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Amalgamation of Tradition and Modernity in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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Abstract

William Dalrymple, a celebrated historian and travel writer is in tryst with India so much so that he has written half a dozen books on this "adopted country", ranging from Moguls period in India to the current era when the country is marching towards greater urbanisation and modernity. India has been a constant in Dalrymple's life since his first visit in 1984. India offers him a deep and limitless will of inspiration. *Nine Live:. In Search of the Sacred in Modern India,* his latest travelogue on India, is the result of Dalrymple's journey in and around the country for twenty nine long years. *Nine Lives* delineates the life stories of nine different people he met on the course of his journey and how each one of his characters tries to maintain the balance between the material and the spiritual paths in this modern world. This paper is an attempt to investigate how the distress, dilemmas and difficulties which these nine individuals endure, delineate the vast transformation the Indian society undergoes due to modernity and urbanistaion. This paper will also try to shed a stream of light on the pluralistic religious traditions of India and how the mainstream religions sidelined the marginalized God and Goddesses in India through the life

history all the nine characters.

Keywords: *Nine Lives*, India, modernity, marginalized, religion, tradition, extraordinary

> To thoroughly enjoy touring in India one must have the digestion of an ostrich, the patience of Job, the temper of an angel, the nerves of a veteran and a sailor's capacity for sleep.[1](Walter Del la Mare)

William Dalrymple, a renowned historian and a travel writer seems to possess all these qualities so much so that he does not only travel across India but makes the country his home. He landed first time in Delhi on Jan 26, 1984 and stupendously marveled the country, "I fell in love with this city"[2], Dalrymple admits in an interview. *City of Djinns (1984)* is the first product of Dalrymple's love affair with India, centering on Delhi, ''a city with a bottomless seam of stories'' [3]. After his famous travel book, *City of Djinns*, which made Dalrymple the centerpiece of a fascinating saga of history of Old and New Delhi, *Nine Lives:In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* is a travel book he wrote after a gestation period of fifteen years, though the idea of the book was growing quietly in Dalrymple's mind, in between the publication of his last three books *The Age of Kali*, the *Last Mughal* and the *White Mughals*. With *Nine Lives* he's made a comeback to the sort of travel writing which first made him famous. "I've returned to the old me with *Nine Lives*," he says in an interview with Sahar Adil.[4]

Dalrymple has gained considerable acclamation and fame from his many scholarly works on India and Indian History. For Dalrymple India is the only country in the whole world so rich in her culture, history and religion, that he devoted couples of books on studying Indian History and couples more on studying and conveying his experiences of Indian culture, tradition and religion.

My concern in this paper is to study Dalrymple's acclaimed travel book on India, *Nine Lives. In Search of the Sacred in Modern India,* on the basis of the issues like how authentic is Dalrymple in his portrayal of the nine characters, believers of 'the lesser known faiths and traditions' in India and, how the paced modernity with which India is developing has resulted into erosion of their spiritual faith and aestheticism.

Nine Lives deals with the issues of religion, spirituality and modernity in India by delving deep into the lives of nine people whom Dalrymple met in the course of his journey and travels across India over the past two decades. He travels through the length and breadth of the country to find the "last remnants of India" (xv).[5] If in the *City of Djinns* Dalrymple found confluence of various religions in India and scrutinized Hindu, Muslims, Sikh religion in India, their mythology, and their dogmas, then in *Nine Lives* he tries to map the lives of nine ordinary, spiritually-aware people, "each of whom represent a different religious path" (Introduction ix)[6] in nine chapters. The nine exotic interviews on the diverse aspects of religions were prompted by Dalrymple's desire to investigate the present state of India following a period of great economic and social change.

