

## Eco-criticism in the chapters *The Maker of Idol* and *The Lady Twilight* of William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives in Search of the Sacred in Modern India*

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### Abstract

Life sustains on this planet because of the intervention of the natural atmosphere. There was a time when humans could know the quality of the soil just by feeling its warmth of it. The explicit relationship between humans and the values of nature was unimaginable. The rise of the industrial era and the modernistic material notions led to a narrow relationship. The paper adopts a perspective of Eco spiritualism in the chapters *The Maker of Idols* and *The Lady Twilight*, the non-fictional work of William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives in Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. With the help of primary textual analysis, the paper locates the connection between the natural environment and the sacredness undiminished in the modern country.

**Keywords:** natural atmosphere, modernistic material notions, Eco spiritualism, sacredness undiminished, modern country

### Discussions

There are stories awakening spirituality and ballads sung in praise of nature. Even today, the district of Kannur, the northern part of Kerala state, preserves the flora or greenery in shrines like *Kaavus* and preaches the diety *Naagarajavu*(the serpent). Before the rise of the technical hub, humans had spiritual contact with nature. Nature was hailed and preached by the natives. The natives strongly believed that God, the Almighty, communicates to them through the form of nature. "Eco spirituality is a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment" (Lincoln 2000).

The story represents a modern India but Dalrymple acknowledges to the readers that people preserve the belief in the natural environment. At the beginning of the chapter, *The Maker of Idols* describes the beauty of the rain-quenched village in the districts of Tanjore, Tamil Nadu state. "Thanjavur is one of the traditional cities of Tamil Nadu. It thrived as the ancient capital of the Chola kingdom, later of Marathas and Nayaks." (Viswanath 2019). The rain has flooded the area as Dalrymple states, "Rickshaws sluiced through the flooded streets"

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(Dalrymple 176). The downpour of rain represents the mighty cosmic dance of Lord Shiva called Thandav. The cosmic dance of Shiva symbolises the interplay of dynamic and static divine energy flow, containing the five principles of eternal energy- creation, preservation, destruction, illusion and emancipation” (Shashidharan 2012). Soon after the rain is over, the annual procession of the village gods is expected to begin. At the same time as the plot progresses, for about a certain moments, the villagers are nowhere to be seen because of the heavy downpour of rain. It should have been a common belief among the villagers not to disturb the dance of Lord Shiva.

The chapter *The Maker of Idols* talks of the sculptor, Mr Srikanda and his business of making the idols for the temple. The idols were sculpted with the help of bronze. Later on, it was discovered all of a sudden the idea of clay, the fine silt at the bend in the Kaveri was suited well for them for making the moulds where the usual bronzes were cast. The influence of nature is present here. The profession of making the idols with bronze has been carried out by them for nearly 700 years. The discovery of the utilisation of clay acted as a boon to the sculptors, it helped them to polish their work more systematically. “It is with the blessings of the Almighty that we have taken this birth, and can make our living in this way, creating gods in the form of man”. (Dalrymple 178). Furthermore back in those days the orders bloomed and lasted for nearly a year, now they do not receive orders from the Kaveri Delta. But, these days they receive orders from abroad. The art of using clay has improved their life in the story we can find that the author talks of the orders booked from outside their land after referring to the discovery of clay from the bend of the Kaveri. The magnificence of the river Kaveri has crossed the rivers to a distant land. The people believed in their soil. Upon the belief they sculpted God.

Dalrymple asks Srikanda, “What it was like to forge the idols that other men worshipped”. The reply Srikanda gives to this is a remarkable one. “I try to think this is not made by me, or even something made by man.... I think: this is a deity” (Dalrymple 178). This shows the staunch belief of Srikanda. The idols were sculpted by him but when the time comes to make them divine, Srikanda advocates spiritualism avoids materialistic thoughts and becomes *aparigraha*. According to Jainism, “the vow of *aparigraha* consists in abstaining from all attachment to the senses.” (Joseph V 11). Remember the famous work *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare where he shares the same idea as none in this world possesses anything, they come, play the role and then depart. “The entire world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' (As You Like It Act 2, Scene 7).” Srikanda approaches an unworldly, non-temporal and heavenly status. The spiritual belief in him and the blessings of the Kaveri had provided him with a new insight transforming him into a complete good natural human being devoid of greediness, jealousy, etc., Hence the line “That is only human”. (Dalrymple 178).

