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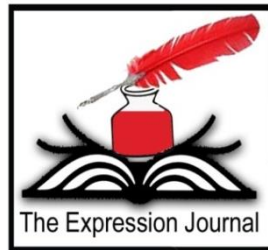
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Undercurrents of Religion and Spirituality in Modern India: Analyzing the Narratives of the Other Indians in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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Abstract

Twenty-first century Indian society is facing the paradox of co-existence of the mainstream progressive Indians heading towards modernization and a set of marginalized and downtrodden Indians following the ritualistic religious traditions as the only way to achieve recognition, peace and solace in the society that is consciously de-recognizing their existence. This set of people makes the 'Other Indians' who choose the untrodden paths of bizarre practices for their spiritual upliftment. William Dalrymple, a well-acclaimed author of non-fiction works on history and travel, brings to light the untold stories of the 'other' India through his seventh fictional work 'Nine Lives' (In Search of the Sacred in Modern India). He narrates the stories of the lives of nine downtrodden or marginalized people who have been making non-mainstream life choices. The present paper tries to explore how the nine lives are depicted as a contrast to the modern Indians who are blindfolded to these 'other Indians' in their own society. The researcher tries to explore how the writer tries to rediscover the regressive undercurrents of the new modern India trying to emerge as a technocratic and progressive society in the global world.

Keywords

William Dalrymple, *Nine Lives*, Marginalized, Religion, Spirituality, Modernization, Downtrodden Indians, Religious Traditions.

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Undercurrents of Religion and Spirituality in Modern India: Analyzing the Narratives of the Other Indians in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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Twenty-first-century Indian society is facing the paradox of the co-existence of the mainstream religious Indians heading towards modernization and a set of marginalized and downtrodden Indians following the esoteric ritualistic religious traditions as the only way to achieve recognition, peace and solace in the society that is consciously de-recognizing their existence. This set of people makes the 'Other Indians' who choose the untrodden paths of bizarre practices for their spiritual, social, or economic upliftment.

William Dalrymple, a well-acclaimed author of non-fiction works on history and travel, brings to light the untold stories of the 'Other' India through his seventh fictional work *Nine Lives (In Search of the Sacred in Modern India)*. Elaborating on the concept of the 'Other', "the other is often seen as an individual who the group perceives as being different in some fundamental way. Here, any stranger becomes the Other and the group as the One. The group then sees itself as the norm and judges those who do not meet the norms as the Other. Further, the Other is always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. They have few or no legal rights and they may be characterised as less intelligent or as immoral or as sub-human" (*The Other*)

Dalrymple narrates the stories of the lives of nine downtrodden or marginalized people who can be characterised as the 'Other' as they have been making non-mainstream life choices by force or by will. The present paper tries to explore how the nine lives are depicted as a contrast to the mainstream Indians who are blindfolded to these 'other Indians' in their own society. The researcher tries to explore how the writer tries to rediscover the regressive undercurrents of the new modern India trying to emerge as a technocratic and progressive society in the global world.

During his journey across India for almost 25 years through various regions, the writer comes across these characters who are leading unusual religio-spiritual life different from the mainstream Indians. Through his descriptive narrative, as a historian, he documents and chronicles the lives in a journalistic style. These stories of

the mystical 'Other' in India are presented through a Western eye; however, even for an Indian, they are fascinating yet intriguing to read.

The narrative begins with a Jain Nun living a nomadic life in Sravanabelagola. It further moves on to Theyyam dancers of Kerala and further traverses through the devdasis in Karnataka, Bards of Rajasthan, Sufi mystic women in Sindh, a Tibetan monk at Dharamsala, an idol maker in Swamimalai and the Tantric woman & blind Minstrels in Bengal. Even in this era of modernization, all these characters follow the less-trodden religious or socio-cultural traditions from ancient Indian culture. All of them are dedicated to the vocation they have chosen, sometimes by inheritance and sometimes by inclination. The Theyyam dancers, the singing bards of ancient epic, and the idol makers are following their family tradition whereas the Jain nun, the Tibetan monk, and the tantric woman have chosen their paths knowingly, but the Devdasis are pushed into the temple service and then into the sex trade in the name of a sacred calling. Through this paper, the researcher explores how these characters, despite being victims of religious beliefs, feel not victimised and live a fulfilling life instead.

