

**BLOCK: IV**

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# UNIT- 1

## JAVIER MARIAS: BACKGROUND

### Unit Structure:

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  - 1.3.1 Chronology of Important Events in Javier Marias' Life
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### 1.1 Objectives:

This unit focuses on providing an account of the background of the renowned Spanish author and translator Javier Marias, his contributions to contemporary Spanish literature, and an introduction to his unique form of writing in his work *Written Lives*. This unit will enable you to:

- *discover* Javier Marias' background as a writer,
- *understand* the significance of the genre of life writing,
- *examine* how the blurring of fiction and reality serves as an important prose technique.

### 1.2 Introducing the Author:

The biographical details of a writer helps one understand the context in which a literary work is produced. The reasons behind the usage of

certain themes and aspects of writing become clearer upon reading such details. Javier Marias was born on September 20, 1951, in Madrid, to Julian Marias, a philosopher, and Dolores Franco Manera, a writer. He was the fourth of their five children. Most of his family members were involved in creative or academic pursuits. Three of his brothers were artists. He spent the first year of his life in the United States of America. His father taught at several key educational institutions there, including Yale University and Wellesley College. His mother was a translator who also edited an anthology of Spanish literature. After returning from America, he studied at Complutense University in Madrid, Spain. He studied English philology and philosophy there. He took up teaching at several prominent institutions, like colleges in Oxford and in Wellesley at Massachusetts. His first stint as a writer came as a result of his stay at his uncle's apartment in Paris where he was introduced to the world of movies and scriptwriting. He published his first novel at the age of 20 in the year 1971. The novel was titled *Los dominos del lobo* ("The Dominions of the Wolf") in which he parodied American films. He established himself as an influential writer within the Spanish contemporary literary scene with the publication of the Spanish translation of *Tristram Shandy*, for which he was awarded the National Translation Prize. He produced many works of translation and also served as a columnist. He produced unique literary works based on profound philosophical themes dealing with complex subject matters in lucid language.

Javier Marias' versatility as an author is exemplified by the numerous genres of literary works he produced. He published fifteen novels, three collections of short stories, and several works of nonfiction. His works have been translated into as many as forty-six languages. Despite existing in a technologically-driven world, Marias never used a computer or the internet for his writing and was solely dependent on his electric typewriter.

In September 2022, Marias succumbed to pneumonia caused by COVID-19 and died at the age of 70.

### 1.3 Background of the Author's Works:

Javier Marías began his writing career at a relatively young age and rapidly gained recognition for his literary talents. Marías developed a passion for literature and writing from a young age, influenced by his family's literary background. His father Julián Marías was a philosopher, and his brother, Antonio Marías, was a writer. This milieu fostered his love for books and storytelling. He wrote the short story "The Life and Death of Marcelino Itturiaga" at the age of fourteen. In 1971, at the age of 19, Javier Marías published his debut novel, "Los dominios del lobo" (The Dominions of the Wolf), based on an American family. This early work displayed his evolving literary aptitude and set the stage for his future calling as a novelist.

He translated many significant works of literature, like Laurence Sterne's famous novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, into Spanish. The translation, titled *Vida y opiniones del caballero Tristram Shandy*, was published in 1981. He also translated Alexandre Dumas' historical novel *The Black Tulip* (La tulipán negra) into Spanish in 1991. Another important work of translation was the Spanish translation of Mikhail Bulgakov's iconic novel *The Master and Margarita*. His translation, titled *El maestro y Margarita*, was published in 2006. Other important translations include Herman Melville's novel *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* (Pierre o las ambigüedades) into Spanish in 2008, Oscar Wilde's classic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (El retrato de Dorian Gray) in 2011, and Charles Dickens' beloved novella *A Christmas Carol*. The translation, titled *Cuento de Navidad*, was published in 2013.

His active engagement with the canonical writers in the form of prolific translations of their works influenced his writings further. He took inspiration from their narrative styles and showed a deep reverence for the writing methods employed by Shakespeare, Sterne, Cervantes, and Proust. His works mostly revolve around themes like the incomprehensibility of life, secrecy, treason, love and marriage. His works displayed his inclination towards using complex narrative

techniques and themes. The complex philosophical underpinnings of his works were inspired by writers like Vladimir Nobakov, William Faulkner, and Marcel Proust. The themes of memory, identity, and the intricacies of human relationships therefore, pervade most of his works. Some of his most famous works include *A Heart So White* (Corazón tan blanco) and the "Your Face Tomorrow" trilogy. Marias ingenuity in reinventing these very quintessential literary themes was the reason behind making him a successful author who sold millions of his books, including their translated versions. Marias emphasised translation as a form of transfer of knowledge from one language to another, which required one to understand the pace of the style of the original writer's work.

The Spanish Civil Wars and dictator Franco's rule recur in the backdrop of his books but he did not actively speak out against them in his novels for which he was criticised by some. The reason behind not highlighting the prominent political issues of his times was the fact that he was not in favour of journalistic novels. According to him the true purpose of a novel is "imparting recognition of things that you didn't know you knew. You say 'yes'. It feels true even though it might be uncomfortable. You find this in Proust, who is one of the cruellest authors in the history of literature. He says terrible things, but in such a way that you know that you have experienced those thoughts too." However, he remained actively involved in political writings as a newspaper columnist for over more than eighteen years.