We are a part of nature. The idea is concentrated here in a spiritual manner. “God is within us” (Dalrymple 179). God is present in nature and so they believe that nature is within them. The hands that sculpted God made nature reside in their minds, in their hearts. “Our mind should never go back to what it was or how it came into being” (Dalrymple 179). The heavenly words of Dalrymple tell us that the writer was not only in search of the sacredness in modern

India but was also fascinated by the natural beauty of the land. The character Srikanda acts as a metaphor by acknowledging the readers and the outside world that we should not possess any anthropocentric view. Our minds should be completely free from worldly thoughts and aspirations. The mind should lack unearthly jealousy. The materialistic attitudes should be controlled and must be in peace with nature.

The depiction of myths believed to be true by the villager's acts as evidence for the eco-spiritualistic notions. "If the villages are the preserve of godlings and obscure village goddesses, then in the prosperous temple towns that dot the plains of the south many of the features of the landscape are animated with stories and myths which link them with the great pan- Indian gods Shiva, Vishnu and the Devi" (Dalrymple 183). The villagers rely on nature which provides everything to regulate their daily life and the ones who guard nature are the Gods. Hence the villagers offer the betel leaves, areca nuts and also garland to their deity. This is a common practice performed in southern India where the deity, the idols of Gods and Goddesses will be completely ornamented with flowers of different varieties. As Dalrymple puts it "There are few places in the world where landscape and divinity are more closely linked than in southern India". (Dalrymple 183). Apart from the flora, the rural Tamizhans use the fauna also. "...cow's role was to provide milk for *pujas*" (Dalrymple 196). The rural villagers show their love and concern for these gentle, meek beings also. As they believe that they are the gift of God, a part of nature and it sustains their daily life. The Tamizhans cultivate human values and care for the aesthetic beauty of Earth. While representing the image of cows as sacred, Dalrymple a Scottish writer, not only tries to mock the western thoughts of nature which are filled with eco-materialism but also the readers are reminded of the philosophical insights of *Tirukkural*. It means the 'holy couplets of Tiruvalluvar, a Tamil poet and philosopher.

"Tiruvalluvar's philosophy is that of common man and hence he developed his ideals in such a manner that man ought to live as a true human being and cherish all the human values, promote earthly virtues, establish social harmony, engage in domestic life follow political ideologies, develop mutual assistance, adhere to the life of renunciation, enjoy all kinds of pleasures, contemplate deeply on a few metaphysical issues, etc." (Gopalakrishnan 30). Dalrymple through the character Srikanda tries to teach the readers a pleasing lesson of discipline. Self-control is the most important thing that a human being should possess. To stop the anthropocentric view and to instil the notions of deep ecology, one must start taking control of one's actions in terms of cupidity and enviousness. "If a God is in the heart and that heart becomes corrupted, the deity cannot flow through that sculptor into the idol". (Dalrymple 199). William Shakespeare represents the same idea, not spiritually though, through his tragic work, Macbeth with the help of three witches. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair:" (Act 1 scene 1). Being a spiritual land, Dalrymple's non-fictional character, Srikanda, tries to teach that only the decontaminated minds will feel the pleasures of nature.

Towards the concluding parts of the chapter, we can find how Srikanda was taught to be a good sculptor by his father. He was systematically instructed step by step on how to make a perfect idol. His father made him understand the importance of an unbroken tradition followed generation after generation. Additionally, "My father used to say that the chisel was

his teacher. It moves in a way that even we cannot control- the heart is its driver, and God is in the heart.” (Dalrymple 202). A moral value to impart to the younger generations. Being a good citizen, be justice and maintain respect as long as they tread on this soil. An unbroken tradition of 700 years of crafting idols gifted from the inheritors represents that our ancestors have preserved this soil, the green blankets, the showers of rain, the sea, etc. for us to live rightfully. Hence it must be carefully preserved as the next generation should nourish the soil, the warmth of the green blankets, the blessings of the showers etc. “After all, as my son says, this is the age of computers”. (Dalrymple 204). The successors of the generation feel that the technological hub and living by artificial means are supreme.