In the first story *The Nuns Tale*, a Jain nun, Prasannamati Mataji, narrates her journey as an ascetic. She is a practitioner of a saintly austere life tradition of Jainism, which included ascetic practices such as giving up attachments and moving from one place to another constantly to avoid making bonds with anyone. They are not allowed to incur any act of violence consciously or unconsciously; even while eating, they need to take care not to hurt any living being. For almost 20 years, Mataji abstained from all worldly emotions created through attachment and bond with people and travelled with her only companion, exemplifying austerity and faith. However, in due course, Mataji develops a strong bond with her companion but later feels guilty for forming an attachment to her. She narrates her journey to nun-hood and claims it to be a spiritual inner calling that made her voluntarily give up worldly possessions and follow asceticism. She still struggles with the loss of her companion, who, being mortally ill, follows *Sallekhana*, the ritual act of starving oneself to death (Somasundaram et al. 472). Mataji feels guilty for defying the principle of non-attachment and considers it a violation of the vows of a Jain nun. And now she is thinking of following the same path of starving to death, though she has good health and a good life ahead for many years as she is still young.

Her story reveals the contradiction of Mataji's feeling guilty for her emotions and planning to end her own life by way of suicide as a kind of violence on herself and, in a way, defying the Jain principle of non-violence. She is not accepting her human side and is not allowing her emotions to flow naturally. By suppressing her emotions, she is, in a way, being a victim of self-violence. Mataji is tormented with the guilt of attachment for her companion. To release herself of the guilt, she too decides to follow the same suicidal path, though she is absolutely healthy and young.

In the story *The Dancer of Kannur* Hari Das from Kerala, a Dalit Hindu is a part-time-Theyyam dancer and part-time labourer digging wells and also a warden of prison. During the festival time, as a Theyyam dancer, he plays the role of a God, and after entering the costume of God, he feels possessed by the God he is representing. He goes into a trance and is regarded as the real God for the moment and is revered by people who go and ask for his advice or blessings. Otherwise treated as an untouchable, during Theyyam he becomes the incarnation of the God Vishnu. He cannot assimilate the

fact that Brahmins wash his feet during Theyyam, and on all other days, he does not even get normal human treatment. Strangely enough, as a Dalit, despite digging the well himself, he is forbidden from drawing and drinking water from the same river. This indicates how social mobility is only a temporary illusion for the downtrodden, and their transforming into a divine image has no effect on their status or their image. Interestingly, the performances of Theyyam contain elements of social critique, and the rituals can be a way to challenge the existing social system based on inequality deeply ingrained in Indian minds.

The third story *The Daughter of Yellamma*, is about Rani Bai, a devadasi (literally God's female servant or a young girl dedicated to God by her family). Rani Bai is dedicated by her parents to Goddess Yellamma as a child, following the tradition. In reality, more than temple service, she is pushed into the sex trade. It is not considered illegal to be a Devdasi in the sex trade; rather, it is the only profession available to them to make their living as they are not allowed any access to mainstream society. Rani bai, as a six-year-old child, when unknowingly pushed into this, finally gets used to life considering it as a service to the Goddess and also as a source of income. This has been the fate to many such unfortunate girls who willingly succumb to the tradition to get some recognition and feel elevated with their Yellamma status. Finally, most of them battle AIDS and meet an unfortunate end. These women are doubly othered, first as women and secondly as devdasis. They are the victims of the tradition that makes the society worship them for being dedicated to the Goddess but at the same time not to offer them normal social life and accept them as a part of society.

