

A Spiritual Journey into the Lives of Nine People as Seen in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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Abstract

Travelling is the best form of meditation which makes a person to explore himself deep inside. The more a person travels, the more he starts to know about himself which in turn helps him to look at the world itself in a different perspective. Travelers sometime don't just stop with traveling but they write about their experiences either in a blog or as an article or even sometimes as a book. With lots of books on travel writing thronging the book shelves these days William Dalrymple, a British Travel Writer and a Historian has made a remarkable contribution to this genre. Especially in his book *Nine Lives*, Dalrymple travels to nine different places and he does not stop with giving the readers a picture of those places but, he makes the reader take up a spiritual journey through the lives of the nine people. This makes this book a perfect source for meditation. This paper attempts to sift the unwonted elements of travel writing found in *Nine Lives* which makes this book an extraordinary attempt in this genre.

KEYWORDS:Travel, Spirituality, Divine Search, Culture.

Human beings always had the yearning to discover the unknown. They wanted to explore the world and uncover its secrets. In many cases travelling was not as easy as one could assume, there were a number of political, economical and social barriers a traveler had to face while crossing borders. Despite all this, the interest that the travelers have on travelling has made this genre to flourish better in recent times. The main job of a travel writer is to observe and comment on the places he visits.

Pico Iyer in his essay, "Why we Travel" wrote,

We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next, to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate. We travel to bring what little we can, in our ignorance and knowledge, to those parts of the globe whose riches are differently dispersed. And we travel, in essence, to become young fools again -- to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more (1).

The main aim of *Nine Lives* was to capture how religion survives in modern India. More than a travel book *Nine Lives* is like a recorded pilgrimage because Dalrymple visits nine different religious sites and also journeys into the lives of the nine devotees who follow different religious paths. The first person he visits is Prasannamati Mataji, a Jain Nun, who undertakes Sallekhana - a ritual fast unto death and who believes death to be an exciting event. Dalrymple's sound knowledge about the history of the Indian religions makes the reader understand the cultural aspect behind such practices in

a better way. Thereby the reader does not sympathize with Prasannamati but instead appreciates the depth of love she has for God. In the nun's tale he also gives a clear picture of the history of the Jain community and their beliefs.

Another important aspect in India is casteism. Dalrymple, in this book, brings out the negative effects of casteism that prevails even in today's modern spiritual India. Even though the country has attained great technological development, somewhere in the country the Dalits, are still being treated as outcasts. The second person the writer visits is a dancer from Kannur - Hari Das, a prison guard and a dalit who performs the auspicious Theyyam dance three months a year who becomes more like a demigod during that period of time. Hari Das is not allowed to draw water from a Brahmin's well but contrastingly during the Theyyam period Haridas is worshiped. SrikandaSpathy another person discussed in the book is an idol maker from Tamilnadu who says that the idol made by the Dalits is not considered to be divine. Dalrymple captures this disparity clearly and thereby the reader imbibes the power of religion in the country. Any reader at this point would look within himself and would try to have a small discussion with him about this contrast. Dalrymple allows the reader to meditate at this point to get an answer.

The other people discussed by Dalrymple are Rani Bai, who was dedicated to the Yellamma temple to become a devadasi; Mohan Bhopa and Batasi the two last hereditary singers of a great 600 year old Rajasthani medieval poem The Epic of Pabuji; LalPeri, a woman who turned into a fakir after much difficulty in life; TashiPassang, a Buddhist monk who took up arms for a purpose; Manisha Ma Bhairavi, an ardent follower of goddess Tara who drinks from the skulls of humans; Kanai Das and DebdasBaul, of the singing Baul tradition from West Bengal are the six other religious people whom Dalrymple visits.