Religion is central to Indian culture, and its practice can be seen virtually in every aspect of life in the country. Indians boast to have 250 million or so Gods and Goddesses who serve the purpose of satisfying their religious faiths, superstitions and spirituality. *Nine Lives* is based on Dalrymple's journey to different parts of India and exploring these 'marginalized' religions, overshadowed by the main stream religions like Hinduism, Islamism and Christianity. Madhushree Chatterjee writes that *Nine Lives* is a "religious travelogue, a distillation of Dalrymple's twenty- five years of travelling around the country to document the lesser known faiths and traditions that exists in remote corners of India"[7]. It is written in the form of a series of biographies which unraveled the abounding religious heritage of the subcontinent. Dalrymple's style of narration in *Nine Lives* is quite magnificent and simple at the same time. He hears of a character, finds them out, and then tell us of his first meeting with those characters. Then having arranged to meet them again, he takes down their story, and then, says Ruaridh Nicoll "like one of the anthropologist who used to travel the subcontinent recording the epics told by illiterates, he let the stories do the work"[8]. While narrating the tales of these extraordinarily ordinary characters, he streamlines the issues of religion and spirituality in India. He also examines the different levels to which the modernistic currents and the streams of development affect people's religious faith and conduct.

India is a country with diverse, multilayered religious system, cultural

heritage and traditional values. It is traditionally regarded as one of the most spiritual countries on the earth, with its myriad religions, naked gurus (now replaced by technigurus) and colourful rituals. In the course of his long stay in India, Dalrymple met and interviewed about two to three hundred people. Out of these hundreds of people, he shortlisted nine , on the basis of their 'extraordinary life stories', to be a part of his extraordinary work *Nine Lives.* Apart from these nine shortlisted sagas of unspeakable personal and religious hardships and momentous courage and faith, there were more stories that could not become the part of the book but find mention in the introduction. The nine lives that feature as characters in this book are: a Jain nun, a Buddhist monk, a woman born into a community of prostitutes, a South Indian temple dancer, a prison warden from Kerala, a blind Baul musician, a maker of idols, a tantric from Bengal and a singer of Sufi songs. All these shortlisted characters live on the margins of a society which is going under the process of metamorphosis due to modernity.

The book opens with the story of Prasannamataji, a Jain nun from Dharamshala in Sravanabelagol. Her story delves into the fact that she comes from a wealthy family, is young and attractive but gives it all up for a life of asceticism. The process is a painful and prolonged one but she is determined to go through it even if it requires giving up her youth, material and emotional comforts. But what makes it a unique tale of spirituality and human-ness is that despite the strict asceticism of her beliefs, she developed an intense friendship with a sister nun, and following her *sallekhana*, Prasannamati Mataji is also wanting to take her own life. Such emotional attachment is strictly prohibited in Jainism. It is, as Dalrymple says, very strange, austere and in some ways very harsh religion; but that, explained Prasannamati Mataji, is exactly the point. By narrating this tale of austerity Dalrymple left readers with a question to ponder over, "Is abstention the only road to spiritual enlightenment?''

By narrating the story of a Jain nun in the very first chapter, "The Nun's Tale", Dalrymple opens a window on to the practices and traditions of Jainism that are little known in the west and increasingly marginalised in the new modern India, "Unlike Buddhism, the Jain religion never spread beyond India...Today there are only four million Jains left, and these are largely limited to the states for Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and

Karnataka. Outside India, the religion barely exists, and in contrast to Buddhism, is almost unknown in the west"[9].

The book publisher describes the book as 'a modern *Canterbury Tales'*. Dalrymple travelled through the entire country, meeting people from a variety of devotional background and then narrates their unique beliefs and traditions through their own mouths. Like the characters of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dalrymple lets his characters narrate their stories of woe and hardship. Like a good listener, he listens to them patiently and does not ever try to put his own notions and beliefs in their mouth. "I was very interested to look at religion not from a theological point of view or even a devotional point of view", Dalrymple says in an interview with Bron Sibree[10], "but primarily through the prism of an individual's life, to see how religion had diverted, even subverted that person's path in life". In the chapter, "The Dancer of Kannur" he lets Hari Das voice his divine feelings as a *theyyam* dancer and hardships he faced as a well digger/Jail warden.

"The Dancer of Kannur" narrates the story of duality and casteism existent in Hinduism. The protagonist, Hari Das, is the representative sufferer of casteism. For Hari *theyyam* is a tool of social empowerment which has improved the conditions of the lower castes but the reality is that the upper class Namboodris who pay their respect to the *theyyam* artist during the performance remain casteist outside it. He narrates that during the *Theyyam* seasons even the Brahmins would touch his feet and seek his blessings, but when he isn't performing *Theyyam*, they are resolute in their caste bigotry, and refuse to mix with him or eat with him. By narrating the story of Hari Das, who's living a dual life of a *theyyam* dancer and a well digger/jail warden, Dalrymple accentuates the wide spread dual mentality that exists in the name of religion.