In the next story, *The Singer of Epics*, Dalrymple describes Mohan Bhopa, a singer of epics. He inherits the tradition of singing a great ancient Rajasthani poetry 'Epic of Pabuji'. Mohan Bhopa and his wife Batasi are the last in their tradition of singing this 600-year-old epic. He sings the local and not the canonical version of the epic for five nights of eight hours each by displaying a cloth painting of their God-hero. Pabuji, in their culture, is perceived not just as a poetic character but as a God. He is supposed to have healing properties and hence was worshipped by the villagers for their welfare. Mohan, through his singing, feels closer to God and privileged in the company of God. Since people worship him, considering him to have divine properties of healing, he enjoys this recognition given to him by society.

Further in the next story *The Red Fairy*, Dalrymple is fascinated by the life of Lal Peri Mastani, a Sufi Fakir or Pasang. This Islamic mystic is originally a refugee woman migrant who is uprooted from Bihar due to ethnic and religious persecution, travelled to Bangladesh and Pakistan to finally land at one of the Sufi shrines in India as a female Sufi. Her shrine is a sanctuary to both Hindus and Muslims, hence disliked by the fundamentalist Mullahs who dream of destroying the Sufi shrines once Islamic rule is paramount. Her character symbolises an all-embracing and liberal perspective of the Sufis who are endangered due to the radical ideology of the Wahhabi Muslim sect. Dalrymple observes, 'the complex three-cornered relationship between Hinduism, Sufi Islam and Islamic orthodoxy – in which the determination of the Sufi's to absorb Hindu ideas and practices has always clashed with the wish of the orthodox to root them out as dangerous and deviant impurities.' (Dalrymple, 135)

The Monk's Tale, Dalrymple relates the story of Tashi Passang, a Buddhist Tibetan monk who now resides in Dharamsala. He once had to renounce his vows of monkhood

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and take up arms during the Chinese invasion of Tibet to defend Tibet and Buddhism. However, after realising the futility of violence as a Buddhist, he returns to his life as a monk and gets involved in making prayer flags as penance for his sinful past. Yet he felt that the hatred he bred towards the Chinese for torturing Tibet and wanting to destroy Buddhism was a sin on his part as a Buddhist Monk. However, his transition from being a monk to being a soldier and back to monkhood is the real sacred journey that helped him to overcome his hatred and get purgation of his sin.

In the story *The Maker of Idols*, Dalrymple describes Srikanda Stpathy, a sculptor of bronze idols of Hindu gods in a village in Tamilnadu. He follows the norms written in the scriptures of sculpture and idol-making in the seven-hundred-year-old tradition of craftsmanship tracing back to the Chola Empire. He lives a life of an ascetic when he is in the process of making an idol. Once the idol is handed over to the temple, he becomes alienated from it and feels more like a worshipper than a maker of the idol. For him, the making of the idol is a spiritual, divine process, and the modern-day cheap imitations have been a threat to their age-old trade. He is also bound by the faith that his art needs to be inherited by his inheritors and feels sad for his son wanting to be an IT engineer.

In the story *The Lady Twilight*, a tantric and mystic woman, Manisha Ma Bhairavi, is a worshipper of the demonic Goddess Tara. She lives in the cemetery and practices tantra by using skulls for rituals, as well as animal sacrifice and tantric rites. Though she appears to be a woman of strength as she lives in the cremation ground, in her life earlier, she has been a victim of domestic violence that resulted in her fits of epilepsy and the deserting of her violent husband and even her small children. She finds refuge in the wandering holy men (Sadhus) and finally lands up taking care of other social outcasts. She is a seeker of love as she tells Dalrymple, 'It is here in this place of death, amid the skulls and bones and smoking funeral pyres, that we have found love.' (Dalrymple 227). Her story brings forth the victimhood of women and their longing for devotion and love.

