

# Socio-Cultural Representations through Lived Religions in Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

Suman

**Abstract**—In the continuous interaction between the past and the present that historiography is, each time when history gets re/written, a new representation emerges. This new representation is a reflection of the earlier archives and their interpretations, fragmented remembrances of the past, as well as the reactions to the present. Memory, or lack thereof, and stereotyping generally play a major role in this representation. William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009) is one such written account that sets out to narrate the representations of religion and culture of India and contemporary reactions to it. Dalrymple's nine saints belong to different castes, sects, religions, and regions. By dealing with their religions and expressions of those religions, and through the lived mysticism of these nine individuals, the book engages with some important issues like class, caste and gender in the contexts provided by historical as well as present India. The paper studies the development of religion and accompanied feeling of religiosity in modern as well as historical contexts through a study of these elements in the book. Since, the language used in creation of texts and the literary texts thus produced create a new reality that questions the stereotypes of the past, and in turn often end up creating new stereotypes or stereotypical representations at times, the paper seeks to actively engage with the text in order to identify and study such stereotypes, along with their changing representations. Through a detailed examination of the book, the paper seeks to unravel whether some socio-cultural stereotypes existed earlier, and whether there is development of new stereotypes from Dalrymple's point of view as an outsider writing on issues that are deeply rooted in the cultural milieu of the country. For this analysis, the paper takes help from the psycho-literary theories of stereotyping and representation.

**Keywords**—Religion, Representation, Stereotyping, William Dalrymple.

## I. INTRODUCTION

MEMORY is the “the power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained especially through associative mechanisms” [1]. In William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2010) [2], memory plays an important role in revealing the lives of nine characters, but more importantly, it is representation and stereotyping that play a role in delineating those characters as well as India. It is a travel book that sets out to cover the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent while following the lives of the nine men and women detailed within its pages. This journey is remarkable not only because of the ordinary lives made extraordinary but also because of the issues it simultaneously deals with. Despite Dalrymple's stated purpose of merely conveying the stories of these nine wo/men [2, pp.

19, 20], there is an inadvertent engagement with various socio-economic issues like caste, class, gender, religion and politics, besides dealing with faith and the lived nature of religion that makes it more of a living entity rather than a static force. The paper critically analyses the representations of these socio-economic issues within Dalrymple's text and for doing so, it introduces the concepts of representation and stereotyping before beginning its analysis.

Representation is the act of representing “an artistic likeness or image,” “a statement or account made to influence opinion or action” [3]. This definition privileges knowledge on part of the one representing something or someone, and as Ania Loomba says, “Knowledge is not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power” [4]. So, representations are not innocent but carry within them the impressions, personal or collective, about peoples, races or places, or in other words, the other. This paper posits that Dalrymple's text is such a case of representation where he sets out to give a voice to the less privileged, marginalized and sometimes *un*-representable by listening to them and by giving them a platform to narrate their personal stories, and during this representation, there is a reinforcement of the already existing stereotypes about India and its various socio-cultural issues.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, a stereotype is a “widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing” [5]. It “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” [6]. Although used interchangeably, stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, “stereotypes are considered the cognitive component of attitudes toward a social group—specifically, beliefs about what a particular group is like. Prejudice is considered the affective component, or the feelings we have about a particular group. Discrimination concerns the behavioral component, or differential actions taken toward members of specific social groups” [7]. Thus, stereotyping is the process of oversimplification and generalization in attitudes that people hold for others. These generalizations are a result of selectivity in social perception and are marked by prejudice. While critically analyzing the text, this paper refers to the pre and post colonial stereotypes, if any, held towards India, its people and landscape in its quest to find the sacred during these times of socio-economic and cultural change.

