

Examining the Stereotypes of Religion and Faith: A Reading of William Dalrymple's

Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India

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Abstract

Each time when history is re-written, a new representation arises because of the constant connection and sometimes conflict between the past and the present which is also called historiography. This new interpretation is a reflection of re-analysis of past records in the light of some newly emerged social, political, religious and economic factors and fragmentary recollections of the past and responses to the present. William Dalrymple's travel writing *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009), which has been acclaimed as one of the exceptional works in the field of travel literature. This is done by attempting to narrate a number of Indian tales of religious and cultural nature complemented by modern responses to them. This book addresses some principal issues like class, ethnic origin and gender in the situations found in contemporary and historical India through experiences of nine characters. This paper aims to throw light on these aspects of the book and, by extension, examines Dalrymple's understanding of multi-dimensional nature of faith and religion in India. It aims to explore as to whether Dalrymple somehow maintains the stereotypes held by the foreigners on the concept of religion and faith in India or by curious and conscious examination renders an unbiased, objective and unprejudiced account of the same, through his travelogue.

Keywords: Travel, culture, religion, stereotypes, India

William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* is a travel book that traces the trajectory of the lives of nine men and women across the Indian subcontinent. Their voyage is fascinating not because of the fact as to how travel transforms ordinary people into unforgettable characters but also because of the way it addresses certain cultural issues. Despite Dalrymple's clearly stated goal of simply retelling the stories of nine entirely different people without bias and prejudice, there is an unintentional involvement of the narrator/author with various socio-economic/religious issues such as class, gender, caste, religion, and political systems.

Representation is a process of representing “an artistic likeness or image,” “a statement or account made to influence opinion or action” (Representation, n.d.). Representations are not neutral; they reflect individual and social judgments about folks, tribes, classes and situations etc. There is no denying the fact that Dalrymple's book is an example of representation through which he attempts to give recognition to the under-privileged people of Indian society by forging a meaningful dialogue with them. This is aimed at providing them a platform to record their individual stories, which paves way for examining various prejudices, conceptions and assumptions about India and its various socio-cultural values.

Going by English Oxford Dictionary and Merriam Webster, the definition of stereotype is a “widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing” (Stereotype, n.d.), “is most frequently now employed to refer to an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic” (Stereotype, n.d.). Unintentional racism, prejudices, stereotyping and sexism are some of those common ways which are used in one way or the other to describe people's views toward others. Prejudice emphasizes these biases, which are the outcome of judgment in social perception.

In Dalrymple's work, all but two out of nine men and women are residents of India. However, these two non-residents of India have some connection with India, as one was born in India but resides in Sindh area of Pakistan and the other was born and brought up in Tibet but resided in India for years. These nine persons include a Sufi Fakir (who literally has disowned the world), a Jain nun (who abandoned her family and sacrificed joys of material life to become one), a devadasi (God's servant), a theyyam dancer (sometimes a deity of God, sometimes a poor, untouchable Dalit), a bhopa (a singer and healer), a Buddhist monk, an idol craftsman, a tantric and a Baul-singer; all of them narrating their life stories in detailed manner. Dalrymple's eagerness and quest to seek the sacred amidst multiplicity and diversity of rapidly changing Indian society, inclines him to weave these personal life stories in one thread, his main focus remaining on people who are spiritually oriented. Interestingly, in India, such struggles and life stories can be easily found in the societies of underprivileged people. The caste system of Hinduism, a system of class division, divides Hindus into many subcategories, even these subcategories also have their own further sub-divisions. Having originated as a well-meaning system of structuring society according to segregation of various occupations, this system has unfortunately degenerated into a repressive, racist and discriminatory one in the postmodern times.

Despite his best efforts to avoid any subconscious biases while recounting these personal stories, the writer fails to keep aside his prejudices as his narration is largely an outcome of his perceptions. While reproducing background of each case, his viewpoint is that of one who is interested in interweaving the common threads of the tales. He portrays India as a beautifully diverse country in terms of culture and traditions, but at the same time portrays her "conservative, socially oppressive and rigidly hierarchical" (Dalrymple 2009).

