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# Performing Identities: Exploring Cultural Heritage and Spiritual Resilience in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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## Abstract

*This article examines the application of performance theory in William Dalrymple's work *Nine Lives*, providing an analysis of how rituals, ceremonies, and artistic expressions influence cultural identities and spiritual encounters. By narrating the stories of nine individuals from various religious backgrounds, Dalrymple explores the convergence of faith, tradition, and social equity in present-day India. The examination of key themes such as cultural heritage, religious devotion, and resilience is conducted through the lens of Richard Schechner's performance theory, emphasizing the influential role of performative actions in navigating social interactions and asserting personal autonomy. Chapters like "The Maker of Idols," "The Dancer of Kannur," "The Nun's Tale," and "The Singer of Epics" are scrutinized to demonstrate how performances act as embodiments of cultural legacy and tools for cultural conservation. Through Dalrymple's detailed storytelling and character portrayals, readers are encouraged to contemplate the dynamic relationship between performance, culture, and spirituality in shaping human experiences and societal standards.*

**Keywords:** Performance Theory, Cultural Heritage, Craftmanship, Asceticism, Religious Devotion and Cultural Preservation.

## Introduction

Performance theory explores the wide array of cultural, spiritual, and artistic expressions. This comprehensive analysis delves deeply into the application of performance theory in the book *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple. It sheds light on how rituals, ceremonies, and artistic performances serve as profound manifestation of human experiences, identities, and interactions with the sacred. By drawing upon disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, and theatre studies, performance theory offers a theoretical framework that enables to understand how individuals and communities construct meaning, express identities, negotiate power dynamics, and engage with the sacred through performative acts. In *Nine Lives*, performances are not mere spectacles, but rather profound expression of cultural heritage, spiritual devotion, artistic creativity, and human resilience. Performance theory analyse the rituals, ceremonies, and artistic

traditions depicted in this book, uncovers layers of meaning, symbolism, and social dynamics that are intricately connected into these performative acts.

William Benedict Hamilton- Dalrymple, a distinguished Scottish historian and author, is renowned for his significant contribution to the comprehension of South Asian and Middle Eastern colonial history. His literary works have been translated into over 40 languages, showcasing his global impact. Dalrymple's meticulous investigative methods and engaging storytelling style provide readers with a captivating exploration of various historical eras. His exceptional writing has garnered numerous prestigious awards and accolades, including the Wolfson Prize for History, The Duff Cooper Memorial Prize, The Hemingway, The Arthur Ross Medal of the US Council on Foreign Relations, The Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, and the Sunday Times Young British Writer of the Year Award. Some of his notable publications are *City of Djinns*, *White Mughals*, *Nine Lives*, and *The Last Mughal*. *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple is a compelling non-fiction work that offers a profound insight into the diverse and vibrant religious practices of contemporary India. By examining the lives of nine individuals from different religious backgrounds, Dalrymple delves into the intricate nature of faith, devotion, and spirituality that influences the Indian people. This book was honoured with 2010 Asia House Award for Asian Literature, underscoring its significance in the literary landscape.

### **Glimpse of the Story**

*Nine Lives: In Search of Sacred in Modern India* by William Dalrymple demonstrates how religious and cultural routes might intersect at one point. This book entitles the narratives of the lives of nine Indians which is said through nine different life stories. It includes the stories of a Jain Nun called Prasannamati Mataji; Hari Das, a part time dancer from Kerala; the Devadasi Rani Bai from Karnataka; Mohan Bhopa and his wife Batasi from Rajasthan as the singer of Epics; the Hindu converted Sufi, Lal Peri; Tashi Passang who is in his fight against the Chinese settlements in Tibet; Srikanda Sapaty, an idol maker from Tamil Nadu; Manisha Ma Bhairavi as the Lady Twilight of Bengal; and the wandering Minstrels or Bauls from Bengal. All these characters showcase their culture and religion to combat social justice through extreme refuge and intense mysticism. The intrinsic cosmopolitanism of human lives and especially of society is one of the highlighted themes in this book. The broad cast of characters depicts how an extensive number of people with diverse views constitute a society. This article covers a wide range of topics such as journalism, travelogue, history, politics, religion and faith. It also interestingly combines two issues together: India and Faith that conjure the lives of these nine men and women.

### **Performance Theory**

Performance theory, articulated by Richard Schechner, is a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of performance and its impact on society. Schechner argues that performance is a fundamental aspect of human life, confining not only traditional forms such as theater and dance but also everyday behavior, rituals, and social interactions. Central to performance theory is the concept of "recovered behavior," which refers to how individuals adopt particular roles and behaviors in a given context. This can happen in formal performance contexts, such as theater productions, as well as in informal social interactions. According to Schechner, all human behavior can be considered as a form of performance, in which individuals continuously engage in acts of self-expression and role-playing. Schechner also emphasizes the role of cultural and social context in shaping and determining performance. It argues that performances are deeply rooted in specific cultural and historical traditions, and that they reflect and shape social norms, values and power dynamics. As such, performances are not just aesthetic or entertaining spectacles but also important sites for negotiating and debating social meaning and identity.