## II. ANALYSIS

Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* refer to the nine men and women,

Suman is with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Mandi, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh 175005 India (phone: 91-1905-267140, fax: 91-1905-267138, e-mail: suman.sigroha@gmail.com).

mostly from various parts of India, with the exception of two, one who was born in India but has been based in Sindh, Pakistan for years now and the other who was born and brought up in Tibet and now resides in India. The book contains personal narratives: of a Jain nun, a Buddhist monk, a *devadasi* (literally, the servant of god), a *theyyam* dancer, a *bhopa* (singer and healer), a *sufi fakir* (one who has renounced the world), a maker of idols, a *tantric* (one who practices Tantra), and a Baul singer. These personal narratives are held together by the narrator's interest and his mission to find the sacred amidst the rapidly modernizing Indian society with its increasing emphasis on a culture of material rather than the spiritual. Interestingly, these narratives are simultaneously mostly the stories of underprivileged lower caste people of India. Caste system is a process of social stratification that divides the Hindus in different categories that began as a system of ordering the society by work during ancient times but has over time become rigid and discriminatory in nature.

The stereotyping begins with the premise of the narrative. Dalrymple's quest is based on the colonial notion that the Orient, or India in this case, is exotic, inexplicable and can lay claim to spirituality if nothing else. During colonial times, because Macaulay's Minutes on Education [8] prioritized Western knowledge, emphasized its superiority and effectively rubbished the entire knowledge of the East, the latter had recourse to only its spiritual knowledge as a beacon of hope to fight this unequal battle with the colonizers. Dalrymple emphasizes this view about India, when he starts on his quest to find the sacred. Despite his aim to steer clear of a subjective bias while narrating these stories, he cannot help that bias, simply because the frames of reference are being provided by him. His voice is the one that links all of the stories together when he provides the context in each case. Also, as tourism could be considered as a sort of neocolonialism [9], [10], in a similar manner the premise of a travel book, which offers armchair tourism to its readers, may also be considered as a form of neocolonialism and this analogy may be confirmed if the colonial representations and stereotypes are repeated, maintained or reinforced. This Dalrymple does in different contexts, as the following analysis will also show, by emphasizing the exotic nature of the landscape as well as traditions and rituals, which appear not only contradictory but also sometimes illogical to him or perhaps to an outsider as well.

Stereotypes related to caste and class figure prominently in most of these narratives. Although one or two of them are the stories of a strong faith and the quest to find the divine, like Prasannamati Mataji, the *Digambara* (sky clad) Jain nun or Lal Peri Mastani, many seemingly have recourse to the sacred or the divine because they belong to the poverty ridden lower castes that do not have access to basic necessities of survival, and this faith provides them with the means by which to achieve those necessities. And to some, these current states of faith and sacred duty give them a respectability, which otherwise is hard for them to receive in their normal course of life.

Hari Das is a Dalit, the lower caste untouchable, who digs

wells and mans a dangerous jail during weekends for a living. However, between December and February, he is a *theyyam* dancer. He becomes a god. *Theyyam* is a socio-religious ritual dance form of Malabar in North Kerala that "incorporates dance, mime and music and enshrines the rudiments of ancient tribal cultures which attached great importance to the worship of heroes and the spirits of ancestors" [11]. The ritualistic dance is not only fascinating to watch but also to study because during this three-month period, the social hierarchies become inverted. Through Hari Das' story, Dalrymple talks about the still prevalent caste system and the practice of untouchability. As a *theyyam* dancer, Hari Das is revered or feared as the god he personifies. Performed outside the villages, in front of small shrines and during dusk to dawn period, *theyyam* appears more to be a subversive activity in the garb of the sacred. "Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Namboodiri Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet." (pp. 89). Besides the colour that defines it and the nature of the form, this element of subversion is what attracted Hari Das to become a *theyyam* dancer and has kept him to it despite its exhaustive nature.