Caste system is not the only hardship many *theyyam* dancers like Hari Das undergo, modernity and the stream of development is also causing a big harm to this old age traditional dance form. Hari Das is one of the most celebrated and articulated *theyyam* dancers from Kannur in northern Kerala, following the trend of the family: "*Theyyam* is in my blood, because although I never lived with my father, I always wanted to be a *theyyam* artist like him,"[11] (43), but now he is uncertain whether this art will survive the

modern education system.

Most of the characters in *Nine Lives* are equally worried about the fading existence of the traditional art form or the religion they follow as a legacy, but which is now losing its influence in this modern and the fast changing world. "What changes and what remains the same?" is what goes on in the mind of these characters.

Each character narrates not only an unexaggerated tale of unspeakable personal/religious traumas they face but also the momentous courage and faith which led them to survive all. In the chapter, entitled, "The Daughters of Yellamma" Dalrymple reconstructs the hardships, sadness and distresses the sex workers, the *'devadasis',* who called themselves 'Daughters of Yellamma' face because of their profession as prostitutes. Dalrymple chooses Rani Bai, a beautiful woman in her late thirties, and mother of two daughters (who were, also in the same profession, and died of AIDS) and a son, to narrate the tale of their fate as *devadasis*.

By narrating the story of Rani Bai, who's been a *devadasi* since the age of six, Dalrymple brings to our attention the change in the status which this profession has undergone because of the so called modernism. The *devadasis* today do not enjoy the revered status they had several centuries ago. Earlier they were regarded as honourable professionals, entering the service of God. But, it's sad the services that they render have now reduced them to the level of prostitutes with no honour in the society, which they had once enjoyed.

Religion is often collective in nature, but the characters of *Nine Lives* are looking for their individual release too. Dalrymple in the introduction to the book called *Nine Lives* "a collection of linked non- fiction short stories, with each life representing a different form of devotion, or a different religious path" [12](xv). But all the stories are tied together with a common thread of faith in religion and the resistance against the transformation due to modernity. "Each life is intended to act as a keyhole into the way that each specific religious vocation has been caught and transformed in the vortex of India's metamorphosis during this rapid period of transition, while revealing the extraordinary persistence of faith and ritual in a fast changing

landscape," [13]says Dalrymple in the Introduction.

The story of Tashi Passang, a Buddhist monk in Tibet, unveils the modernity in a more brutal manner and accounts Passang's persistent beliefs in Buddhism above all the sufferings, pains and adversities he had faced. Passang was a young monk when China invaded Tibet in the 1950's. When his monastery came under pressure from the Chinese, he decided to take up arms to defend the Buddhist faith. Passang left Tibet with the Dalai Lama in a trek across the mountain tops. He joined the Indian army to fight the Chinese the specific act his faith allowed – and found himself in an astonishingly unjust turn of events, and ends up fighting Pakistanis in Bangladesh war instead. Following that life, he crawled back to the monastic life, seeking succor for his troubled soul. When Dalrymple met him and interviewed him, he was living a life of solitude in exile in Indian Himalayas, printing the prayer flags in an attempt to atone for the violence he committed after he joined the resistance: "As a part of my penance and reparation for what I have done, I have made it a point that every single flag should be perfect, that every word should be correct and legible"[14] (172) admits Tashi Passang. His concluding words sum up his uncompromising belief in Buddhism, "In my heart I never really gave up my vows. I was always a monk in my heart it was just that sometimes my duty led elsewhere" (172). His story has forced us to change the way we think about devotion.

