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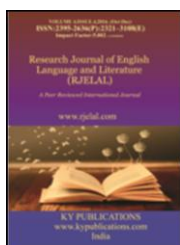
QUEST FOR SPIRITUALITY AND MYSTICISM IN WILLIAM DALRYMPLE'S *NINE LIVES*

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ABSTRACT

India is a diverse and multiethnic country. Exploring India is like exploring the whole universe. The diversity of beliefs, customs and rituals make a traveler wonderstruck. Each place and community has a tradition of their own. Exploring the blending of culture in India shows how this land is filled with mysticism and spiritual experiences. In this materialistic world, where people are after materialistic pleasures, spirituality is waning day by day. For a visitor, India is a feast to the five senses as well as the spirit. This spirituality and the mysticism attracted the people all over the world towards India. William Dalrymple in his *Nine Lives* represents strange and mysterious spiritual experiences of nine people out from the main stream society, thereby defining a spiritual dimension of the modern India. The study intends to be exploratory focusing on the nine pen portraits of Dalrymple and analyzes how his book answers the questions about identities and stereotypes and the cultural values associated with these lives of the margin. Dalrymple probes into the lives of his characters, meaning of their quests, religious frenzies, heart-breaking stories, sacrifices for faith, the essence of their beliefs and spiritual commitment and the difficulties they face in maintaining their unwavering devotion to their God.

Key Words: India, Spirituality, Mysticism, Religion

Nine Lives deals with the diverse traditions and customs manifesting the spirituality of India. Dalrymple subtly points out that, though with rich heritage and strong adherents, they are on the edges of extinction, struggling to cope with the so called realistic world around. *Nine Lives* is the result of the travel and expedition experiences of William Dalrymple as he travels through the entire purlieu of the country.

During the course of the expedition, Dalrymple met multiple people with each of them holding different sets of moral and religious beliefs. In deeper analysis of the book, it was found that, different people have different sets of the beliefs that drive them to lead their life accordingly.

In Marie Arana's words:

As William Dalrymple shows in his strikingly colorful new book, to be Indian is to inhabit a carnival of strangely colliding worlds, a profusion of identities with sharply defined regional variants. Nowhere is this more evident than in the country's spiritual life.

The historical narrative *Nine Lives* is engagingly woven around the nine figures: a Jain Nun; Hari Das, the Dancer from Kerala; the Devdasi Rani Bai from Karnataka; Mohan Bhopa and his wife Batasi from Rajasthan as the Singer of Epics; Lal Peri, the Sufi; Tashi Passang, the Tibetan monk in fight against the Chinese occupation; Srikanda Stpaty from Tamil Nadu as the makers of idols; Manisha Ma Bhairavi as

the Lady Twilight of Bengal; and the Wandering Minstrels or Bauls from Bengal. Dalrymple listens to the heart breaking real life stories of the people he meets and gave a compassionate ear to them. His narration is impressive and takes the readers to an entirely different spiritual world. As Hirsh points out, In *Nine Lives*, Dalrymple shows how '*religious and cultural paths can intersect at one juncture*'.

Let's say considering the case of the Jain nun, Prasanmati Mataji who has left her luxurious life and taken the very difficult and austere Jain monkhood full of strict code of conducts. She has seen her friend dying through the ritual process of starvation to the death and finally decides to take up the same path of '*sulekana*' shows her unwavering faith to her religious belief. She is a living example of strong devotion and faith. Her words "First you give up your home, then your possessions. Finally, you give up your body" (N.L p 27), shows her detachment of worldly life and strong spiritual attitude. Her spirituality finds its culmination in the path of self- suffering as her choice of salvation i.e '*Moksha*'. Following is the *Theyyam* Dancer Hari Das from Kerala, who belongs to a Dalit community, attain exaltedness and is worshipped as God during the *Theyyam* seasons by the upper class people. His mystical experience is being possessed by God, shows his staunch faith in the spirituality.

For those months we become Gods..... We bring blessings to the village and the villagers, and exorcise evil spirits. We are the vehicles through which people can thank the gods for fulfilling their prayers and granting their wishes. Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Namboodiri Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet. [N.L p33]

Daughters of Yellamma depicts the tradition of Devdasi- the tradition of dedicating girl child to the goddess. In due course of time these devdasies end up as sex workers and died from Sexually Transmitted Diseases. Even in their pathetic life amidst all pain and sufferings their only solace is the deity Yellama. Rani Bai, the Devdasi has heart rendering pathetic tale of her sufferings yet finally she had to push both her daughters into the same trade and considers it as divine calling. Trailing it is

the singer in Rajasthan, who used to enjoy singing the 600 years old poetry of 4000 lines by heart. Mohan Bhopa feels that it's all because of the spiritual power of the recitations and the heroes of the poems could keep the tradition alive for centuries. With his songs and dance he could invoke the spirit of the deities and the people seek cure for the ailing cattle and family members. 'The Red Fairy' or the Lal Peri, a Muslim from Bihar, after a long history of refuge finally finds comfort in Sufi Shrine. Possessed women are brought to the shrine for exorcizing the spirits tormenting them. She finds comfort in the Sufi tradition which believes in humanity rather than the rituals.