Rani Bai's is a narrative of entrenched gender stereotypes, misogynistic mindsets, poverty and caste divisions. She is a *devadasi*, one who is supposed to serve the god. The reality is that she and other *devadasis* like her have to instead serve the patriarchal gods during the current times. A religious practice in Southern India whence the parents would dedicate or marry their young daughter to a temple or a god, it has become a symbol of sexual exploitation of girls and women and has been banned since 1988 [12], though it continues as Kaveri's and Rani Bai's stories here show. Although once considered figures of veneration, power, grandeur and respect due to their erudition and knowledge of various arts and patronage offered by kings or men of wealth, *devadasis* became mere sex-slaves/prostitutes once the British colonial rule pulled aside this veneer of respectability. The system was left with little but a religious sanctity that was also hard to defend given the sexual exploitation it entailed for young girls and women. Like others, needing money and this being the most accessible way to make some money, Rani's parents dedicated her to Goddess Yellama, whose story is another of such patriarchal exploitation. And like others, she was sold to the highest bidder upon reaching puberty. Afterwards, she is promised work in Mumbai, but is again sold to a brothel there. Her narrative continues this sordid tale of cheating, sexual exploitation and the vicious cyclical chain of this abhorrent practice (she dedicated her daughters who are now both dead of AIDS) because of its intricate relationship with gender, economics, caste and religion, and now disease. Rani had no choice and neither did her daughters, and the marginalized become more marginalized by contracting AIDS and dying in disgrace and penury.

Lal Peri Mastani's (literally, red fairy ecstatic) is an engrossing account of a young girl's journey from backward rural Bihar in India to a border village in Bangladesh and then on to Sindh in Pakistan. It is also a story of polarization of two religious groups due to politics and the consequences the poor

have to bear and the price they have to pay for these political decisions. Since Lal Peri's family members are Muslims, they become the targets of Hindu anger because of rumoured Hindu killings in neighbouring East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Lal Peri's family flees their village, seeks refuge and starts building a life in East Pakistan. But soon after become refugees again because of the the war between India and Pakistan that culminated in East Pakistan becoming Bangladesh. Promised land to settle down in Sindh in Pakistan, she and her brother leave for Pakistan. However, there is no land awaiting them. Later on, upon being mistreated by her brother's widow, she leaves home and journeys to Sehwan Sharif to become a sufi *fakir*, following in the footsteps of Lal Shahbaz Qalander who appeared to her in a dream and told her to follow her heart upon waking up. As a *fakir*, she finally feels protected and empowered. Through her story, Dalrymple, besides highlighting the effects of religious polarization on common people who do not understand politics, strongly comments on the increasing influence of Wahhabism in Islam, its Talibanization, and the resultant intolerance for any syncretic or accommodating tendency that Sufi traditions display. The authorial voice shows concern at the rising number of cases of such intolerance that have resulted in bombings of some of these centers of Sufi tradition in Pakistan.

Mohan Bhopa (bard and healer) belongs to the Nayak caste, the nomads, who are very low in the caste hierarchy. He along with his wife sing the 4000 lines epic of the local legendary hero Pabuji. As in the case of Hari Das, this role of his brings Mohan Bhopa fame and respect besides a decent earning, something he wouldn't have had access to if he had followed any other profession. Caste and class divisions and untouchability take prominent place in this story also. The emphasis continues to be on his caste and his social status, ending with his lamentable death, which Dalrymple highlights as another instance of the limited access to healthcare for the less privileged.

Like others, Manisha Ma Bhairavi and the *Tantra* that she practices lie at the margins, "at the shifting threshold between the divine and demonic, violating approved social values and customs" [2, pp. 435]. A story of poverty, exploitation caste hierarchies and physical abuse, her decision to leave her home and three young daughters to find goddess Tara, who interestingly comes to possess her frequently in while she is with her abusive husband, is her one act of agency in the face of patriarchal subjugation. She 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.