Dalrymple is not an exception as in most of such tales of a multi-cultural country narrated by a foreigner, there is an irresistible tendency to be swayed by one's prejudices and perceptions. He also seems to be validating a pattern of stereotyping when he highlights some aspects of India's culture that look not only self-contradictory but also nonsensical and intriguing to them. Building his opinion on the basis of his response to the tales of nine characters, he finds India's religious and cultural values and beliefs fascinating as well as conservative. One feels like agreeing to Melanie K. Smith observations that even tourism contributes, directly and indirectly, to strengthening of neo-colonialism. She conveys that tourism is "dominated by Western developed nations, rendering host nations dependent and subservient to its needs" (Smith 2009). And such travel writings, of course, tend to reinforce such prejudices about the host nations, amongst the potential tourists from foreign soils. In majority of these life stories, social and class stereotypes play a pivotal part. For example, the life stories of Prasannamati Mataji, the Digambara clad and Lal Peri depend on firm religious beliefs and their search for the divine. Some like Bhopa singers, Idol makers of Chola and the Devadasis, live stringently, thriving on basic food and abstaining themselves from normal pleasures of life because of their self-inflicted obligation to the austerity of spiritual world of divine. Some like Hari Das just want to be respected and accepted in their lives, so for them, belief and holy devotion is seen as a means to that goal of acceptance in the society that they might not otherwise acquire in their ordinary activities.

Hari Das, being a Dalit, is maltreated by upper caste, he digs wells and serves as a weekend guard in jail for sustaining his family. However, ironically, during the golden months of the year from December till February, he is nothing less than a God himself as a Theyyam Dancer. Theyyam is a religious traditional dance style from Kerala's Malabar region that blends dance, mime, music and embodies the foundations

of old tribal civilizations that valued the worship of gods and ancestors. The traditional dance is not only shockingly fascinating to witness but also intriguing because the age old conventional roles of the social structures are flipped during this three-month period wherein Hari Das is worshipped, revered and also feared as the lord he embodies as a theyyam dancer. This event is organised in front of minor shrines, from twilight to dawn. Dalrymple points to the perception of caste system and the practices of caste discrimination through Hari Das's life story. He fails to see any logic in people unquestioningly following an incomprehensible caste system in which the same person is sometimes treated as untouchable and other times as God as per convenience of the upper caste people. An extract from Hari Das's narration encapsulates this intriguing aspect of our culture: "Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Namboodiri Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet." (Dalrymple 2009).

Rani Bai's story is replete with stereotypes of sexism, patriarchal beliefs, curse of poverty and class inequalities. She is a devadasi, which means she is vowed to serve the deity or temple throughout her life. Unfortunately in reality she and many other devadasis like her are unjustly subjected to maltreatment and exploitation by the patriarchal society even in 21st century. For acquiring the status of a devadasi, girls have to go through a religious ceremony in which parents sacrifice their young daughters by marrying them off to a temple or God (mostly to a female deity of that temple). The age-old practice still continues in some Southern parts of India in spite of having been officially prohibited since 1988. Having originally in some sincerely followed religious ideas and values in ancient times, in present it has become a subtle tool of sexual exploitation of female children and women. Devadasis were once regarded as figures of piety, spiritual strength and moral integrity on account of their unflinching love for God and immense knowledge of various art forms. They were glorified and patronized by aristocrats and kings. But once British colonial rule stripped away they became

nothing more than sex slaves/prostitutes. It is really shocking and painful to know that many of them die because of unwanted pregnancies and communicable diseases. Now this structure centred around the devadasis has been reduced to a social evil feeding on the maltreatment and sexual abuse of young girls and women. From Rani Bai's story in the book, the readers get to know that her parents sacrificed and devoted her to Goddess Yellama of one of the temples as they could not afford to raise and marry her. After having been sold in an open market, she is offered a job in Mumbai, but once again sold to a brothel there. Because of its deep link with gender, money, caste, religion and illness, her tragedy continues. And yet she has no option but to sell both of her daughters as devadasis to the temple who are now both dead because of AIDS and she is left all alone unwillingly perpetuating this vicious cycle. Asa traveller-cum-writer Dalrymple is shocked after listening to the tale of Rani Bai and gets perplexed at the pseudo-religious practices prevailing in India.