Even though all the above mentioned devotees come from different backgrounds, one thing that unites all of them is the connection that they have with their own religions. All of them have a firm belief in what they do and William Dalrymple explores this belief and what they have become because of this belief and records the same. He writes about how these devotees were before and after their religious journey. He also looks at what the future holds for them. Nine Lives is a little different from other travel writing books because more than describing the places, Dalrymple records his journey through the lives of these nine people. Each chapter reads like a biographical account of each one of them. The reader journey's through their lives and understands the effect of religion both in him and also in the society.

This does not stop him from detailing on the places he visited to meet the nine people. Dalrymple is at his best when he describes the places. No matter which place he visits he gives minute details about everything that seemed important to him. He gives details about the climate, smell and even the number and sizes of objects. In the chapter "The Maker of Idols" he describes the villages in Trichy as follows,

The villages appear like those in R.K. Narayan stories, with roadside shops full of sacks of dried red chilli and freshly cut stalks of green bananas. Buffaloes are wallowing on the sandbanks of the Kaveri, and bullock carts trundle along red dirt roads, past village duck ponds and the tall, rain-wet fans of banana trees. Old women in blue saris sit out on their verandas, while their granddaughters troop along the roads with jasmine flowers in their hair. The cattle are strong and white, and their long horns are painted blue (192).

Dalrymple is very poetic in his descriptions, especially at places where he calls River Kaveri a “thin silver ribbon” (192), Tibetan settlement as “barnacles on a rock” (149) and the nights in Rajasthan as “white midnights” (81). When he talks about objects he never fails to mention the material that they are made from. Dalrymple talks about “copper kettle drums” (117) and the “outsized leather-trussed camel drums” (117) in “The Red Fairy”. He also gives details about the smell of the places he visits. In the chapter “The Red Fairy” when he is in Sehwan a place where the Sufis pray, he says, “The air was hot with sweat and the rich, sweet scent of rose petals mixed with incense and Hashish” (118).

Dalrymple discusses every detail about the place he visits. He discusses the landscape, politics, caste system, culture and the kind of life that each person lives. About Tamilnadu he says, “Other parts of India may be leaping aggressively forward into the new millennium, but for a visitor at least, rural Tamilnadu still seems deceptively innocent and timeless” (192).

Humour is a very important feature in travel writing but, with a subject as serious as religion the writer has to be doubly cautious as to what to laugh at and what not to laugh at. Dalrymple beautifully handles this and invokes humor subtly to entertain the reader without hurting anybody’s sentiments. In “The Lady Twilight” it is humorous to note that TapanSaddhu, a person who deals with skulls is found with a radio clamped to his ears, and occasionally interrupts the conversation with the latest score from South Africa such as “England are 270 for four” (207) and “India are ninety-four without loss” (219).

Dalrymple’s *Nine Lives* moves away from the usual form of Travel Writing, because generally in Travel Writing the writer gives more importance to the places he visits. But in *Nine Lives* Dalrymple gives importance to the devotees he visits. He speaks about their physical appearances, their way of living, their past, present and future and also importantly the place they live in. At this juncture it is significant to remember that Dalrymple, more than a travel writer, is a historian. SalilTripathi, the author of *Offence: the Hindu case* in a review to *The Independent* is of the view that Dalrymple acts like an unobtrusive cameraman and lets these nine people speak. He intrudes gently only to provide context and succinct summaries of the issues like the petty cruelties of caste; the challenge to inclusive Sufis from the self-righteous Taliban in Pakistan; and the ostracising of tantriks, whose blessings politicians and moneyed traders nonetheless seek. He also adds that the author listens with a rare empathy and is not judgmental.

In *Nine Lives* he leaves a record of how religion has changed in modern India. Many philosophers believe that life itself is a search for the Divine. Dalrymple in *Nine Lives* searches for the sacred in the modern India thus making this book a symbolic search for the divine itself. The book includes History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Geography which are the essential ingredients of a successful travel book. Unlike his other travel writing books Dalrymple in this book acts more like an observer. He sets the stage and watches the devotees talk about their lives. Not only the writer, but also the readers take up a meditative journey through the lives of the nine people while reading the book.

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