In the last chapter, *The Song of the Blind Minstrel*, the ninth life he describes is that of a blind mystic minstrel, Kannai. He is a wandering singing minstrel who follows the Baul tradition in West Bengal. The Bauls (bards or Minstrels) believe in reaching God by way of their expression through singing and dancing (*Music, Joy, and Divine Delight*). They usually abandon their families, and so did this Bard Kannai who is blind and is accompanied by Debdas. They believe that God resides not in temples, idols, or rituals but in the joy of everyday life.

While analysing the major hypothesis of this paper, one finds that even in 21st-century modern India, the undercurrents of religion and spirituality are still very predominant in the lives of the common Indians. In the present times, when the world is becoming ever more conformist and non-liberal, Indian society represents a diverse world of multiple sects and practices which are the survivors of the mystical and mythical world of the 'Other' that includes the ascetics, yogis, singers and dancers, mystics, devdasis and tantric. Most of them are outcasts from society, and they get to fill in the void of social recognition through the vocations they follow or the religious and spiritual practices they adhere to. Manisha, the tantric, Prasannamtimataji and the Tibetan monk find it divine to follow their ritualistic paths and try to attain spiritual salvation through their ways.

The characters are from the present social and cultural context; however, their present has tied them to their complex past, which has percolated deep into their existing life of faith. The Baul singers and the Theyyam dancers carry with them the deep-rooted past through their singing and dancing. They use their art to manifest their inner pain for validation and recognition of their existence. These so-called 'Others' of Indian society are always on the fringes of society and hence marginalised. These religious men and women follow alternative paths and forms of devotion, and they are caught up in the web of conventional vocations imposed upon them and are unable to go beyond or even challenge them.

Viewing the kaleidoscope of India, one can realise its multi-colour view of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural, and multi-lingual populace walking hand in hand with science and religion, and the different religious inclinations of the majority of the Indians are its unique characteristics. Religion, on one hand, has the power to transform the lives of people and, on the other, has made people trapped in age-old rituals pushing them to do odd things. It can never be expected for people blindfolded in religious superstitions to think critically and to follow spiritual persuasion.

Through the subtitle of this book, 'In Search of the Sacred in Modern India', the writer shows how the religious rituals, both sacred and esoteric, intermingling with the superstitious past display the inherent contradictions in the cultural practices. These religious rituals, though considered superstitious, are widely accepted by most Indians. It is the result of the conformist and non-questioning culture imbibed in the minds of the Indians for ages. Many still go to the sadhus to seek blessings for some of their ventures or to the tantric to fulfil some of their seemingly impossible desires. Politicians go to sacrifice goats to the goddess Tara to win political elections. (Dalrymple 219)

The writer, being British, observes with awe the esoteric and abstruse life of these 'Other' Indians. It is distressful not just for the writer but also for the readers to read through the narration that unveils the sacred yet suffering lives of the 'Other' in different religious sects in India. Most of the characters have accepted their life by choice or by no choice, yet they claim to achieve spiritual attainment through their ways. Though they are suffering, they believe it leads to ultimate happiness or ecstasy through spiritual revelation. The writer is curious to know whether it is a real joy or is it something they are conditioned to feel and think of as the end result of their suffering.

To sum up, the researcher finds the crux of Indian spirituality in the words of the idol maker Srikanda when he says 'God is inside us,' he said. 'It is from our hearts, our minds and our hands that god is formed and revealed in the form of a metal statue.' (Dalrymple 179).

The entire thread of the narrative moves along with the themes of spirituality in modern times, the complexity of the synthetic culture of India and the rituals and traditions as a way to endow social recognition to the 'Other' in Indian society. The marginal class of Devdasis, nuns, monks, bards, minstrels, fakirs, sadhus, mystics and tantric all represent the divinity in mortal humans. The book, therefore, becomes a documentation of the nine sacred lives and their respective traditions and explores the religious and spiritual undercurrents of modern India.

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