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Research Article

Sacred Fractures and Subaltern Cosmologies: Reconfiguring Postcolonial Travel Writing in William Dalrymple's Nine Lives and The Age of Kali

[1] Dr Madhvi Rathore, [2] Anjali Chauhan*

[1] Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bhupal Nobles' University Udaipur.
[2] Research Scholar, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bhupal Nobles' University Udaipur.

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***Corresponding author: Anjali Chauhan**
Research Scholar, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Bhupal Nobles' University Udaipur.

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of postcolonial travel writing through a sustained analysis of Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India (2009) and The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters (1998) by William Dalrymple. Situating Dalrymple within the long history of British travel narratives on South Asia, the study argues that his work occupies a transitional position between imperial ethnography and ethically reflexive postcolonial witnessing. While The Age of Kali documents political fragmentation, insurgency, and communal tension in late twentieth-century South Asia through a liberal-humanist lens, Nine Lives experiments with polyphonic narration by foregrounding the lived religious experiences of marginalized spiritual practitioners. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and contemporary travel writing scholarship, this article contends that Dalrymple neither reproduces colonial authority nor entirely escapes its structural residues. Instead, his texts dramatize the unstable ethics of representation in a globalized literary marketplace. By comparing the crisis narrative of The Age of Kali with the sacred ethnography of Nine Lives, the article demonstrates how Dalrymple reconfigures the genre's epistemological assumptions while remaining entangled in the mediating power of authorship. Ultimately, his work reveals the possibilities and limits of travel writing after empire.

Keywords: *William Dalrymple; Postcolonial Travel Writing; Subaltern Studies; Sacred Geography; Narrative Mediation; Liberal Humanism; Religious Pluralism; Kali Yuga; Polyphony; Representation; South Asian Modernity; Lived Religion; Cultural Translation; Ethics of Witnessing.*

Introduction: Travel Writing in the Afterlife of Empire

Travel writing has long functioned as a powerful instrument of cultural interpretation and political authority. From early colonial narratives to Victorian exploration accounts, European travel texts frequently transformed geographical movement into epistemological domination. The traveler did not merely observe foreign lands; he classified, narrated, and incorporated them into imperial knowledge systems. In the South Asian context, travel literature played a significant role in constructing India as both a site of spiritual mystique and civilizational deficiency.

The collapse of formal empire, however, destabilized the genre's authority. Contemporary travel writers must negotiate the ethical implications of representing cultures once subjected to colonial rule. The question is no longer how to describe the exotic Other, but how to write within a world acutely aware of historical asymmetries.

It is within this fraught intellectual terrain that William Dalrymple emerges as a central figure. Known for his historical works as well as his travel narratives, Dalrymple occupies a distinctive position: a Scottish writer deeply immersed in South Asian history yet writing primarily for Anglophone audiences. His travelogues—particularly The Age of Kali and Nine Lives—offer fertile ground for examining how the genre adapts in the postcolonial era.

This article argues that Dalrymple's travel writing enacts a shift from observational authority toward dialogic engagement, while simultaneously revealing the persistence of narrative mediation. The Age of Kali presents a fractured postcolonial landscape marked by violence and ideological extremism, narrated through the reflective lens of liberal humanism. In contrast, Nine Lives attempts to decentralize the authorial voice by foregrounding sacred biographies of marginalized practitioners. The movement between these two texts illustrates an evolving but incomplete reconfiguration of travel writing's epistemic structure. Sacred Fractures and Subaltern Cosmologies:
Reconfiguring Postcolonial Travel Writing in William Dalrymple's Nine Lives and The Age of Kali.

Literature Review: Travel Writing, Postcoloniality, and the Question of Voice

Scholarly engagement with travel writing over the past four decades has decisively reframed the genre from a peripheral literary form to a central instrument of cultural production. Rather than viewing travel narratives as merely descriptive or autobiographical, critics have foregrounded their ideological work within colonial and postcolonial systems of knowledge.