He received critical acclaim for some of his major works like his novel *A Heart So White* won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1997. He was honoured with Spain's National Narrative Prize for his contributions to Spanish literature. This award is one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Spain which he denied in order to "avoid being connected to any political party or power". In 2011 he won the European literary prize for his outstanding contributions to European literature. In 2019, he was awarded the prestigious Jerusalem Prize for his lifetime achievement in literature at the Jerusalem International Book Fair. He also had been conferred with the title of the King of Redonda,

a real place denoted by an islet in the Caribbean, the claim to which is passed down from one writer to another. In a light-hearted manner he admitted in an interview to *The Guardian* that "I've taken my responsibilities lightly," and that he follows the role of an "intellectual nobility" by sponsoring literary awards. Some of the notable writers who have been recipients of these awards include J.M Coetzee, Alice Munro, A.S Byatt, Umberto Eco and William Boyd.

#### **Stop to Consider:**

The importance of knowing the context of a writer's literary works  
Understanding an author's cultural background, including their nationality, can provide insights into the themes, settings, and cultural references in their writing. Marías, for example, is Spanish, and his works often engage with Spanish culture and history. An author's personal experiences, such as their upbringing, education, and life events, can inform the themes and characters in their works. Understanding Marías' life experiences can offer insights into the motivations behind his storytelling. Familiarity with the authors and literary movements that have influenced an author can provide a broader literary context for their work. Marías has been influenced by writers such as Henry James and William Faulkner, and recognizing these influences can deepen one's understanding of his literary style

#### **1.3.1 Chronology of important events in Javier Marias' life:**

- 1951: Javier Marias was born in Madrid, Spain, on September 20.
- 1970: He began his studies at the Complutense University of Madrid.
- 1975: He completed his degree in philosophy and literature.
- 1978: Marías published his first novel, *Los dominios del lobo*.
- 1986: His novel *Todas las almas* (All Souls) was published, which gained critical acclaim and recognition.

- 1992: Mariás was elected a member of the Royal Spanish Academy, a prestigious honor for Spanish-language writers.
- 1994: He published *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* (Tomorrow in the Battle Think of Me), another highly regarded novel.
- 1997: *Negra espalda del tiempo* (Dark Back of Time), a novel that blends autobiography with fiction, is published.
- 1999: Mariás released *Tu rostro mañana* (Your Face Tomorrow), a three-volume novel considered one of his most significant works.
- 2008: He was awarded the National Prize for Spanish Literature in recognition of his contribution to Spanish letters.
- 2011: Mariás' novel *Los enamoramientos* (The Infatuations) was published and it received critical acclaim.
- 2018: He published *Berta Isla*, another well-received novel.

### **1.3.2 Significance of literary translations:**

Translation plays a significant and multidimensional role in literature, enriching literary traditions and enabling the exchange of ideas and cultures across linguistic boundaries. It helps in preserving the cultural heritage of a place while helping it reach a wider audience and making them familiar with that culture. It helps in further promoting global literature. Writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Alexandre Dumas, and many others gained global acclaim because of translations of their works.

In the Spanish literary scene, works of writers like Carlos Ruiz Zafon, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Javier Marias and others have been widely translated. This has resulted in garnering widespread recognition to their works. Javier Marias stands out as a unique writer because of the ease with which he blends philosophy and popular culture in his works. Being a prolific translator himself, he believed that some authors' works are easier to translate than others. According to him the process of translation entails identifying the rhythm in the language of the writer and carrying it to another language.

Marias did not translate his own works to English. His works have been mostly translated in English by Margaret Jull Costa who describes her process of translating Marias' work as an enjoyable yet a challenging endeavour because of its philosophical and linguistic complexities. Clear communication between the author of the original work and its translator helps in achieving better quality of translated works. Marias describes Jull Costa as a talented and a meticulous translator who consulted him from time to time to better comprehend his original works. The text prescribed in the syllabus, *Written Lives* by Marias, translated by Jull Costa shows an effortless carrying forward of not only the meanings but also the cadence and humourous tone of the original Spanish text to the English language.

**SAQ:**

Give some examples of writers whose writings are based on the lives of historical figures. (50 words)

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How does the context in which a writer writes impacts the reception of the literary work? (60 words)

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**1.3.3 Brief description of his works:**

Having a brief idea about the nature of the other works of literature produced by Javier Marias can help us better understand the context in which he was writing. This will also familiarise us with the different forms of narrative styles and themes employed by him in his works. Brief introductions to some his prominent works are given below:

Marias' debut novel *Los dominios del lobo* (1978) translated as *The Dominions of the Wolf* follows the story of a man named Ranz who



dies under mysterious circumstances. The novel explores the intricately connected lives of the characters in the form of a humorous and philosophical narrative.

Marias works are often drawn from his own personal experiences. The 1992 novel *Corazón tan blanco*, translated as *A Heart So White* is the story of a translator Juan Ranz and his wife Luisa. Juan's quest to uncover family secrets forms the crux of the novel. Marias' frequently explores the theme of hidden secrets and their repercussions on the lives of the characters upon getting revealed. Marias and the translator of the novel Margaret Jull Costa jointly won the International Dublin Literary Awards for it.