Disrupting the Earth’s beauty and the harm were caused largely due to human activity. Mistreating a land is commonly practised not only in the high-tech urban areas but also in the interiors also. Humans are seen to have a violent relationship with nature. “Peace is essential for individual well-being. Peace is an integral part of normal social life and relations. If peace is lost, man’s existence loses its smooth, flawless tenor.” (Roy 11). In the chapter *The Lady Twilight*, we come across a different version of the eco-spiritual element. The ecological concern, not pleasing though, appears to be sinisterly balancing the spiritual element throughout the story. Hence, a contrasting feature takes place where nature is described unenthusiastically prolonging the beauty simultaneously.

The story takes place in Calcutta. It is described as an eerie place with no good reputation. Unlike his other chapters, *The Lady Twilight* does not provide any vivid description of the lush green nature. The readers find that it rather takes a modernistic approach that talks about death, cremation, graveyard, human skull, etc. This chapter talks about the Tantric sadhus, their rituals, etc. Dalrymple storks the first contrasting feature of an animal getting slaughtered in a vegetarian country. “...drinking the blood of the goats slaughtered day after day... in this frequently vegetarian country” (Dalrymple 205). The country is been proclaimed to be frequent vegetarian but we find an anthropocentric approach where the humans dominate, forming an aspect of human centrism.

The writer while in contact with the character Manisha enquires in detail about the place where they reside. Even though the place is expressed as eerie and scary, the spirituality in Manisha kept her far from the ghostly atrocities created by the general public. “Tara loves us” (Dalrymple 208). Manisha is not scared and believes that she is raised by the goddess. The spiritual belief has transformed her and promoted her to be a transcendental by detaching the outside worldly elements.

Another beautiful element in the first part of this chapter which requires a highly mentioning is “If you call her from your heart, one day you will see her, floating before you” (Dalrymple 209). This is described as the Goddess Tara. The staunch belief of people like Manisha upon the divine is presented here along with nature in the form of the divine. Mother Earth is metaphorically presented here in India, they call it *Bhoomi Devi*. “The idea of Earth as Mother Goddess and a living entity is as old as mankind, and references can be found in many ancient civilizations. The Greeks called her ‘*Gaia*’ – the primordial mother earth goddess and the source of all life. Romans called her ‘*Terra*’.” (Anaadi Foundation). When one truly worships nature from the heart, one will witness and experience the tranquil motions of nature

in its most idyllic manner. Right awareness, also called *Samyak Smrti*, in Buddhism. “The awareness of the body, the awareness of sensations, awareness of thought and the awareness of the internal functions of the mind.”(Joseph V 39). Yoga is referred to as communion with nature. Meditation helps to exercise spirituality in nature. “Acknowledge that nature is at play inside your body. It’s in your bones and it’s in your blood. The oxygen you breath is produced by plants, allowing us to live. The carbon dioxide we breathe out in turn feeds those plants, allowing them to live by our side.” (Dhyaan Foundation). When one sees oneself through nature and spirituality, the mind will be free from any unearthy affairs and gets transformed into an energy of freshness and positivity.

Towards the second part of the chapter, the goddess's description appears to be horror. In “*Mundamala Temple* Tara is called She who likes Blood” (Dalrymple 211). According to the believers, it means that Tara, the goddess will not only grant fulfilment to the wishes of her devotees but also at the same time she will slay the evils and their bad deeds ruthlessly. She is described as the goddess who prefers blood and gets smeared in it. The bad deeds represented here are the homocentric approaches of the people, who subjugate earthly values and harm nature and its environment. Goddess, like a mother, nourishes and feeds her children but the same children when tries to slay them she takes the form of a devil.