## Exploring Performances in *Nine Lives*

### 1. “The Maker of Idols”

Performance theory as an expressive act of religious devotion refers to the ways in which individuals constitute their religious beliefs, emotions, and commitments through ritualized behaviors, gestures, and ceremonies. In the context of William Dalrymple’s *Nine Lives*, this concept can be observed in the narrative of “The Maker of Idols”, which is about Srikanda Spathy, an individual Hindu idol maker. The craftsmanship of Srikanda Spathy and the rituals associated with idol-making extend beyond practicality, involving profound symbolism and performative elements. By meticulously attending to every detail and adhering to traditional techniques passed down through generations, Spathy infuses his creations with spiritual meaning and reverence. “Once the eyes are opened by having their pupils chiseled in with a gold chisel, once the deity takes on the form of the idol and it becomes alive, it is no longer mine” (Dalrymple 179). Each stroke of his chisel and every offering of incense represents a deliberate expression of devotion and dedication to the deities he serves. By employing performance theory, Spathy’s work can be interpreted as an embodied practice, where his actions and gestures effectively communicate religious beliefs, values, and emotions.

### 2. “The Dancer of Kannur”

The significance of ritual performances as embodiments of cultural heritage is vividly portrayed in *Nine Lives*. One notable example of the power of ritual performances in capturing cultural heritage is found in the chapter “The Dancer of Kannur”. Dalrymple explores the intricacies of Theyyam rituals in Kerala through the character of Hari Das, a Theyyam dancer. This ritual blend elements of mythology, folklore, and ancestral worship. Dalrymple’s vivid portrayal of Hari Das’s performances brings to life the elaborate costumes, mesmerizing movements, and profound spiritual devotion inherent in Theyyam. These performances not only entertain but also evoke a deep sense of collective memory and identity, as they honor the cultural traditions and beliefs that have shaped the community over centuries. These rituals serve as ritual embodiments of cultural heritage, transmitting ancestral wisdom and knowledge to future generations while simultaneously fostering a sense of continuity and belonging within the community. “As is the case with each and every story in the “theyyam” form was developed as a response to Kerala’s oppressive and rigid caste system, which is discussed in the book where the social backdrop plays a significant influence in the construction of a faith” (Vjesh 466).

### 3. “The Nun’s Tale”

Richard Schechner’s performance theory offers a valuable framework for analysing the narrative, “The Nun’s Tale” in *Nine Lives* as a manifestation of asceticism and devotion. Schechner also delves into the immersive quality of performances, emphasizing their ability to transport individuals to different realities and elicit emotional, intellectual, and spiritual changes. The narrative of Prasannamati Mataji, plunges readers into the realm of Jain asceticism, providing a glimpse into the physical, psychological, and existential obstacles she encounters along her spiritual journey. “The story of the transformation of this young girl into a woman going through the initiation process to be a perfect nun is heartwarming, particularly when she enjoys the close friendship of another young girl, like any other teenager, and at times gut-wrenching, especially when she has her hair plucked out of her young scalp and enters into a process of ritualistic starvation to die at will” (Nath 238). By embarking on a path of self-denial, self-discipline, and renunciation, readers are able to observe the profound impact of religious rituals and dedication. Schechner’s framework

aids in comprehending how the nun's enactment of ascetic practices establishes a platform for both personal and communal metamorphosis, challenging traditional concepts of self, longing, and contentment.

#### 4. "The Singer of Epics"

Performance theory offers a structure for comprehending the utilization of different forms of expression by individuals, including storytelling, music, dance, and ritual, in order to convey significance, share ideas, and mould identity. The story of "The Singer of Epics" underscores the significance of performance as a vehicle for cultural preservation. "Mohan and Batasi were two of the last hereditary singers of a great Rajasthani medieval poem, The Epic of Pabuji. This 600-year-old poem is a fabulous tale of heroism and honour, struggle and loss, and finally, martyrdom and vengeance" (Dalrymple 79). In numerous traditional societies, performances like storytelling, music, dance, and ritual play a pivotal role in transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and customs from one generation to the next. The protagonist, Mohan Bhopa is tasked with the responsibility of conserving and passing on traditional stories and folklore, ensuring that these narratives endure and remain relevant in the collective consciousness of his community.

#### Conclusion

Performance theory can be a way of framing objects of study, viewing them as performances, thereby facilitating a new sort of thinking about them. The application of performance theory in the novel *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple presents a sophisticated and complex analysis of how performances influence identities, defy dominant ideologies, cultivate social connections, convey feelings, and push people against cultural limitations. By adopting the perspective of performance theory, profound insights are uncovered into the transformative power of performative actions in negotiating cultural intricacies, asserting individual agency, and promoting inner strength in various cultural environments. Dalrymple's intricate storytelling and characterisation encourage readers to ponder the profound connections between performance, culture, and spirituality. His writings prompt a more profound comprehension of the dynamic interaction between heritage and ingenuity, consistency and evolution.

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