Japan? As the author herself states,

...the book was ultimately probably as much about me as an observer, my circumstances and predilections, as it was about Japan. It was best to read it as a haiku- a subjective suggestion of a mood, a tantalising glimpse, a truth yes, but only one of many.

The paper attempted to analyse *Orienteering an Indian in Japan*, as a commentary not as much about Japan the country about which the author writes, since no single book can perhaps capture the complexity of a country, but more as an endeavour to signify and assert the significance of the expatriate voice of experience in lending a unique perspective on a country. What is also equally significant for the expatriate herself in her overseas stay is engagement with the 'other', culturally and socially, and to be understood as much as to understand- an aspect of expatriate writing which can be the focus of future research in the area.

As Aiyar's account reveals, the notions and stereotypes formed about a nation are tested, re-tested, remade and ever-changing when experienced over a length of time. Perhaps the one aspect of importance here is the people-to-people interactions and bonds she formed, made possible due to the extended period of her stay in Japan. In Aiyar's case, this is seen in the form of meeting people such as Kunio Nakamura- someone who had been holding workshops on *kintsugi*. He opens her eyes to the philosophy of the art of mending broken ceramics, which touches her at a much deeper level. She happens to meet some more people who become close enough to discuss the problems of online schooling of their children, etc., in other words, mundane problems as a fellow human than as a foreigner. Another aspect that the stay enables her is learning the language to realise the nuances, the complexity of silences, and the multiple scripts, among others ...something that may be more of an impediment only for a tourist who visits the country for a shorter period.

The book is also instrumental in revealing as much about the expat writer- Aiyar herself through her self-reflection of being an Indian, her own culture, finding common ground with Japan at times, while at other times revelling in how unique a race the Japanese were and sometimes also reflecting on one's follies and

strengths, thereby providing a more rounded experience than simply glorifying or abhorring the 'other'. It is also revealed that even when pointing out Japan's uniqueness, she is vigilant to not fall into the trap of orientalising the country as is often done through the Western gaze.

The book concludes with the author mentioning that she feels unqualified to have completely understood the complex nature of a country through her work and uses Tagore's words from *Spirit of Japan* to state,

My stay here has been so short that one may think I have not earned my right to speak to you about anything concerning your country. I feel sure that I shall be told to idealise certain aspects while leaving others unnoticed.

A non-fictional account such as a travelogue or a diary written about one's experiences in another country is undeniably valuable in understanding the perceptions of an outsider, as much as literary works that are more stylised and offer different perspectives. The expatriate experiences then occupy a space that is common to both the literary and the non-literary genres-one where the author is influenced by the literary aspects of writing, as is Aiyar, such as Haiku from which she extensively quotes in the book, while at the same time not allowing them to overshadow her own experience and take on the country. It is a space worthy of exploration, given the number of expatriates from India in Japan and vice-versa. The area has the potential of being explored in much more depth to further the understanding of one another through the ordinary day to day experiences which offer invaluable insights into knowing the 'other' and, in the process, understanding the 'self'.

Acknowledgements-I would like to express my sincere gratitude for this opportunity to contribute a research paper to the editor of the Journal of Japanese Studies- Exploring Multidisciplinary (JJSEM). I am indeed very thankful to the editor and the team of reviewers who have put in their efforts and made the publication of this journal possible, an invaluable contribution to Japanese Studies in South Asia. I am grateful to my university -Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, for making it possible to access digital resources even during the COVID 19 pandemic and making it possible to refer to research papers and books remotely.

References

- Aiyar, Pallavi. (2021). Orienting an Indian in Japan.
- Boerner, Peter. (1975). "National Images and their place in literary Research, Germany as seen by Eighteenth-Century French and English Reading audiences", *Monatshefte*, Vol. 67, No.4 (Winter 1975), published by University of Wisconsin Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30165179>, accessed on 20/09/2011.
- Dyer, Richard. (2002). Introduction, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representations*, Second Edition, Routledge, London and New York, 2002.
- Ilyas, Mohammad. (2018). Expatriate Experience and the fictional World of diaspora, *Journal of Social Studies Educational Research* 9 (1), 106-123
- Lippmann, Walter. (2008). Public Opinion, www.bnnpublishing.com, USA