Moreover, the writer also meets a Buddhist monk from Tibet who is living the life of an exile due to taking up the arms against a Chinese. Tashi Passang is remorseful of the killings; he has done which is opposite to his Buddhist Dharma. His prayers and meditations help him overcome his hatred towards Chinese.

Dalrymple presents the details of the Idols maker, Srikanda Spathy who follows the traditions of Shilpa Shastras. His tradition of Idol making goes back to hundreds of years and is very proud to keep the tradition alive. He believes that the proportions of the idols must be perfect so the God dwells in the idols. His devotion to his profession and his pride in finishing the work perfectly shows his spirituality. For him what he does is not an art it is 'an act of devotion'

Dalrymple meets the most thrilling and astonishing lady who lives on a crematorium and drinks from the skulls of the suicides and the virgins. Manisha Bhairavi Ma, lives in the cremation ground and performs severe and intense rituals so as to grant the prayers and petitions lodged at that time. She hopes to get the 'darshan' of the goddess with all her rituals. William presents the extreme religious ecstasy and unimaginable rituals through this tale. Finally, the writer meets the blind Baul poet Kanai. His spiritual journey depends on the songs and the specific tactics of love making and ritualised sex. The *bauls* are practitioners of tantra experimenting human sexuality.

Nine lives is a thoughtful and intelligent observation of the religious tradition of India which

is vague to most of the people. He presents the rich and spiritually complex life of India. For some people, religious satisfaction is attained through self-imposed hardships, for some it is through songs and dance, for a few it is through the art, for few it is with some bizarre practices. Their divine madness is very difficult to explain.

All the characters find solace in their mystical or spiritual path they have chosen. It juxtaposes the worldly life. However, all of them intended to meet the eternal quest of spirituality. Most of them are the extreme form of the religious practices. Their determination to overcome their hurdles in spite of their heart breaking real life stories became an example to the people of the world. Nine people with nine different spiritual experiences:- either they neglect or renounce the worldly life or the world neglected them by the name of class differences. In this narrative, the underlying theme remains the same - these historical figures (so to speak) use the religion and culture to fight against the social injustice, while they show themselves as practicing extreme refuge and mysticism.

Dalrymple, as a non-native and a curious traveller is able to spot various characters of the land which is acknowledged by the natives. The practices of esoteric and exotic beliefs and in various religious sects are taken in to consideration rather than the rituals of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. He presents India as not the one that of the caste Hindus. He crushes down the belief that spirituality exclusively belongs to the Brahmins. Dalrymple's portrayal of India is not the land of Vedas or popular epics. He focuses the multi-vocal truths and micro-narratives. The common thread that runs along is their spiritual quest which may be crazy to outsiders. The characters of *Nine Lives* are around us the familiar figures, living apart from the mainstream of society. Love, hatred, respect and fear surround them and lay men place themselves in a safe distance from them. There are others who serve as the protectors of ancient traditions but not given the due respect.

After the thorough considerations of all the people that were incurred during the finding of the subjected cause it was found that all of them were

observed to be following different beliefs as per their mental level of the satisfaction. Thus, it is said that India is holding multiple sets of beliefs and most of the people living in India are found that they are following different sets of the moral, ethical and cultural norms. Although some accounts are stupefying to much extent, Dalrymple manages to bring past and present together in this text. The strange and unbelievable rituals, the philosophies of different beliefs show that India is a land to be explored.

In the present world, when religion is becoming more and more intolerant, Dalrymple portrays how "*the diverse Indian sub-continent offers broad spectrum of sects and stupefying practices*" (Jason). India is now becoming the rapidly modernizing country, simultaneously known as the spiritual center for many people across the world. Dalrymple wants to show through his work that contrast of Indian religious and worldly scenario, or the old and the new culture, and even the ethereal and the material aspects prevalent in India. For Dalrymple it is highly impossible to cover all the spiritual paths of India as it is so vast. Dalrymple has chosen only few minor sects of religious believes. Major religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism are not acknowledged. Even with these nine pen portraits he explains very well the spirituality and mysticism of India. The evolution and the growth of spiritualism are still prevalent in this modern era.

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N.B: Nine Lives is referred as N.L in reference areas.