

Spiritualism in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*

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India is one of the world's most diversified countries. Religion is an essential component of it. Rituals, customs, and traditions vary from location to place and from person to person. Some rituals have been passed down through generations. India is still a land of sacred history. Indian faiths, philosophy, and mysticism arose in such circumstances, where people had no reprieve from misery and the fear of death. Studying the cultural mingling in India reveals how this nation is rich in mysticism and spiritual experiences. Religious ecstasies are changes in an individual's conscious state in which awareness of the exterior environment decreases and "spiritual," or inward, consciousness increases. The book *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* examined diverse snapshots of human encounters with various components such as religious activities, religion, traditions, and so on. To outsiders, the variety of their religious rites and rituals appears unusual and even insane. Their insanity beyond explanation. All of the characters are real and have a steadfast devotion to a superpower. Nine lives, nine persons. Each one follows a different religious journey and tells an interesting story.

William Dalrymple's first travel book in a decade, exquisite and captivating, and narrated with almost biblical simplicity, investigates how traditional forms of religious life in South Asia have been changed in the vortex of the region's rapid transformation. Each character in each story reflects life in various forms of devotion or a unique religious path. "Nine Lives" delves into the various customs and rituals that contribute to India's peculiar spirituality. Despite their long history and devoted devotion, Dalrymple hints discreetly to the idea that they are on the edge of extinction and are struggling to adapt to the "real" world that surrounds them. William Dalrymple's voyage through the entirety of the country served as the idea for his book, "NineLives," which is based on his travel and expedition experiences. This paper focuses on the spiritualism in 'The Red Fairy' and 'The Lady Twilight' episodes in *Nine Lives: In search of the sacred in Modern India*. Dalrymple was stunned to find India as a place where modernity, spirituality and religion go hand in hand.

The Red Fairy: The Islamic mystic known as "The Red Fairy" revolves on LalPeriMastani, a lady fakir (holy person) who occupies a shrine in the lawless province of Sindh. LalPeriMastani is a big, dark-skinned, and club-wielding holy person who lived in Pakistan. Such shrines, which are frequented by both Muslims and Hindus, are typical of Sindh's liberal Sufism. Strict Wahhabi Islam, whose adherents label Sufis as idol worshippers, poses a challenge to this centre for an inclusive type of Islam. To entice kids and teenagers away from the Sufi heritage, the Wahhabis have opened a madrassa (school for young people) in the neighbourhood. Although Wahhabi Islam hasn't spread much here, the danger is mounting. "At the moment only the poor will send their children to us, and then only because we feed them," says the Wahhabi schoolmaster. "... If we can get children away from their homes to board here with us we can influence them more thoroughly." In LalPeriMastani, those who are from lower castes that are impoverished and lack access to basic necessities of life turn to the sanctity or the divinity for

help since their faith gives them the means to obtain those necessities. A respectability that they would otherwise find difficult to obtain in their regular course of life is given to some people by their current states of religion and sacred duty. Dalrymple says in *The Red Fairy* :”The Sufis believed that this search for God within and the quest for *fana*-total immersion in the absolute-liberated the seeker from the restrictions of narrow orthodoxy, allowing the devotee to look beyond the letter of the law to its mystical essence.”(N.L pg 113) .

Dalrymple tells the tale of a female Sufi saint in the Pakistani city of Sehwan in "The Red Fairy." The political polarisation of two religious groups is also a theme in this narrative, in addition to the costs that the underprivileged must endure as a result of these political choices. LalPeri's Muslim family members become the subject of Hindu resentment due to rumours of Hindu massacres in neighbouring East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The family of LalPeri leaves their village, looks for safety, and begins to establish a life in East Pakistan. But shortly after, they once more became refugees as a result of the conflict between India and Pakistan, which culminated in the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh. She and her brother travel to Pakistan after being promised land in Sindh. But they won't find any land there. Later, after being harassed by her brother's widow, she departs from her house and travels to Sehwan Sharif in order to become a sufi fakir, following in the footsteps of LalShahbazQalander, who appeared to her in a dream and advised her to follow her heart when she awoke. As a fakir, she finally feels protected and empowered.LalPeri, as she is known, speaks about Sufism and a Sufi pir by the name of LalShahbazQalander.”Within ten days, said another, ‘whatever cure these women ask for will be done.LalShahbaz cannot refuse his devotees’(N L pg 119).They get respectability through these states of religion and sacred obligation that they would not otherwise be able to obtain in their daily lives.The most terrifying interview Dalrymple conducts is not with the club-wielding Red Fairy but rather with the astutely knowledgeable director of a conservative madrasa, who is persuaded to confess that, sure, all Sufi shrines would be destroyed when Islamic control is the dominant factor. Dalrymple severely highlights the rise of Wahhabism in Islam and the ensuing intolerance for any blending or conciliatory inclination that Sufi traditions exhibit, underlining the repercussions of religious polarisation on ordinary people who do not understand politics. The author's voice expresses worry about the growing number of incidents of intolerance that have led to violence and posed a threat to Sufi traditions. But Dalrymple also highlights the views of common people in the lines-