A reference to yoga was made above. Yoga is a communion with nature, a spiritual devotion towards nature. The mentality of a person will transform to be in peace with nature and the environment around. In this chapter, Dalrymple uses the word ‘Tantra’ which he says that it discusses yogic practices long back in the early medieval period. The Tantric traditions did not stay for many long years in many parts of the country. Certain traditions were viewed as highly superstitious and very much undeveloped. “...Hindus believe that purity and good living are safeguarded by avoiding meat and alcohol” (Dalrymple 215).

Dalrymple explains in another part of the chapter where he employs the idea of describing Manisha’s childhood, her first step to religion and the trance of spirituality affected her life. After the marriage, Manisha was spending all her time in the temple and she hardly spent time with her in-laws and with the household duties which a woman is normally assigned. Directing herself towards a right view, Manisha was completely preoccupied with spirituality. “None of this stopped me. Instead, I became increasingly preoccupied with the goddess and spent more and more of my time in the temple, listening to *kirtans*”. (Dalrymple 222). The worldly affairs of her life were sacrificed for spiritual purposes and she couldn’t withstand it. *Samyak-dristi*, the first component of the eight-fold path of Buddhism says, “It consists of the grasp and acceptance of the four noble truths, rejection of the fault doctrines, and avoidance of immorality resulting from covetousness, lying, violence, etc.” (Joseph V 38). Nature affects the life of a human instantly when one is obsessed with it. The mind wanders in nature and starts to sing the *kirtans* in praise of nature. She adds, “My three daughters were no longer babies and I felt better able to imagine taking my own path”. Self-reliance teaches one how to self-sustain and be self-independent. Dalrymple further adds, “Come to me. All that you may lose, you will recover. I will take care of your daughters. Your place is now with me”. (Dalrymple 223). Considering the life of a human on this Earth, we arrive without carrying anything and after a while, we depart taking nothing. Hence, the call of nature is very spiritual



and esteemed. In terms of nature, all that one will lose is nothing but what one gain is peace and being in communion with a beautiful life. It would rather be just a call- the call to nature, the call to spiritualism. After enduring such a call, it cannot be repudiated. "It was not my will. Mother called me, and I had to go". (Dalrymple 223).

**Conclusion:**

The idea of greenery and spiritual thoughts will always remain within as long as the last human strands on this Earth. Humans should nourish it at the beginning stage, and later on, honour it. To have a spiritual conviction one must sacrifice and must try to avoid material thoughts. While in nature, it is the duly right of every human being to enjoy all the aspects of nature. Manisha says to Dalrymple, "This is the will of Tara, everyone must accept it" (Dalrymple 232). The reference to Tara acts as a metaphor for nature and spirituality. Everyone must accept nature and its spiritual process the way it is. Nature may soothe one's mind and soul, but similarly, it can be devastating too, bringing all sorts of sorrows and tears. Spirituality provides freshness and no one can avoid spiritual thoughts. One can never expect nature and spirituality to be irrelevant and redundant elements for living on this Earth. It is very difficult to ignore it as we all are part of it.

Born in the lap of nature, one lives within till the last breath. Being spiritual toward nature and oneself is another major element which keeps our life on the move. The relationships which were fostered, the enjoyments created, and the sorrows carried should one day be left back and must carry on the journey into nature and then to the afterlife. A human, who set the heart on the creation and believes that everything belongs to the Creator, will surely lead a path of glory, will face fears of none, and will counter no doom. The modernistic approach toward nature and the environment always had an unpleasant effect. Various pollution problems arise due to ill-treatment and the degradation of the environment.

William Dalrymple, a prolific writer tries to search for sacredness in modern India and finds out the various sacred beliefs of the people of India. Dalrymple through this book depicts to the world how far the natives have been successful in preserving nature along with its spiritual beliefs. By keeping modern India in the background, he tries to balance spirituality and nature in these chapters and maintains a parallel relationship between them. The sacredness in nature shows that it has given a livelihood to the characters of the story. The references and attitudes of the characters prove the elements of eco-spirituality are brought out finitely.

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