Another novel by Marias to gain critical acclaim throughout Europe was *Mañana en la batalla piensa en mí* translated as *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* and published in the year 1994. The protagonist of this novel Victor is a scriptwriter who get embroiled in the life of a grieving family of a married woman with whom he shared a romantic relationship. The novel is peppered with quotes from Shakespeare and many digressive soliloquys.

*Tu rostro mañana* (2002-2007) - This trilogy, consisting of *Fiebre y lanza*, *Baile y sueño*, and *Veneno y sombra y adiós*, explores the ethical dilemmas faced by Jacques Deza, a Spaniard living in London, who becomes involved with British intelligence. The trilogy delves into the themes of spying, betrayal, and the aftermath of one's actions.

*Así empieza lo malo* published in 2014 and translated as *Thus Bad Begins*, explores the moral complexities of its characters and the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. It follows the life of a young man named Juan de Vere living through the aftermath of the Spanish Civil Wars. Juan's eventual entanglement in the secrets of a film director named Eduardo Muriel and his wife Beatriz makes him privy to many revelations.

Mariás is also known for his essays and works of non-fiction, where he provides perceptive observation on literature, politics, and culture. One

of his notable essays is "Negra espalda del tiempo", published in 1998. This essay collection, translated as *Dark Back of Time*, is a highly meditative work in which Marías reflects on his own life and experiences, blending memoirs with literary criticism and philosophical reflections. It is a commentary upon the source materials and critical reception of the novel *All Souls* published in 1992.

Another significant work of non-fiction is the *El oficio de contar* (2000). This essay collection, which translates to *The Art of Translation*, explores the art and challenges of literary translation. Marías reflects on the complexities of translating works from one language to another, and often draws upon his own experiences as a translator.

In *Cuando fui mortal* (1996) translated as *When I Was Mortal*, Marías delves into personal anecdotes from his life, providing glimpses into his own experiences and beliefs. These essays touch upon different aspects of life like love, death, creativity and memory.

*La última vez que vi París* (2010) is a collection of essays, translated as *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, captures Marías' remarks and reflections upon various cities he visited, including Paris, Venice, and Oxford. He combines travel writing with reflections on antiquity, arts, and literature.

In *Vidas escritas* published in the year 1992 and translated as *Written Lives*, Marías presents a series of brief biographical sketches of several important literary figures. He offers unique insights into the lives and personalities of authors such as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Malcolm Lowry, Arthur Conan Doyle, and others.

Javier Marías heavily makes use of autobiographical accounts as source materials for his works of fiction and non-fiction. However, it was in *Written Lives* that we see him operating as a writer of life writings. This will be further discussed in the following sections.

### **Stop to Consider:**

Mariás' novels, such as *A Heart So White* (*Corazón tan blanco*) and *Your Face Tomorrow* (*Tu rostro mañana*), employ first-person narrators to depict the characters' self-reflection. His works are marked by the incorporation of personal reflections and autobiographical elements. His works display a confluence of literary fiction and personal contemplations.

While discussing life writing as a literary genre, we need to look at how it focuses on documenting experiences, thoughts, and memories of an individual's life. It is a broad category that includes autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, journals, personal essays, and letters, among others. Life writing can be both factual and reflective, aiming to provide insight into a person's life, character, and inner world.

Do you think Javier Mariás' idea of blending biographical information of the prominent figures with his own personal observations of them serves as an effective literary technique?

#### **1.4 Introduction to Life Writing:**

The genre of life writing serves as a means for individuals to record and share personal stories, experiences, and perspectives. This genre can also explore the relationships between an individual's life and the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they lived.

The Oxford Centre for Life Writing states, "Life-writing includes biography, autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals, anthropological data, oral testimony, eye-witness accounts, biopics, plays and musical performances, obituaries, scandal sheets, and gossip columns, blogs, and social media such as Tweets and Instagram stories... Life-writing is vital form of cultural communication."

Life-writing thus, helps in understanding the history of the times of the individuals whose lives have been written about. The multi-disciplinary

facet of life-writing makes it an interesting and an ever-growing genre. It is an amalgamation of history, literary research and creative writing. The various forms of life writing include autobiographies which are comprehensive and intimate accounts of a person's life, usually written by the subject themselves; memoirs which are similar to autobiographies but tend to emphasise upon specific periods, themes, or events in a person's life; personal essays which are shorter, reflective pieces of writing that explore personal experiences, memories, or observations; travel writing which often includes personal accounts of journeys, adventures, and encounters with different cultures and autobiographical fiction which draw heavily from the author's life experiences, blurring the line between fact and fiction. These novels or stories incorporate elements of the author's own life.