Mohan Bhopa is a nomad from the Nayak caste, and is at the bottom of the hierarchy of the caste system. He and his wife recite the 4000-line epic of Pabuji, the local mythological hero in different places from time to time. Just like Hari Das, the Theyyam Dancer, Mohan Bhopa's work also allows him a fair salary and also recognition and respect which otherwise he would not have had if he has pursued any other line of work. The focus in the story is entirely on his caste and social rank. It is demonstrated unflatteringly that even the members of Nayak clan die because of different reasons like curse of poverty, lack of awareness and inaccessibility to relieving factors, if any available to them. Manisha Ma and the Tantra also suggest that their self-contradictory practices create noticeable chasm between the pious and the devilish, "at the shifting threshold between the divine and demonic, violating approved social values and customs" (Dalrymple2009). Being a victim of harassment and oppression, she decides to abandon her house and three daughters in search of respect

and freedom. She feel enclined to search and pray for goddess Tara, in which she succeeds eventually. Now Goddess Tara mysteriously, comes to possess her regularly whenever she is with her violent, abusive husband. It can be said that it is one of her liberating acts to feel more powerful than her husband or any other male. She feels blessed with affection, admiration and contentment in the midst of the cremation grounds, something she had been deprived all through her life.

Red fairy's life story is an engrossing one, it being about life of a little girl's voyage to Sindh region of Pakistan from a backward rural area of Bihar, India. It is a narrative about the time period when India was burning in the flames of communal violence, in which the worst affected were the people of minorities and Muslim community. Lal Peri's family members were Muslims and they become targets of Hindu rage so much so that they were forced to flee from their home, their village overnight, finally seeking shelter in Pakistan. However, this was not the end of their sufferings and they soon became refugees because of Indo-Pak war, which resulted in partition of Pakistan and subsequent formation of Bangladesh where they started their lives afresh. She later had to leave the house because of increasing humiliation and abuse by her brother's widow. Then she decided to live her own life and started following the steps of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar to become a Sufi Fakir in a Sufi Shrine. In the role of fakir, she finally feels not only secure, but always respected. This story not only demonstrates how religious disharmony can affect ordinary people adversely but also makes a strong statement on the influence of the spread of Wahhabism's on Islam and the increasing intolerance towards the same, which eventually led to conflicts amongst the Muslim groups resulting in explosions of Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

'The Song of the Blind Minstrel' is the story of Kanai, a Baul singer. Baul community is a wandering group of musicians who oppose norms, traditions and caste system of the society. It does not believe in idol worshipping and without having any

affiliation with any class or caste, it searches for the divine through its musical compositions. Kanai belonged to a poor household, he was also blind since early childhood. His father worked as a labourer in the fields of the local farmer until his death, which left Kanai and his family devastated and financially insecure. Kanai had to take his father's place when he was very young so he seeks for a mentor to train him to be a Baul singer to support his family. After becoming one, he received affection and respect which by then had remained an unimaginable thing for him. The Baul singers focus on acts that would be considered controversial or repulsive in any regular social environment, that is why this group is seen as rebellious and non-conformist but they do it in a peaceful, non-violent and acceptable manner so as to earn approval from the spectators. Ironically, people of rural and backward areas show more respect and acceptance towards them as compared to educated urban residents because of the fact that they can relate themselves to the acts in the performances of Baul singers.