This travel book is also an attempt, on the part of the author, to offer an insight into the pagan cultures and marginalized religious traditions popular in the different corners of the sub-continent. He says, "In Hinduism, the small village goddesses, the fringe Tantric cult with their blood sacrifices, the regional variants of national epics, these are the things dying out. The things that are gaining around in the new urban centers are these mainstream national gods like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna,"[15] (Introduction xvi). In an interview, with Madhushree Chattrejee, Dalrymple talks about how these local gods and faiths are dying out and how the once popular pagan faiths of Assam, Bengal and Kerela have been marginalised by the overwhelming 'Ram-ification' (domination by Ram) of the Hindu mainstream vaishnavism. "The local 'devatas' are falling off the map", he adds (*IANS*).[16] *Nine Lives*, thus, could be read as Dalrymple's homage to these dying local gods, their

faith and beliefs.

The story, "The Lady Twilight", narrates one such tale of marginalization where old age pagan culture of *tantra* and processions are persistently under political threat and where people are persuaded to reject faith healers, embrace modernity and return to more mainstream and less superstitious forms of Hinduism. The protagonist of the story is Manisha Ma, a Bengali woman who takes refuge at Tarapith, 'the abode of the Devi's Third Eye' and a Hindu cremation ground renowned as a centre of Tantra or the dark arts. In the same chapter, Dalrymple also documents the story of Tapan Sadhu, Manisha's dreadlocked partner, who, for the sake of his two foreign settled sons and their status, gave up his power of Black Magic.

It is because of rise in reformation movements and Vaishnavite *bhakti* cults of Lord Krishna and especially Lord Rama, to the extent that they eclipsed many other more traditional and popular forms of local devotion involving Devi cults and blood sacrifices, which were regarded as something uncivilized, superstitious and against modernity by the urban and often Western- educated reformers. But Dalrymple had not used, even once, the word 'superstition' for the age old rituals and beliefs. To him superstition is a very 'modern urban word' and India is not at all about superstitious people. "All the rituals are re-invented new traditions and an interesting revival of religion" firmly says Dalrymple[17]. To support his view on mingling of modernity and tradition, Dalrymple, in the introduction of the book , narrates a story of an ash smeared sadhu, who, he later discovers had been a sales manager in Mumbai with Masters Degree in Business Administration before he decided to renounce the world. Though, before this incidental meeting, Dalrymple had always assumed that most of the Holy men in India were from traditional village backgrounds and were motivated by a blind and simple faith but traveling around the country has completely changed his perspective of looking at Indian religion and traditions.

"The contrast between the ethereal and the worldly, the old and the new, is at the heart of this latest travel book" says Jason Webster[18]. The rapidly growing modernity is effecting and replacing the old thoughts and beliefs. "The India of sadhus and holy shrines is colliding with Western modernity" says Dalrymple[19](xii).

The chapter on the 'ecstatic red fairy' of the Sehwan Sharif in Pakistan recounts Lal Pari Mastani's story of great hardship, forced immigration—which led her to leave home and family behind, and taking refuge in various places across the sub-continent. It was while enjoying the *dhammal*, a devotional dance to the saint, at Sehwan Sharif that Dalrymple first saw Lal Pari among the transported women, "dancing with an enormous wooden club held aloft in her right hand"[20] (119). The life of Lal Pari Mastani, a lady fakir at a Sindhi dargah in Pakistan reflects the harsh realities the lower class people and local culture face.

In India coexistence of science and religion and, modernity and tradition is a commonality. *Nine Lives* amply shows this cohesion between modern and traditional prospects in religion. Dalrymple believes that modernity has brought a revival in religions in India. Lewis Jones reviewed *Nine Lives* as a travel book which "beautifully illustrates the relationship between tradition and modernity in India"[21]. Much has been written about how India is moving forward and transforming itself at the most incredible rate. But there is other side of this development. It is a picture of different India indeed, the real India. It is the picture of this India that Dalrymple has portrayed in the nine chapters of the *Nine Lives*.

Hence, *Nine Lives* is an attempt to seek the answer to the question, "how earthquake of modernity has affected the diverse religious traditions of the South Asia?" and explores "how the people who live out these rich traditions have coped with living in the eye of the storm of modernity"[22] (Introduction xii).