’You don’t even have to be a Muslim and you will be welcomed,’said Lal Peri

’What difference does it make if you call Allah by his Hindu names-“Bhagwan or Ishwar?”’

“These words are different languages,’said Lal Peri.

The voice of a common people expresses a respect for the other culture and a divine emotion for the Almighty without worrying about the intolerance and violence.

Although the temple was a Sufi shrine, Dalrymple shows it in a way that highlights the unity of religions by continuing to hold Shaivite rituals. Sufism held to the idea that everything and everyone is a reflection of God. Sufism was in grave danger because other branches of Islam were unable to accept its

all-inclusive teachings. Due to the Sufi ideology being similar to Hinduism, many Hindus practise it. Towards the conclusion of the chapter, Lal Peri tells an inspiring story: Lal Shahbaz Qalander and a companion were once ambling in the desert. There was no wood to make a fire because it was really chilly. In order to obtain fire from hell, his companion advised Qalander to transform into a falcon. After an hour, Qalander came back, but there was no fire. He said, "There is no fire in hell. Everyone who goes there brings their own fire, and their own pain, from this world". (N L pg 145). The author left Lal Peri with the profoundly philosophical ideas of perceiving oneness in all things and that heaven and hell are not two independent realities; they reside in our own bosoms. Despite how fascinating her story is, Dalrymple claims that what makes it so compelling is the complex relationship between Hinduism, Sufi Islam, and Islamic orthodoxy - in which the Sufi's desire to absorb Hindu practices and beliefs has always come into conflict with the desire of the orthodox to root them out as dangerous and deviant impurities.

The Lady Twilight: The story of Manisha Ma Bhairavi, a devout follower of the goddess Tara who makes her home in the holy city of Tarapith in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Hindu cult of Goddess Tara was described by Dalrymple in *The Lady Twilight* as being the most esoteric religious activity. Kali, who craves blood, believes that Goddess Tara is an idol. Her followers practise tantra, dwell on cremation grounds, cure skulls, elevate taboos to the level of divinity, and live in cremation grounds. Dalrymple describes the place as "Tarapith is an eerie place, with a sinister reputation. In Calcutta I had been told that it was notorious for the unsavoury Tantric rituals and animal sacrifices which were performed in the temple. Stranger things still were rumoured to take place after sunset in the riverside burning ground on the edge of the town, outside the boundaries of both village life and the conversation of Bengali society". (N.L pg.205)

Manisha Ma Bhairavi, one of Goddess Tara's worshippers, travelled to Tarapith in quest of the goddess who she claims frequently she was possessed by her throughout her marriage and is an extremely powerful being. The more violently her husband treated her, the more she used to be provoked by the trances, which led to conflict in her marriage as a result of her frequent possessions of the goddess. In addition to being Tara the goddess of ultimate knowledge, bestowing upon those who worship her the capacity to understand and know the Absolute, but she is also the Lady Twilight, the Cheater of Death, a figure of horror and terror, a stalker of funeral pyres, and a ruthless killer of demons and evil yakshis, taking on their dreadful forms in order to defeat them. The ancient Mundamala-Tantra, also known as the hymn of a hundred names, contains several labels for Tara, including "She who delights in spilling blood," "She who is tainted with blood," and "She who is obsessed with blood." She strongly favours human blood, particularly that extracted from the palms, foreheads, and breasts of her followers.

