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**PLAY OF PERCEPTIONS: THE SOUTH INDIAN IDENTITY IN “THE AGE OF KALI: INDIAN TRAVELS AND ENCOUNTERS” AND “NINE LIVES: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED IN MODERN INDIA”**

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Abstract

The present paper aims to look at South Indian identities as constructed by the author in the books written by Dalrymple, a Scottish travel writer. William Dalrymple, in his other book, “Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India,” represents the south with two stories: of the followers of the goddess Yellamma and a Theyyam dancer from Kannur. The foreign gaze tends to focus on the mystic aspects of the nation that constantly refers to natives as stereotypically steeped in superstition and blind faith. The mapping of South Indian identities suggests several images and paints pictures of the people in an unconsciously biased and appalling manner. Amidst the westernization and amalgamation of cultures, there is a raw patch of originality, unscathed and unpolluted, preserved by people deep-rooted in this understanding of culture. Primarily, one might ridicule the out-dated viewpoint of the natives judged by the contemporary world as stuck in the ancient rut, but on a secondary level, one may realize that it is the effect of the works of writers like Dalrymple, to be more specific, their style of narration and writing. The discrepancy caused by the language gap, modern outlook, and subjective reasons is a few of the general reasons for this occurrence. Though Dalrymple tries to present a neutral stance, certain areas of the text reflect his thoughts on Indian culture. The presence of a sub-conscious layer instigates the reader to ponder the absurdity of their own culture. The study is an attempt to elucidate the bias, though covert in nature, through the interpretations which he overtly expresses. The present paper is not a judgment passed on Dalrymple’s work, rather a reflection of the myopic blindness of a visitor trying to understand the culture from outside and how it conflicts with the viewpoints of the native host.

Keywords: *south Indian identities, yellamma, westernization, myopic.*

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The present paper aims to look at South Indian identities as constructed by the author in the books written by Dalrymple, a Scottish travel writer. *The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters* represents South India with stories from Madurai and Cochin. William Dalrymple, in

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his other book, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, represents the south with two stories: of the followers of the goddess Yellamma and a Theyyam dancer from Kannur. The foreign gaze tends to focus on the mystic aspects of the nation that constantly refers to natives as stereotypically steeped in superstition and blind faith. The mapping of South Indian identities suggests several images and paints pictures of the people in an unconsciously biased and appalling manner. Amidst the westernization an amalgamation of cultures, there is a raw patch of originality, unscathed and unpolluted, preserved by people deep-rooted in this understanding of culture. Primarily, one might ridicule the out-dated viewpoint of the natives judged by the contemporary world as stuck in the ancient rut, but on a secondary level, one may realize that it is the effect of the works of writers like Dalrymple, to be more specific, their style of narration and writing. The discrepancy caused by the language gap, modern outlook, and subjective reasons is a few of the general reasons for this occurrence. Though Dalrymple tries to present a neutral stance, certain areas of the text reflect his thoughts on Indian culture. The presence of a sub-conscious layer instigates the reader to ponder the absurdity of their own culture. The study is an attempt to elucidate the bias, though covert in nature, through the interpretations which he overtly expresses. The present paper is not a judgment passed on Dalrymple's work, rather a reflection of the myopic blindness of a visitor trying to understand the culture from outside and how it conflicts with the viewpoints of the native host.

Reading a travel narrative could be one of the most exhilarating experiences for most, especially those who rely on books alone as a mode of exploring other worlds. This, however, has its bane, as most forget how perceptions and images created are shaped by the author, the keyhole through which this world is conceived to be a reality. When the author is a foreigner who happens to explore a certain culture, the problem which is yet to be addressed, increases. To get a thorough understanding of this issue one has to move back a few centuries.

In the eighteenth century, the oriental world was portrayed as a counterpart of Europe which was considered as all-knowing, stable and powerful by the travel discourses which propagated a sense of 'otherness', as these writers examined the rituals, beliefs, and systems as rudimentary and crude. (Lowe,30-31) Their inability or the lack of open-mindedness enabled the introduction of cultural standards and hence a hierarchy. This has now led to 'amalgamation' and 'hybridization' of cultures. In accordance with the idea put forward by Andreas Motsch, even travel narratives move beyond the drive of necessity or curiosity, or by economic, political, or spiritual pursuits, the concept of writing travel narratives reinforce the way in which the world looks at those places beyond the reach of their physical existence (Motsch, 207). Thus, it does become political, what a travel narrative does is re-create the picture which a person who has never been physically present to experience the wholeness of a culture or a paradigm.

Albeit, times have changed and attempts are made to neutralize this process with the advent of Indian travelogues and narratives, there are many who read travelogues by foreigners without

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a sense of the awareness of the distance which they create to the native culture of the readers. Though the modern writers try their best to keep a neutral stance while narrating their encounters, this concept of otherness still exists and even today has enabled to maintain that divide which existed before.

The present paper tries to act as a decoding agent or simply points out to those subtle parts of a narrative which puts forward this wall of the “other” as pointed out by Fischer so that the reader achieves a certain ‘sensitivity’.

"These Indian travel narratives must be understood in their own terms, not merely as "other" too, or imitative of, European ones." (Fischer, 154)

In context to the works of William Dalrymple, one can say that he has taken the stance of a foreigner who looks at the different systems around him with awe and wonder, but the issue lies in the subtle interjections of his opinions and a certain level of distancing which he involves in, observable upon a close read through the course of his narrative. Though Dalrymple provides an engaging read into one of the most ancient of cultures in its most understandable form, the form of narration also enables that the reader is in a way detached. The paper attempts to substantiate the claims by taking passages from two chapters each, from two of his books. *Nine Lives* of which the chapters “The Daughters of Yellamma” and “The Dancer of Kannur” are taken and from the book *The Age of Kali*, the stories “At the Court of the Fish-Eyed Goddess” and “Parashakti” are chosen.