One of the most influential interventions in this field remains Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation by Mary Louise Pratt, who argues that travel texts operate within "contact zones"—social spaces where disparate cultures meet under conditions of asymmetrical power. Pratt demonstrates that European travel writing frequently encoded imperial authority even when it appeared observational or aesthetic. Her concept of transculturation, however, also suggests the possibility of reciprocal cultural exchange, complicating simplistic models of domination.

Building on this foundation, scholars such as Tim Youngs and Carl Thompson have explored how contemporary travel writing negotiates the ethical burden of representing formerly colonized societies. Postcolonial travel writers cannot assume innocence; their mobility is entangled with global inequalities. The genre therefore oscillates between reflexive self-awareness and inherited narrative habits.

Within postcolonial theory, the work of Edward Said remains foundational. Said's analysis of Orientalism reveals how Western discourse constructed the East as static, irrational, and inferior, thereby legitimizing imperial intervention. Although Dalrymple writes after the height of Orientalist scholarship, his subject matter—South Asian religion, politics, and social transformation—inevitably engages with representational frameworks historically shaped by Orientalist discourse.

Subaltern studies further complicate the representational question. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can "speak" within elite discursive systems exposes the structural mediation embedded in acts of narration. Even when marginalized figures are foregrounded, their voices are filtered through institutional and linguistic apparatuses that shape intelligibility. Dalrymple's Nine Lives, structured around interviews with religious practitioners, appears to respond directly to this challenge by attempting to centre subaltern testimony. Yet the act of textualization—translation into English, narrative shaping, and global publication—introduces unavoidable mediation.

Meanwhile, Homi K. Bhabha's articulation of hybridity and the "third space" offers a conceptual lens for understanding Dalrymple's position. His texts inhabit neither purely Western nor purely indigenous epistemologies. They emerge from cross-cultural entanglement, producing hybrid narrative forms that resist binary categorization.

Existing criticism on Dalrymple tends to emphasize his historiographical skill and narrative accessibility rather than deeply interrogating his travel writing within postcolonial theoretical frameworks. While his historical monographs have received significant scholarly attention, his travelogues are often treated as journalistic or literary rather than theoretically consequential. This article addresses that gap by situating The Age of Kali and Nine Lives within debates about narrative authority, subaltern representation, and the ethics of witnessing.

Theoretical Framework: Representation, Mediation, and Ethical Travel Writing

The theoretical stakes of this study revolve around three interrelated questions:

1. How does travel writing negotiate the legacy of imperial epistemology?
2. Can subaltern religious practitioners be represented without reinscribing narrative dominance?
3. What constitutes ethical witnessing in politically volatile contexts?

1. Orientalism and the Residue of the Imperial Gaze

Although Dalrymple's prose avoids overtly exoticizing language, the structural dynamics identified by Said remain relevant. The imperial gaze, as theorized in Orientalism, functioned by producing the Orient as an object of study, rendering it coherent within Western knowledge systems. Travel writers historically participated in this process by mapping, cataloguing, and aestheticizing colonized territories.

In The Age of Kali, Dalrymple's investigative essays at times approach this classificatory impulse. Regions marked by insurgency or sectarian tension are described within larger narratives of decline. The metaphor of Kali Yuga frames

contemporary crisis within a mythic cosmology, potentially universalizing what are historically specific political conflicts. Yet Dalrymple simultaneously resists totalizing claims by foregrounding individual testimonies and localized histories.

The tension between synthesis and fragmentation becomes central. Unlike colonial administrators who claimed objective mastery, Dalrymple acknowledges uncertainty and contradiction. His narrative authority is reflexive rather than absolute.

2. Subaltern Voice and Narrative Architecture

In Nine Lives, Dalrymple structures each chapter around extended life histories. A Jain nun recounts her renunciation; a Baul mystic narrates his spiritual journey; a ritual dancer embodies divine presence through performance. These narratives foreground marginalized religious actors who occupy liminal spaces within modern nation-states.