The tales which are most interesting because of their uniqueness need special mention here. One of them is that of Prasannamati Mataji who became a Jain nun. She abandoned her family and home when she was very young because of her strangely developed fascination for Jain religion and the teachings of Jainism. She adopted a life of austerity, discipline and devotion, despite the luxuries of life which she enjoyed at her parents' place. Another in this category is the tale of Passang, a Buddhist monk, born and brought up in Tibet. During the conquest of Tibet, he was compelled to lift the guns against the Communists. After years of joining a Tibetan regiment of the Indian Armed forces, he continues to live a life of regret and remorse for killing people (Buddhism believes in Karma and non-violence). The third tale in this group is that of the life story of Srikanda Spathy who is an idol sculptor belonging to Chola dynasty's bronze makers of Southern India. This story alludes to unsavoury features of caste-ridden Indian society. As Spathy is not entitled to learn Sanskrit because of his

profession and work, he takes pride in craftsmanship saying, “ The gods created man.....but here we are so blessed that we- simple men as we are- help to create the gods”(Dalrymple 2009).It is enigmatic to the author-narrator that those who make idols of gods through their excellent craftsmanship are not allowed to learn and study Sanskrit language, on the pretext that it is the ancient language of Vedas and scriptures, to be mastered by people of upper caste groups only.

Dalrymple earnestly recounts his travel experiences in this book as he has been able to penetrate into the remotest and most isolated territories of India and comes to develop his own understanding of Indian culture, history and mythology. He captures in his travel narrative the plight and sufferings of the marginalised people who are subjected to all kinds of discrimination and exploitation in a very subtle manner in the name of religious, cultural and customary practices. Through the stories of these nine characters, Dalrymple demonstrates in a convincing manner that these people, though living on the periphery of the society, have an indispensably important role to play for the religious and spiritual wellbeing of the society. But one can discern that despite empowering his characters to communicate for themselves, the reference points provided to them and for them restrict their liberty.The principal objective of the narrator/author is to provide background for each story but the brilliant use of his writing stylesomewhat contributes significantly to maintain and possibly strengthen prejudices and misgivings.

While Dalrymple recounts the abundance of various forms of devotion in different stories, there is an element of evident surprise and a guarded understanding in his narration, which he cautiously avoids labelling blind faith or superstition. Read from native perspective, one finds that it is the devotees' religious sentiments, unflinching faith and deep belief that binds them together butfor Dalrymple, it is the outcome of conservative and rigid thinking. It is reflected in his observation on how the

idols made of clay metamorphose into omnipotent, “Without faith, of course, it is just a sculpture. It’s the faith of devotees that turns it into a god.” (Dalrymple 2009). Dalrymple's search for the divine is basically this faith, which he constantly doubts. The frequent comparison of contemporary rural India to Middle Ages on one hand and to England on the other, reinforces Dalrymple's stereotyped portrayal of India in the pages of his travel book. But it certainly remains one of the best travelogues on India, being “ a glorious mixture of journalism, anthropology, history, and history of religious” (Doniger2016)while precisely talking about India and faith, the two subjects which make foreigners “fly off into cosmic vagueness” (Iyer 2009).The very titles of the chapters instantly arouse our interest in the tales of the nine people, each representing an intriguingly different religious path to give meaning and purpose to his/her life. Told in Dalrymple’s distinctive style, these stories invite not only the Indian readers to join the journeys of these nine people but also readers across the globe to get familiarised with the lives of Baul singers, idol makers, folk singers of Rajasthan, Theyyam dancers of Kerala and so one and so forth. Although a “ compelling and poignant”(Dalrymple 2009) work, the book refrains from challenging and questioning the mindset which promotes and encourages the tendencies of masses in South Asian territories to be the frogs in the well blinding believing in and unconsciously perpetuating the exploitation, discrimination and abuse in the name of religion and faith.However, it also demonstrates that the same fold of faith and religion can sometimes help in resuscitating those whose lives have been destroyed by certain unknown and unspecified social, religious or political institutions. But in terms of candid recounting of the honestly narrated tales of those nine characters, told with unflattering simplicity and precision the book deserves appreciation not only as a travel book but also as a collection of biographies and a subtle critique of politics behind the events which devastates lives of thousands of people. The work is also said to be “the very finest travel writing”(Nicoll, 2016).The postcolonial reading of the book also

paves the way for looking at it as the portrayal of and commentary on migration and globalization, affecting lives of million, positively as well negatively.

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