Manisha Ma Bhairavi had a strong base of followers after people started hearing her stories. One day, finally she heard a call from the Goddess "come to me. All that you may lose, you will recover. I will take care of your daughters. Your place is now with me" The character Mystic Manisha Ma Bhairavi may have epilepsy and worships the evil goddess Tara. She has abandoned her children and fled her abusive husband in order to take refuge at a Bengali cremation ground among sadhus, or wandering religious men. She finds solace among other accepting outcasts under the goddess's protection while residing in a landscape of mortal transience. They drink tea while listening to radio broadcasts of cricket while covered in ash and completely naked. "It is here in this place of death," she tells Dalrymple, "amid

the skulls and bones and smoking funeral pyres, that we have found love.”The episode starts with the line: ‘Before you drink from a skull,’ said Manisha Ma Bhairavi, ‘you must first find the right corpse.’ (N.L.205) Manisha Ma Bhairavi, who resides in a crematorium and sips alcohol from virgins’ and suicide victims’ skulls, appears to be the most fascinating and amazing woman Dalrymple has ever met. Manisha Bhairavi Ma, who resides in the cremation ground, engages in arduous and demanding ceremonies in an effort to answer the prayers and requests made at the time. She does all of her rituals in the hopes of receiving the goddess’ darshan. Dalrymple asked Manisha Ma Bhairavi during the interview: “But why live in a cremation ground in the first place? I asked. Isn’t it asking for trouble? Surely there are better places to lead a holy life? In the Himalayas, or at the source of the Ganges...” It is for her that we people inhabit this place,’ said Manisha, cutting me short. ‘Ma Tara pulled us here, and we remain here for her sake. It is within you that you find the loving *shakti* of the Mother. This is a place for its realization, for illumination” (N.L pg208) Manisha Ma Bhairavi finds love, respect and happiness while living around the burning corpses at the cremation grounds, something that was denied to her when she was part of the ‘mainstream’ society.

According to Dalrymple, this persona finds comfort in the mystical or spiritual path she has chosen. It contrasts the life of the planet. Her goal, however, is to fulfil the never-ending search for spirituality by engaging in extreme religious activities. Despite her heartbreaking real-life situation, her unwavering trust in God and resolve to overcome the obstacles made her an inspiration to people all over the world. He also talks about Tantra, which is primarily composed of rituals and mantras that are intended to have certain effects. The language is extremely technical and usually employs cryptic symbols that are meant to obscure the core meanings from the common person. Consequently, it is essential that the aspirant be presented by a knowledgeable Guru. Tantra is a system of religious rites that emancipates the practitioner by directing the energy of the universe into the practitioner. One of the "tools" one may use in a Tantric practise is mudras, mantras, prayers, meditation, and other yogic techniques that purify the body and spirit. Dalrymple claims that the term tantra is currently misinterpreted and connected to witchcraft, black magic, and a variety of psychological manipulation techniques. Indian mysticism, philosophical religion, and common individuals put in remarkable situations are all explored in *The Lady Twilight*.

CONCLUSION

The overarching concept of these two *Nine Lives* episodes is the same: the characters used their faith and culture to fight against social injustice, but they also demonstrated their own practise of mysticism, spirituality, and extreme retreat. Through these stories, William Dalrymple depicts the profound religious rapture and unfathomable rites. As opposed to the rituals of Hinduism and Islam, the rituals of occult and exotic beliefs and in numerous religious sects are taken into consideration. He portrays India as being different from the Hindu caste system. He disproves the notion that only Brahmins are capable of spirituality. He concentrates on the micro narratives and multivocal truths. Their spiritual quest, which seems strange to outsiders, is the unifying factor. The familiar faces we see every day that the *Nine Lives* characters are based on live outside of society's norms. They are surrounded with respect, terror, love, and hatred, and laypeople keep their distance from them for their own safety. Others act as the guardians of traditional customs, yet they are not treated with the appropriate respect. After giving each person involved in the search for the subject reason careful study, it was discovered that each one

of them had varied beliefs depending on how satisfied they felt within. As a result, it is said that India holds various systems of beliefs and that the majority of its citizens adhere to multiple systems of moral, ethical, and cultural norms. Although some of the testimonies are incredibly stupefying, Dalrymple succeeds in fusing the past and present in this work. India is a country that deserves to be explored because of its bizarre, religious, spiritual and incredible customs as well as its many philosophical systems. India is currently a developing nation that is also universally recognized as the spiritual hub of the entire world. With his writing, Dalrymple hopes to convey the difference between Indian religion and the modern world, or between old and contemporary culture, or even between the spiritual and material qualities that are pervasive in India. Dalrymple believes it would be extremely difficult to cover all of India's spiritual paths due of the country's size. Dalrymple has only selected a small number of tiny religious cults. He explains India's spirituality admirably, even with pen pictures of Lal Peri and Manisha Ma Bhairavi. Even in this day and age, spiritualism is continuously evolving and growing. This world is hidden in the centre of India and is home to the real seekers who are looking for serenity and enlightenment. Dalrymple sought out this information and was able to reveal that, despite its modern exterior, India retains a spiritual culture.

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