Spivak's caution regarding subaltern representation demands scrutiny of this structure. Although Dalrymple minimizes intrusive commentary, he remains the architect of the narrative frame. He selects interview excerpts, arranges them into coherent arcs, and contextualizes them for readers unfamiliar with local traditions. The subaltern voice is therefore neither silenced nor fully autonomous; it is curated.

This curated polyphony may be understood as an ethical compromise. Complete authorial withdrawal is impossible within literary production. What Dalrymple attempts instead is a mode of respectful mediation—one that foregrounds lived religion without reducing it to anthropological specimen.

3. Hybridity and the Third Space of Travel Writing

Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides a productive lens for understanding Dalrymple's textual strategy. His works operate within a "third space" where Western historiographical training intersects with South Asian sacred traditions. Rather than presenting India as either exotic spectacle or modern nation-state, he depicts it as layered, contested, and plural.

This hybridity destabilizes essentialist narratives. In The Age of Kali, political extremism coexists with syncretic memory. In Nine Lives, ancient ritual persists within globalized urban landscapes. The coexistence of temporalities undermines linear narratives of modernization.

Political Fragmentation and Moral Witnessing in The Age of Kali

1. Journalism, Travel, and Historical Consciousness

The Age of Kali is structured as a series of essay, each anchored in a specific location or political situation. Unlike classical travelogues that follow a linear itinerary, this text moves episodically, reflecting the fragmented political landscape it describes.

Dalrymple's method combines journalistic inquiry with historical reflection. He interviews militants, aristocrats, bureaucrats, and ordinary citizens, allowing them to articulate grievances and aspirations. Yet these testimonies are interwoven with historical digressions that contextualize contemporary conflicts within colonial and postcolonial trajectories.

This layering of time complicates simplistic narratives of chaos. Violence is not presented as inherent cultural pathology but as historically conditioned phenomenon. Such contextualization resists Orientalist tropes that portray South Asia as intrinsically unstable.

2. The Melancholy of Pluralism

A recurring motif in The Age of Kali is the erosion of pluralistic coexistence. Dalrymple often juxtaposes contemporary sectarianism with memories of syncretic pasts. Architectural ruins, fading aristocratic lineages, and fragmented communities symbolize a broader sense of cultural loss.

This melancholic tone aligns with liberal humanist commitments to secular tolerance. Yet it also risks idealizing a prelapsarian pluralism that may itself have been uneven and hierarchical. The narrative's elegiac register underscores Dalrymple's normative orientation while inviting readers to mourn alongside him.

Sacred Continuity and Embodied Devotion in Nine Lives

1. Biography as Sacred Cartography

In contrast to the crisis narrative of The Age of Kali, Nine Lives constructs a cartography of sacred endurance. Each life story maps a distinct religious landscape—Jain asceticism, Sufi devotion, Tantric ritual, Baul mysticism.

Rather than presenting religion as static tradition, Dalrymple emphasizes adaptation. Practitioners negotiate modern pressures—legal regulation, urbanization, media exposure—while maintaining ritual commitments. The sacred is dynamic rather than fossilized.

The biographical structure personalizes cosmology. Abstract theological doctrines are rendered through lived experience. This method counters the reduction of Indian spirituality to monolithic mysticism, a trope historically prevalent in Orientalist discourse.

2. Performance, Body, and Transcendence

A striking feature of Nine Lives is its attention to embodiment. Ritual dance, ascetic fasting, devotional singing—all foreground the body as site of transcendence. Dalrymple's prose captures texture and rhythm without lapsing into sensationalism.

Embodiment complicates Western dualisms between spirit and matter. Sacred practice is shown to be corporeal discipline embedded within social networks. The narrative thus resists exotic abstraction and situates spirituality within everyday struggle.

Comparative Synthesis: Crisis and Continuity

When read together, The Age of Kali and Nine Lives articulate complementary visions of South Asia. The former foregrounds rupture, violence, and ideological polarization. The latter highlights sacred continuity and plural devotion.

This juxtaposition destabilizes monolithic representations. India emerges not as singular narrative but as field of competing temporalities. Political fragmentation coexists with ritual endurance; modern nationalism intersects with ancient cosmology.