'The Song of the Blind Minstrel' is a Baul singer named Kanai's story. Literally meaning mad, a Baul is a wanderer singer who defies custom and tradition, and reject idol worship and caste system or the limitations of religion in his quest to find the divine. Blinded by small pox when yet an infant, Kanai belongs to a poor family. His father worked as a labourer in the fields of the local *zamindar* or the landowner till his unfortunate death that makes Kanai the sole

breadwinner for the family. The unfortunate series of deaths in the family make Kanai turn to a guru to teach him to be a Baul singer, so that he can fend for his family. This new brotherhood provides him with love and respect that he would not have otherwise received in his caste-ridden society. Through Kanai's narrative, Dalrymple again comments on the social system, caste hierarchies and marginalization that make life difficult for those on the lower rungs of the social setup. He finds fulfillment and respectability that otherwise would not have been possible for him. Although, on living on the margins of the society, this community is subversive because of its emphasis on practices that would be termed extreme or repugnant in any normal social setup. Interestingly, the respectability and acceptance comes from village folks than the educated urban.

Three stories stand out for their differences from the rest. Prasannamati Mataji, the Jain nun, left the comforts of her home and family when very young. Her fascination with the teachings of the monks and deep faith attracted her to this life of demanding asceticism and devotion which otherwise would have been considered unsuitable for a girl used to comforts and pampering. Tashi Passang, the Buddhist monk, who was born in Tibet and got his *dikhsa* there. He was forced to take up arms against the Chinese during the invasion of Tibet. Now, he continues to live a life doing penance for killing people after he joined a Tibetan unit of the Indian Army. Srikanda Spathy is a maker of idols who traces his ancestry to the bronze casters of the Chola dynasty in southern India. Although he does not belong to the lower caste, this narration has references to caste and the restrictions imposed upon those belonging to the lower castes like learning Sanskrit, during earlier times, and hence their inability to caste proper idols. In its authorial introduction to the place and the story, there is a strong comment implicit in its references to superstitions or blind faith of the people that is manifested in holding rivers, places, stones, etc. divine and worshipping them as such and Dalrymple maintains the stereotypes about caste and landscape in this narrative as well.

### III. CONCLUSION

Dalrymple travels to the remote corners of India in his quest to find the sacred in his travel book. But despite this remoteness of situation, it is apparent that nothing and no one is left untouched by the progress in education, technology, money and ideas, although Dalrymple highlights the opposite throughout. The analysis reveals another important feature of most of these stories and their narrators is their existence in a liminal space. Although, most of them perform important functions in the society, they exist on the margins of the society both in terms of their caste or class and the socio-cultural functions they all perform. Dalrymple maintains certain stereotypes related to caste, poverty, access to education and basic healthcare facilities and superstition, and reinforces some of them with these narratives by his usage of the authorial voice. Despite letting his characters speak for themselves, they are not as free because of the frames of reference provided for them. Although the intent is to give the

background for each narration though this authorial voice, and ritual or practice therein, this also serves to maintain and perhaps reinforce the already existing stereotypes about India. Dalrymple constantly emphasizes the caste and caste hierarchies as most of these men or women belong to the lower castes. Also, India is continuously exoticized, referred to as fecund and fertile, as well as portrayed as “conservative, socially oppressive and rigidly hierarchical” [2, pp. 92]. Although these words are used for a particular society in one of the narrations, there is a persistent highlighting of the same in other narratives as well. The narrative maintains that the caste hierarchies that result in glaring social and economic differences persist in rural India despite the rapid modernization of the urban areas. The analysis reveals that poverty is another recurring feature throughout the text. The book emphasizes the fact that a majority of these nine people have been in a way forced to adopt their stated profession because of their poverty. And given a better choice, like in Mohan Bhopa’s or Srikand Spathy, the younger generation may choose to leave their family calling and join the more modern or popular vocation of being an engineer or some such occupation. There is an apparent surprise at and a guarded acceptance of the faith, which Dalrymple just refrains from naming superstition when he explains it in different stories. If looked at closely, it is actually the faith that holds them or their devotees together, “Without faith, of course, it is just a sculpture. It’s the faith of devotees that turns it into a god.” (pp. 370-371). The sacred that Dalrymple seeks is actually this faith that he however continuously questions. The oft-repeated comparison of modern day rural India to Medieval Europe or England only adds to the stereotypical representation that Dalrymple has done within the pages of *Nine Lives*.

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