The chapter, "The Singer of Epics" illustrates the combat between ancient and modern that presents a clear picture of this part of the world today. The chapter narrates the story of Mohan Bhopa, one of the last bards of "The Epic of Pabuji" a 4,000 line poem that Mohan knows by heart and that "takes a full five nights of eight- hour, dusk till dawn performances to unfold" (232). The epic is performed in front of a Phad, a long sheet on which scenes depicting the life and adventures of Pabuji are painted. The Phad is considered a divine manifestation similar to the images of Gods – and the bhopa is assumed to have healing powers. The tradition of oral story telling is all but forgotten in the world and this remains one of the last

few remnants of this art.

Dalrymple makes an interesting point of how modernity and education is affecting this tradition. "Literacy is actually killing off this tradition," Dalrymple states, "only the illiterate seem to have the brain capacity to absorb and remember these magnificent relics of oral history" (92)[23]. Hence, with modernity, this fragile art may disappear totally in few years now if it isn't preserved. This story is an emotive tale of how an individual found, or inherited, a path to spiritual dedication and how he served as a medium between the village god and the villagers. Dalrymple has a sensitive eye for his characters. In an interview with Garima Dutt, he talks about the fragility of the traditions but "none more so than the oral tradition of remembering epics of Pabuji", he bemoaned[24].

On his travels to Kenduli near Shantiniketan, Dalrymple saw a gathering of Bauls who meet every year in January, descending into a cloud of singing and dancing throughout the night. This last story, "The Song of the Blind Minstrel" is again set in Bengal on the banks of Ajoy River. This story unfolds primarily through the eyes of a blind minstrel, Kannai Das Baul who along with this group, keeps walking along in search of inner peace. The Bauls live a wild and abandoned life and believe that God lives in the present moment , in the seeker of the truth and each man must find his own way.

Therefore, each life Dalrymple depicts in this book is much like a short story. Each life represents a different form of devotion, and a different religious path. But "The common thread is how diverse forms of Indian spirituality are changing in a modern world", says Amy Yee[25].

Dalrymple believes that country is marching towards greater development and modernity. But at the same time he is equally aware of the fragility of the unevenness of this boom. In an article in *Newstatesman*, Dalrymple expresses his grief on this unevenness of development and modernity. He says, "...The truth is that much of India remains completely untouched by this astonishing boom. The grandchildren of Brahmin temple may be designing space rockets, but the grandchildren of the untouchables are still untouchables, and the grandchildren of the two- third of Indians

who derive their income from agriculture remain, by and large, farmers...and the country remains as fascinating unpredictable as ever."[26]

The chapter, named, "The Maker of Idols", is about how the age of computers is overtaking the age of bronze casters. In this chapter Dalrymple narrates the story of Srikanda Stapathy from Swamimalai, near Tanjore in Tamil Nadu, an idol maker, the thirty-fifth of a long line of sculptors going back to the legendary Chola bronze makers. Srikanda regarded creating gods as one of the holiest callings in India but now has to reconcile himself to a son who only wants to study computer engineering in Bangalore. Srikanda doubts whether his son, who is interested in computers, would carry forward the family tradition. Hence, it becomes difficult for a father to persuade his son to opt for family lineage of casting bronze idols above the career in computers.

Dalrymple is an 'interviewer and transmitter of stories' in *Nine Lives.* "Like best kind of traveller," says Pankaj Mishra, "Dalrymple resists judgment and generalization. And, occasionally, the unobtrusive narrative voice is also paired with a more open inclusion of Dalrymple the traveller- now and then; he slips in his aim of staying in"[27]. And that is just a mechanism intended to avoid the ''pitfalls that you can fall into when you have a Westerner speaking about Indian religion''[28] clarifies Dalrymple in an interview taken by Shreevatsa Nevatia, giving the reason for using this kind of narrative technique. Tabish Khair in *Hindustan Times* opines that "it is difficult for anyone, especially a 'Westerner' to write about Indian religious traditions without slithering into Orientalist, New Ageist or Hindutva tropes. It is even more risky to narrate Indian religious beliefs against the template of today's India, which itself a half- mythical being in the throes of constant change"[29]. Khair credits Dalrymple for his task done well and continues, "Dalrymple has managed to do so, and with aplomb."

Hence to conclude, all the stories in *Nine Lives* are poignant and magical, weave together travel, history and legend, and have established William Dalrymple as the greatest travel writer of his generation.

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