Dalrymple's travel writing thus occupies a transitional position in the genre's evolution. It neither replicates imperial mastery nor dissolves authorial mediation. Instead, it dramatizes the difficulty of ethical representation in a postcolonial world.

Close Readings: Voice, Translation, and Narrative Control

1. Interview as Literary Form in Nine Lives

One of the most significant formal strategies in Nine Lives is the sustained use of interview-based narration. Rather than merely summarizing the beliefs of his interlocutors, Dalrymple reconstructs their speech in extended passages that simulate oral continuity. The Jain nun's renunciation, for instance, unfolds not as abstract theological exposition but as personal narrative marked by hesitation, conviction, and embodied memory. Similarly, the Baul mystic's reflections on song and transcendence are conveyed through lyrical fragments that preserve rhythm and metaphor.

Yet these passages are not raw transcripts. They are edited, translated, and arranged for narrative coherence. The very smoothness of the prose indicates mediation. The dialogic form generates intimacy while concealing the labour of textual shaping. The subaltern voice is audible, but it is refracted through English syntax and narrative pacing.

This tension illustrates the limits of ethnographic authenticity. Even when the traveler prioritizes listening, the final text remains a literary artifact shaped by aesthetic decisions. What emerges, therefore, is not unfiltered voice but ethically curated testimony.

2. Spatial Movement and Moral Framing in The Age of Kali

In contrast, The Age of Kali deploys spatial movement as a structuring principle. Dalrymple's journeys across regions marked by insurgency or political instability create a mosaic of crisis zones. Each chapter functions as both reportage and reflection. Interviews with militants are juxtaposed with architectural ruins, bureaucratic offices, and domestic interiors.

A close reading of these chapters reveals a pattern: Dalrymple frequently begins with vivid description, moves into personal testimony, and concludes with historical contextualization. This tripartite structure situates individual experience within broader temporal arcs. Violence is not isolated spectacle but part of a layered narrative.

However, the concluding reflections often return to the authorial voice as synthesizer. The interpretive authority that recedes in Nine Lives remains more visible here. Dalrymple's commentary frames the moral implications of the events he witnesses. The liberal-humanist lens shapes the evaluative tone.

Translation, Language, and Cultural Mediation

1. English as Global Medium

Both The Age of Kali and Nine Lives are written in English for a predominantly Anglophone readership. This linguistic choice carries implications for representation. English functions as a global medium capable of circulating South Asian narratives across transnational markets. Yet it also imposes semantic frameworks that may not fully capture indigenous cosmologies.

When Dalrymple translates devotional terminology, ritual concepts, or metaphysical categories, he faces the dilemma of equivalence. Literal translation risks opacity; explanatory gloss risks simplification. The text oscillates between retaining vernacular terms and rendering them accessible through analogy.

This oscillation highlights the politics of cultural translation. The act of making subaltern spirituality legible to global readers inevitably transforms it. Dalrymple's prose attempts to preserve nuance, but the structural asymmetry remains: local voices are reframed within globally dominant language systems.

2. Archive versus Oral Tradition

A further distinction between the two texts lies in their relationship to archive. The Age of Kali frequently draws upon documented history—colonial records, political timelines, institutional developments. It engages with formal historiography.

Nine Lives, by contrast, privileges oral testimony and embodied practice. Its archive is experiential rather than documentary. By centring practitioners whose traditions are often transmitted through memory and performance, Dalrymple shifts attention from written history to living ritual.

This shift has epistemological consequences. Written archives traditionally served imperial administration; oral traditions frequently preserved subaltern memory. By foregrounding the latter, Dalrymple participates in a broader postcolonial movement toward recuperating marginalized epistemologies. Yet the conversion of oral memory into published English prose re-enters the domain of textual archive. The subaltern narrative is preserved, but also transformed.

Globalization and the Literary Marketplace

Contemporary travel writing operates within global publishing networks. Dalrymple's works circulate internationally, shaping Western perceptions of South Asia while also being read within the region itself. This dual audience complicates the ethics of representation.