Some popular works of life writing from various genres are enumerated as below:

**Autobiographies:**

- *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley
- *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
- *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* by Mahatma Gandhi

**Memoirs:**

- *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt
- *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls
- *The Year of Living Danishly* by Helen Russell

**Diaries and Journals :**

- *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* by Samuel Pepys
- *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* by Sylvia Plath
- *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau* by Henry David Thoreau

**Personal Essays:**

- *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* by Joan Didion
- "Me Talk Pretty One Day" by David Sedaris
- "The Empathy Exams" by Leslie Jamison

**Letters:**

- *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* edited by Mark Roskill
- *The Letters of John Keats* edited by Hyder Edward Rollins

**Oral Histories:**

- *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Svetlana Alexievich

**Stop to Consider**

Life writing documents individual experiences, memories, and perspectives. It serves as a valuable record of personal and collective history, ensuring that the stories of individuals and communities are not forgotten. It offers a window into different time periods, lifestyles, and social norms, aiding in the understanding of the past and its impact on the present.

Biographies and autobiographies humanize historical figures and public figures, revealing their personal struggles, triumphs, and vulnerabilities. This humanization fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of the complexities of individuals in positions of power. Life writing often contains commentary on social and political issues. Personal narratives can shed light on injustices, inequalities, and systemic problems, making them important tools for social critique and change.

Life writing can be used as educational material to teach history, literature, sociology, and other subjects. It provides students with first-hand accounts and personal perspectives, making historical events and complex issues more relatable. Life writing allows individuals to leave a legacy for future generations. It provides a means for family histories to be passed down and shared, ensuring that the stories of ancestors and loved ones endure.

Life writing has been instrumental in giving voice to marginalized groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others who have historically been underrepresented in mainstream narratives.

Do you think reading life writings is a more effective way of knowing about real life figures than reading about them in historical accounts?

### **1.5 Marias' use of the form in *Written Lives*:**

*Written Lives* by Javier Marias is a collection of biographical accounts of several writers which was originally published in the year 1992. He blends literary history with humour and informal tone to create very lively accounts of the writers included in the collection. According to Marias the reason why people are inclined towards learning more about the lives of the writers of canonical works is the fact, "that in those lives, or in their most secret anecdotes, can be found the key to a writer's work." In the times when people find it increasingly difficult to grapple with large volumes of information, he offers a brief and unique description of the biographical details of the writers in a rather whimsical form. He mingles interesting anecdotes with his own personal remarks in the snippets of the lives of the writers presented in the book. He describes most of them as "disastrous individuals" leading chaotic lives. Apart from anecdotal details of their eccentric characters and unconventional lives, he provides further information about their lesser known literary works. For instance, he mentions how R.L Stevenson's essays have been overlooked owing to the overshadowing of his other works by the more popular ones.

The biographical accounts of the writers who feature in the book are: Djuna Barnes, Joseph Conrad, Arthur Conan Doyle, Isak Dinesen, Marie du Deffand, William Faulkner, Henry James, James Joyce, Rudyard Kipling, Malcolm Lowry, Thomas Mann, Yukio Mishima, Vladimir Nabokov, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud, Laurence Sterne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Ivan Turgenev, Oscar Wilde

### **Stop to Consider**

Spanish life writing, also known as "escritura de la vida" or "escritura autobiográfica," encompasses a wide range of autobiographical and biographical works in the Spanish-speaking world. This genre of literature includes various forms of personal narratives and memoirs, as well as biographies and autobiographies written by Spanish-speaking authors.

Spanish authors have produced many autobiographical works, providing insights into their personal lives and experiences. Prominent Spanish autobiographers include figures like Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, and Miguel de Unamuno.

Spanish memoirs often focus on specific periods, events, or themes in an author's life. These narratives often cover a wide range of topics, from politics to artistic accomplishments. For instance, Rosa Chacel's memoir "Memorias de Leticia Valle" explores themes of identity and sexuality.

Collections of letters exchanged between Spanish authors and their contemporaries or loved ones provide valuable insights into their personal and intellectual lives. The letters of figures like Miguel de Cervantes and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz are notable examples.

Spanish life writing also includes testimonies and witness accounts related to historical events, such as the Spanish Civil War. These writings provide firsthand perspectives on significant moments in Spanish history.

### **1.6 Critical reception of his works**

His works have received critical acclaim both in Spain and internationally. For *A Heart So White* (1992) critics praised Marías's intricate narrative style and his ability to delve deep into the psychology of his characters. It received the prestigious IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1997, further solidifying its critical acclaim.

Mariás's elegant prose and his ability to create an atmosphere of tension and unease in *The Infatuations* (2011) was praised widely. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2013, further raising Mariás's international profile. *Thus Bad Begins* (2014) received positive reviews for its incisive social commentary and complex characters. *Berta Isla* received acclaim for its character development and emotional depth. Critics appreciated Mariás's exploration of the consequences of secrecy and deception in relationships. *Written Lives* received acclaim on account of its vivid portrayal of the lives of the literary doyens in the form of short and engaging anecdotes. His own remarks add depth to the personalities of the characters. The commentary seamlessly blends with the biographical information which lends it with more liveliness. For instance, in the prologue to the book itself, Mariás acknowledges that he could not generate adoration for the three authors, namely- James Joyce, Thomas Mann and Yukio Mishima because of their egotistical characters. Carl Rollyson of *The New York Sun* remarked that *Written Lives* will prove to be a landmark in history of biographies. Another interesting review of the book by Christopher Benfey in *The New York Times* Book Review was that "For Mariás, great writers aren't riddles to be solved but paradoxes to be savored."