When constructing a narrative, the intent may not be to create a hierarchy, or a form of a gap, as discussed earlier. The language is also responsible for the same to a large extent, as language itself holds the weight of the culture. The narrator not providing a complete picture of the symbolic elements, handling the gravity of a system of beliefs as a whole and only looking upon those aspects which interest him, to a non-critical reader this material is equivalent to reality. To the critical reader, the same is ‘distorted reality’.

The space created is bound to presents the readers, especially the Indian readers, with a certain estrangement from their own culture, if one is to take a simple example let’s take this excerpt from “The Dancer of Kannur”.

The ‘strange crouching position’ could have been phrased better, to give a better idea of the action rather than just placing it as an irrelevant action. What is the meaning of the action? Why is the same done in a particular way? Is there a history behind the same? Considering the aspect that Dalrymple has included histories of each of these destinations and also the mythologies of these places in his narratives, a deeper analysis of the above mentioned would indeed bring a certain level of completion to the narrative. The casual mode of narration does offer a pleasant read, but the gaps made especially in this context does create a certain space as if an action has been done without any sense of logic as to why this crouching position is performed in the first

place. Apart from the selective mode of elaboration, another aspect which does bring a level of distance is how one conveys the grandeur of his visual perception on the page.

The focus here is how the comparative standard is set, though intentionally or unintentionally when a phenomenon is compared with another the emphasis is more on the object which is standardized than the subject to which it is compared unless one gives multiple sources of comparison. So the identity it holds is compromised, as the image it creates in the reader's mind is distorted. It is repeated in other instances as well, but the point being simply this, rather than focusing on the originality of the structure the writer introduces elements which he is reminded of but does not have any resemblance to the magnanimity of the original, thus creating a distorted sense of reality in the minds of the reader.

In other sections, the obvious detachment can be observed, where certain elements of deeper sentiments are merely left without any in-depth analysis or further substantiation. Thus, reinforcing the image of India being the land of the mystics, rather than land with its own sense of identity, with equality in the process of reasoning to that of the western sense of the same. Like the following section:

"Then tie twine around the banyan tree in the courtyard, and in nine months' time a child will be born, or so they say."(Dalrymple,179)

In the above passage, the significance of the banyan tree, the twine and also the relevance of the action is not discussed, again exposing the incomplete narrative, which distances the audience. This selective mode of narration does bring a sense of distancing and alienation to the readers, especially if read from the perspective of a person who belongs to the homeland. This distancing is very well contributed by language itself, but it is further enhanced with the interjection of subtle lapses and lack of narrations. For someone who elaborates on the landscapes and decorates his narration with imagery and extensive comparative elements, it is unsubstantiated as to why the significance of the Banyan tree or the twine is not thoroughly explained in the passage. The same logic applies to the deity which he encountered in the narrative that ensued.

"In fact, the image was not of a deity, but some sort of fertility Yakshi,'...'"(Dalrymple,187)

This is repetitively seen in his other works as well; in fact, one could opine that his attitude towards other cultures is clearly not that of reverence or respect. Dalrymple's lack of sensitivity towards other cultures is also reflected in the following lines:

"Is this a full-time job, becoming a God?"( Dalrymple,31)

"So you are only part-time Gods?"(Dalrymple, 33)

The gravity with which an outsider takes the matter or when referring to the art of 'Theyyam' as a mere job is not outright derogatory but is a limited understanding of the sanctity with which culture is upheld by the natives of the land. The artists themselves uphold the art beyond a profession, but clearly, Dalrymple fails to acknowledge this. His opinions come from a

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limited set of knowledge unexposed to the variety of the emotions one upholds in different contexts.

“It sounds like a classic case of faith healing.”(Dalrymple,224)

When learning about different types of cultures, facing commonalities in different practices are normal, but categorizing without understanding the whole picture, is disrespectful, as it shows a lack of willingness to understand the entirety of the same. Rather than patiently understanding the traditions upheld by the natives, the author chooses to conclude on the basis of his limited observations.

“There was a nice irony, I thought, in the money of the most Puritanical and intolerant of Wahhabis being used to fund such a fabulously and unrepentantly pagan ceremony” (Dalrymple,51)

One among the core features about India as a nation is an accommodative mindset of multiple religions (though clashes do exist amongst different religious groups, it is lesser in magnitude compared to most), language and cultures. This does exhibit the limitations of Dalrymple's mindset and thinking, where he finds irony is what the natives may call accommodativeness. His observation is in a way dangerous as it reinforces the divide between religions. The habit of reinforcing structures, to disrupt the existing equilibrium is a colonial trait which has brought a divide long ago. Again to a non-critical reader, these are capable of shaping boundaries and divides amidst native groups.

To conclude, the arguments presented above are not in any way an attempt to reprimand or degrade Dalrymple and his works. Moreover, it tries to elaborate on the disadvantageous position which he is in for the culture which he has brought up from and the culture he has to deal with are in direct conflict. Thus what the character Venugopal told Dalrymple in ‘Parashakti’ is applicable in multiple contexts.

"To see her work, maybe you must first be a god- fearing and god loving," he said. Only then can you really understand her true power..." (Dalrymple, 224)

As mentioned in the introduction, these interjections throughout the novel indeed work as a curtain, which reveals only what the author finds interesting or wants his readers to see, thereby blocking or covering the wholeness of the culture and the richness of the same. The author holds back the reader from the complete experience of the native world. Albeit what one can do while experiencing his works is to be aware of the discrepancy he faces as an outsider and keep alive the spirit of inquiry and use his works as a starting point alone to get a greater understanding of different cultures and systems.

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