In Nine Lives, practitioners express anxiety about modernization, media exposure, and the erosion of ritual communities. Ironically, their stories gain international visibility through the very circuits of globalization that threaten traditional structures. The book thus participates in a paradox: documenting endangered spiritual worlds while contributing to their global commodification.

Similarly, The Age of Kali presents political instability to international readers who may lack contextual familiarity. The narrative must balance accessibility with complexity. Dalrymple often resists sensationalism, yet the selection of crisis-oriented episodes inevitably shapes perception.

The literary marketplace therefore exerts subtle pressure on genre conventions. Travel narratives must be engaging, coherent, and narratively compelling. These demands influence structure and emphasis. Ethical intention alone cannot neutralize market dynamics.

Ethics of Witnessing and the Limits of Empathy

A central question emerging from this comparative study concerns ethical witnessing. What does it mean to witness violence or sacred devotion as an outsider? Dalrymple's position as a foreign observer who has spent extensive time in South Asia complicates simple categorizations. He is neither transient tourist nor indigenous insider.

In The Age of Kali, witnessing takes the form of investigative engagement. Dalrymple listens to grievances, contextualizes conflict, and mourns pluralistic erosion. His empathy is visible, yet it is mediated by reflective commentary.

In Nine Lives, witnessing becomes participatory observation. Dalrymple attends rituals, travels with practitioners, and immerses himself in sacred geographies. His narrative voice softens, allowing subjects greater discursive space.

Yet empathy cannot dissolve structural difference. The traveller retains mobility, publication access, and interpretive authority. The practitioners he describes often inhabit precarious social positions. The asymmetry persists even within respectful engagement.

Rather than resolving this tension, Dalrymple's texts expose it. They reveal the instability of postcolonial representation: the desire to honor subaltern cosmologies while recognizing the mediating power of authorship.

Comparative Conclusion: Transitional Postcolonial Aesthetics

Reading The Age of Kali alongside Nine Lives illuminates an evolution in narrative strategy. The earlier work foregrounds political rupture and moral reflection; the later text emphasizes sacred continuity and dialogic listening. Together, they articulate what may be termed a transitional postcolonial travel aesthetics.

This aesthetic is characterized by:

- Reflexive awareness of imperial legacy
- Attempted decentralization of authorial dominance
- Persistent narrative mediation
- Engagement with both crisis and continuity
- Hybridization of historiography and ethnography

Dalrymple does not fully escape the structural residues of imperial travel writing. His texts remain shaped by English language, global readership, and narrative synthesis. Yet he significantly complicates inherited models by foregrounding lived religion, contextualizing political violence, and dramatizing ethical uncertainty.

In this sense, his contribution lies not in achieving representational purity but in staging the difficulty of representation itself. Travel writing after empire cannot claim transparent objectivity. It must acknowledge its own entanglement in histories of power. Dalrymple's works, taken together, offer a sustained meditation on this entanglement.

Conclusion

This article has argued that William Dalrymple's The Age of Kali and Nine Lives exemplify the evolving possibilities and persistent tensions of postcolonial travel writing. Situated within the intellectual aftermath of empire, Dalrymple navigates the ethical challenges of representing South Asian political and religious landscapes for a global audience.

The Age of Kali constructs a narrative of fragmentation and moral witnessing, framed through liberal-humanist reflection and historical contextualization. Nine Lives shifts toward polyphonic biography, foregrounding subaltern spiritual practitioners and sacred embodiment. The movement between these texts signals an attempt to reconfigure narrative authority while acknowledging its limits.

Drawing upon postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and travel writing scholarship, this study has demonstrated that Dalrymple's work inhabits a hybrid space—neither imperial chronicle nor purely indigenous narrative. His texts reveal the instability of ethical representation in a world shaped by colonial memory and global circulation.

Ultimately, Dalrymple's significance lies in his willingness to expose rather than conceal this instability. By dramatizing the tensions between empathy and mediation, crisis and continuity, archive and oral tradition, he contributes to an ongoing redefinition of travel writing in the postcolonial era.

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