### **Stop to Consider**

#### **The Unique Writing Style of Javier Mariás:**

He is known for his distinctive narrative style, which often involves intricate and lengthy sentences, reflective narrators, and a focus on the inner workings of the human mind. His experimental approach to storytelling challenges conventional narrative techniques and continues to captivate readers interested in innovative literature.

Mariás is known for his mastery of language, and his works are often translated into multiple languages. His novels challenge translators to maintain the nuances and complexity of his prose, making them relevant to a global audience.

Mariás often engages with the world of literature within his works, discussing literary theory, translation, and the act of writing itself.



This self-reflexive quality appeals to readers interested in the craft of storytelling and the role of literature in society.

His writing style is influenced by Lawrence Sterne and the old Spanish tradition of using heavily punctuated sentences that are long and digressive in nature. Juan Benet, his mentor too displays usage of such sentences in his works. This is visible not only the introspective passages of his novels but also in his works of non-fiction including in *Written Lives*.

### **1.7 Significance of His Works:**

Mariás' works often delve into universal themes such as identity, memory, love, and the human condition in general. These themes are timeless and resonate with readers across different generations and cultures. His works frequently explore the intricacies of human psychology and the complexity of human relationships. His characters are often multi-dimensional, and their inner lives are methodically examined, making his works relevant to readers interested in the human psyche and interpersonal dynamics.

His works highlight moral and ethical dilemmas, engaging readers in contemplating questions of right and wrong, responsibility, and the consequences of one's actions. These ethical quandaries remain relevant in contemporary society.

Many of Mariás' works are set against the backdrop of Spain's history, particularly during and after the Franco era. This historical context provides insights into Spain's social and political evolution and helps readers better understand the country's past and present.

While some of Mariás' novels may have specific historical or cultural references, the core themes and explorations of human nature in his works transcend time and place, making them accessible and meaningful to readers regardless of their background or context.

Mariás' fascination towards blending reality and fiction is mostly inspired by Miguel de Cervante's works. He also employs the Proustian approach

of slowing down time to be able to dedicate more time towards introspection in life. His long, winding sentences linked mostly by commas shows his penchant for representing the complex rhythm of life.

His works have been considered by critics as immaculate products of cultural exchange through translation across languages. His merit as a writer is proven by the fact how seamlessly he employs English literary sensibilities to tell stories set in the Spanish backdrop.

**Check Your Progress**

Q.1. Discuss Javier Marias' contribution to contemporary literature along with some examples of his notable literary works. (about 200 words)

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Q.2. Discuss the distinctive narrative style and techniques employed by Javier Marías in his works. (about 200 words)

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Q.3. Javier Marías is celebrated for his command of language and linguistic playfulness. Explore how language and translation are central to his works? (about 200 words)

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Q.4. Discuss the critical reception of Javier Marías' works both in Spain and internationally. How has his writing influenced contemporary literature, and what sets him apart as an author? (about 200 words)

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## 1.8 Summing Up:

In the previous sections, a brief outline of the biographical account of Javier Marias has been presented along with the details of his literary achievements and international accolades. The unique writing style of Marias has been described along with his accomplishments as a prolific translator of English canonical texts. The significance of translations as a vehicle for promoting cross-cultural exchange of ideas has been delineated. How life writing serves as an indispensable literary genre that familiarises readers with historical information in a more intimate way than plain historical narratives has been discussed. Marias' complex language and themes have been highlighted.

In summary, Javier Marías' works remain relevant due to their exploration of universal themes, innovative narrative techniques, psychological depth, and engagement with moral and ethical questions. His novels continue to resonate with readers who appreciate literary complexity and the timeless aspects of human experience.

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## UNIT- 2

### JAVIER MARIAS: *Written Lives*

#### **Unit Structure:**

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Context
- 2.4 Source
- 2.5 Critical Reception
- 2.6 Literary figure-wise reading of the book
- 2.7 Summing Up
- 2.8 References and Suggested Readings

#### **2.1 Objectives:**

This unit will introduce you to the book *Written Lives* by Javier Marias and enable you to look at life writing from a new perspective. The information provided in this unit will introduce you to the interesting and exceptional lives of some of the renowned literary and historical figures in the form of their biographical accounts. It will also help you

- *assess* the significance of life writing as a literary genre,
- *analyse* the language used in the book to delineate the biographical accounts of the literary figures,
- *understand* how usage of playful narrative techniques enable readers to engage with texts in a more dynamic manner,
- *read* the representations of the literary figures to understand their unique personalities and get a glimpse of the experiences their creative lives,
- *reflect* upon the importance of reading biographies.

## 2.2 Introduction:

*Written Lives* by Javier Marias is a collection of biographical accounts of twenty writers which was originally written in Spanish and was translated to English by Margaret Jull Costa. Marias provides the readers with glimpses of day-to-day lives and personalities of various notable literary figures in the form of intriguing anecdotes and information about their creative processes. Marias offers the readers with a perspective on these individuals. The book is a departure from Marias' typical fiction works, as it combines his talents as a fiction writer and as a history enthusiast. Throughout the essays, Marias not only provides biographical information but also offers his own interpretations, anecdotes, and reflections on the authors and their works. This combination of biography and personal insight makes *Written Lives* a captivating read for anyone interested in literature, writers' lives, and the art of storytelling.

The prologue to *Written Lives* serves as an introduction to the collection of biographical essays that follow. In this prologue, Marias reflects on the art of biography and the challenges of capturing the essence of a person's life and character. He acknowledges the subjectivity integral to the process of writing about the lives of historical figures and the inevitable gaps and uncertainties that exist in any endeavour to present authentic biographical accounts.

Marias emphasizes that his essays are not like other conventional biographies but are rather personal and literary sketches of various authors. He highlights the difficulty of truly knowing and understanding another person, especially one who has passed away, and how even the most detailed biographies can only offer a partial and subjective view.

The prologue sets the tone for the biographies that follow which depict Marias' ability to bring out unique perspective and insights into the lives of the authors he discusses. It also underscores his love for literature and his belief in the power of storytelling to illuminate the complexities of human existence. Overall, the prologue prepares the reader for a collection of biographical essays that are as much about the act of writing

and interpretation as they are about the lives of the authors themselves. Marias' in the prologue to *Written Lives* mentions how he stumbled across the idea of bringing out an anthology depicting the lives of renowned writers in an intimate manner. It was an earlier work by him written in the form of an anthology of unusual stories titled *Cuentosunicos* or *Unique Tales* which was published in 1989 by Ediciones Siruela, that gave him the idea of *Written Lives*. The book had short biographical accounts of the writers whose short stories were anthologized in the book. He decided to expand upon the idea and using the model to delineate the lives of well-known literary figures. He states that he randomly chose the writers whose lives were portrayed in the book, with the only condition that they were all dead and that none of them was Spanish. He consciously mingles humour and history in the work depicting the lives of those whom he considered as "fairly disastrous individuals". He closes the prologue with the remark that of all the works produced by him, he enjoyed writing *Written Lives* the most because it was written not just for recounting the lives of the individuals but mainly with the intention to make people read about them.

### **2.3 Context:**

Biographies are an important subset of life writing. They play a crucial role in documenting and narrating the lives of individuals. Biographies aim to provide an extensive and objective view of a person's life, including their personal background, accomplishments, trials and tribulations, and their impact on society in general. Biographers engage in extensive research to gather information about their subjects. This research often comprises of studying personal documents, letters, diaries, and interviewing individuals who knew the subject and conducting archival research. They draw from primary and secondary sources with the aim to present a factual and balanced account of the subject's life. Biographers may highlight specific themes, character traits, or significant events in the subject's life to offer insight into their personality, motivations, and contributions. They place their subject's life within the context of the historical and cultural setting in which they lived. They

explore how societal norms, political events, and cultural influences shaped the individual's experiences and choices.

Javier Marias mentions how he had to dig deep into very rare books and documents for writing *Written Lives*. He makes a detailed bibliography of the sources that enabled him to write the book. While biographies are expected to be objective, they also allow for interpretation and analysis. Marias mentions that he mostly remained true to the depiction of the lives of the individuals. He also acknowledges that he took the liberty of “embellishing” a few biographies. Biographies are inherently shaped by the biographer's perspective and writing style and some element of subjectivity can be seen in the narrative, as the biographer makes choices about which aspects of the subject's life to emphasize and how to present them. In *Written Lives* we can see how Marias’ maintains this balance between presenting objective information and his subjective positions on the writer’s stature as an individual and an artist. The book thus, deviates from the traditional biographies by presenting the lives of the twenty six writers in the form of captivating short narratives.

#### **2.4 Sources:**

Javier Marias, in the prologue to *Written Lives*, light-heartedly states that for the ‘suspicious reader who wants to check some fact’ he had appended a notably lengthy bibliography at the end of the book to lend it with an air of academic authenticity. He makes extensive use of various forms of life writing like memoirs, personal correspondences, diary entries and prefaces to the books of the writers to reconstruct their lives and present them in the form of their vivid biographical accounts. Some of the memoirs used by him were *Memoirs of an Aesthete* by Harold Acton, *Memories and Portraits & Memoirs of Himself & Selections from His Notebook* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and others. He also gathered biographical and textual knowledge of the writers from works like *Stenbock*, *Yeats* and *The Nineties* by John Adlard, *The Pact*, *My*

Friendship with Isak Dinesen by Thornkild Bjørnvig, Out of Africa by Karen Blixen, The Mirror of the Sea, Memories and Impressions by Joseph Conrad and many such known and lesser-known works of non-fiction.

## **2.5 Critical Reception:**

*Written Lives* by Javier Marias received critical acclaim for its unique approach to biographical essays in which Marias deftly blends biography with personal remarks in creative ways. The work was noted by critics as it defied the conventional, objective biographical format and instead offered personal and literary portraits of the authors chosen by Marias. This blending of genres made it a popular among the readers. Critics praised his ability to capture the essence of each author and their works through his urbane and evocative writing style. In *Written Lives* Marias also obliquely remarks upon certain literary works of the authors alongside their biographical information. Some critics were of the view that Marias' approach of incorporating his own interpretation and subjectivity in within the biographical accounts, may not be suitable for readers seeking purely objective biographies. However, many readers as well as critics found this subjectivity adding to its depth that helped in making it resonate more with the readers. Marias' emphasis upon moulding factual details in the shape of stories arises from his belief that humans rely upon stories to comprehend the world around them. In the prologue to *Written Lives* he states it is pointless to form judgements about the writers mentioned in the book based on his account of them as he reveals their lives partially perhaps because it is practically impossible to hold up an accurate picture of an individual's life through a literary mode. He brings to the fore the idea that literature is not only an important way of knowing about the world we live in but it also is a way to explore the uncertainties of life. Marias does not solely function within the frameworks of traditional realism. He emphasises upon using imagination in depicting personal experiences of reality because it is through imagination that readers engage at a deeper level with the text.



**SAQ :**

How does the subject matter of a literary work influence its narrative structure? (50 words)

.....  
.....  
.....

Cite examples of some biographies that combine both fiction and reality. (60 words)

.....  
.....  
.....

**2.6 Literary figure-wise reading of the book:**

• *William Faulkner on Horseback*

The first biographical account in the book depicts the life and personality of the renowned American author William Faulkner. In this essay, Mariás explores various facets of Faulkner's life and character and his unique personality, using his own distinctive style of biographical writing. Mariás reflects upon Faulkner's reputation as a somewhat enigmatic figure in American literature. Mariás presents personal observations and anecdotes related to Faulkner's works and their impact on him as a reader and writer.

He begins the account by very refuting a literary legend that tried to model Faulkner as a 'proletariat writer' by claiming that he wrote *As I Lay Dying*, while working in a mine and within a span of only six weeks. Mariás refines the factual details out of this legend by stating that only the duration of time taken by Faulkner to write the book was true and that the reason why he chose to write it near an electrical power plant was because nobody disturbed him there. Faulkner was not cut out to be a regular office-going person which was revealed by the fact that while working as a post-office clerk in the University of Mississippi, he would often dump the bags containing unopened letters in the garbage cans. He also disliked getting up from his reading to sell postage stamps.

His uneasy connection with letters remained even after he became a successful writer. He opened only the letters received from his publishers with the hope of finding cheques. He has been labelled as a “spendthrift” as he used to spend heavily on “horses, cigarettes and whisky” and expensive clothes.

Another interesting anecdote of Faulkner’s life that Marias finds worth-mentioning is when a man who had come to meet Faulkner asks him since how long his daughter had been learning to ride a pony. After remaining silent for some time Faulkner answers, “Three years” and remarks solemnly that there are three things that a woman must know-telling the truth, riding a horse and signing a cheque.

Marias describes him as a reserved man who liked silence. This is further highlighted when he shows his reluctance to be in the public eye after winning the Nobel prize in 1950. The reason behind the title of the account becomes clearer when the circumstances leading up to his death are described by Marias. It was his immense love for horse-riding that had caused an accident and an irremediable injury which eventually led to his death. Marias also describes Faulkner’s literary tastes while delineating his idiosyncratic traits. Throughout the essay, Marias interweaves his own thoughts and reflections with biographical details about Faulkner, creating a nuanced portrait of the author.

- ***Joseph Conrad on Land***

In the biographical account of Joseph Conrad, Javier Marias at the very onset states the reason behind the unusual title of it. Despite being associated with sea and seafaring activities, Conrad spent the last thirty years of his life on land. He immersed himself in reading and writing and was known for his bizarre choice of conducting his creative pursuits in unusual spaces like the bathroom. Other very eccentric traits of his were his choice of wearing “an extremely faded yellow-striped bathrobe”, his need to always have cigarettes in his hands and submerging himself so deep in his readings that his books caught fire from the candle kept nearby for the purpose. His disposition has been described by Marias as that of a restless and an anxious person who got easily annoyed over trivial matters.

There is no particular passage in the biographical account that is dedicated to depict Conrad's relationship with his wife Jessie, but the various episodes of his peculiar mannerisms and her reaction to those shows their strong bond. He has been described as a devoted husband who would often shower his wife with gifts upon completing his books. When Conrad heard a child crying after his wife had given birth to their son, Borys, he asks the maid to "Send that child away at once; it will disturb Mrs Conrad!", not realising that it was his own son who was crying. Jessie too was sensitive to Conrad's whimsical persona and was well-versed with his likes and dislikes. According to her he detested poetry but had regards for an unnamed French poet and the poet Arthur Symons. Some of his acquaintances were of the view that he liked Keats but hated Shelley. He also had been said to have hated Dostoevsky because of his nationality and the madness and confusion surging within him.

Conrad died suddenly at the age of sixty-six on August 3rd on 1946 in his house at Kent. In the account Marias shares his admiration for Conrad's storytelling and narrative mastery despite the eccentric irony inherent in his character.

- *Isak Dinesen In Old Age*

In the profile of the Danish writer Isak Dinesak, Marias begins by negating the popular image of hers that was propagated by the movie based on her life-story. Instead of limiting her image to that of a romantic colonial aristocrat, he presents a more realistic description of her character, her creative process and her life in general. She had spent several years in Africa with no substantial success. It was in America where her works achieved the greatest recognition. However, it was also in America where many rumours surrounding her enigmatic persona were circulated. Some considered her to be man, while some thought that it was actually two people writing as one person. Marias presents the rumours in the form of colloquial expressions like, "she is, in fact, a man; he is, in fact, a woman; Isak Dinesen is actually two people, brother and sister; Isak Dinesen lived in Boston in 1870; she's from Paris really; he lives in Elsinore; she spends most of her time in London; she's a nun; he's very hospitable and

welcomes young writers as his guests; she's rarely seen and lives like a recluse; she writes in French; no, in English; no, in Danish; no, in ....". All these rumours were dispelled when she appeared at the parties and the public readings where she did not make use of notes during the story-telling sessions. Of other significant events in Dinesan's life, one major one was her meeting with Marilyn Monroe in the presence of her then husband, the acclaimed American writer, Arthur Miller. Marias, in his humorous way presents her interaction with Miller as one filled with unease and disdain of the former towards the latter.

Javier Marias uses very animated language to depict Isak Dinesan's eventfully strange life. How she used her own sufferings as source of her stories and her tumultuous relationships have been described using wry humour and detailed descriptions. Marias presents a few disparate information about Dinesan which further reinforced her image as an eccentric person like her ability to see a four-leaf clover despite her weak eye sight, the superstitions she believed in, her love for Heine and Goethe and hatred for Dostoevsky, and her claims of living a life according to the rules of classical tragedy. She died at the age of seventy-seven on 7th September 1962. This very candid and thorough biographical account closes with Dinesan's famous words, "There is no mystery in art. Do the things you can see, they will show you what you cannot see."

- *James Joyce in his Poses*

James Joyce's portrait drawn with words by Javier Marias begins with people's view of the former as a "sad and tired" person. Marias reveals that Joyce once described himself as "a jealous, lonely, dissatisfied, proud man" to his wife, Nora Barnacle, in one of his letters to her. In the prologue to *Written Lives* Marias mentions that his description of James Joyce lacks affection unlike for other writers in the collection because of his egotistical ways. The portrayal of Joyce as a "taciturn and disdainful" man who thought very highly of his own works reinforces the reasons behind Marias' lack of regard for him. Despite having an

image of an artist who was not bothered by people's reaction to his works, Joyce not only extensively promoted *Ulysses* in whatever way he could but also indulged in appeasing readers who showed the slightest interest in it. The mediocre critical reception of *Finnegans Wake* caused Joyce to live the last two years of his life in bitter resentment which Marias describes as "not a pleasant way to spend one's years, especially when they are one's last"

Joyce's struggle with weakness of eyesight and his obsession with caring for his eyes is mentioned in the account. Readers get to know more about the writer's whimsical ways through the perspective of his contemporaries like Ford Maddox Ford according to whom being in his company during dinners was like being in "an easy but absolute silence". He would mostly reply only with "yes" or "no" unlike the characters from his novels whom Marias refers to as "interior gasbags". His superstitious nature has been ridiculed by outlining an incident where he fainted after someone told him that there were rats running down the stairs which he considered to bring bad luck. Marias portrayal of Joyce's fear of dogs and storms too seem derisive in tone. Joyce sexual fetishes too have been delineated in more or less wryly explicit manner and he has been labelled as a "coprophiliac" based on his correspondences with his wife.

Joyce did not display much emotions despite series of misfortunes befalling upon him like death of five of his nine siblings because of which he had been labelled as "heartless". His brother Stanislaus mentions that for James Joyce "unhappiness was like a vice". However when his daughter was admitted to various psychiatric hospitals Joyce sincerely hoped for her recovery and wrote her letters regularly.

Joyce died at the age of fifty nine due to an ulcer in Zurich, on January 13, 1941. The biographical sketch ends with an interesting trivia about Joyce that his wife Nora never read *Ulysses* and that she considered him to a "fanatic".

### **Stop to Consider**

While reading the biographical accounts presented in *Written Lives* by Javier Marias, one needs to observe the language and the tone in which the lives of the authors have been outlined. The self-contained essays display the usage of humour, direct quotations from the writer's along with intertextual references and significant anecdotes from the lives of the authors.

In *Written Lives*, Javier Marias does not follow a single narrative structure. The book comprises of a series of brief self-contained essays, each focusing on a specific literary figure. However, all the essays in the collection share the biographical details of the selected writers in the form of stories and personal reflections upon their eccentric traits and creative processes. There are variations in the length of the essays. Some focus more on anecdotes about remarkable events in the lives of writers while some focus more upon their writing processes and remarks upon their nature. The biographical snippets have been prefixed with photographs of the writers along with interesting titles such as 'William Faulkner on Horseback', 'Joseph Conrad on Land', Isak Dinesan in Old Age' and others. The titles indicate certain prominent traits of the writers or a significant phase in their lives. The events delineated in the short snippets from the lives of writers do not follow any chronological order and are written mostly in the manner of a written documentary of random events.

- ***Giuseppe Tomasi Di Lampedusa In Class***

Javier Marias continues with his style of abruptly opening the biographical accounts in the collection as seen in that of Giuseppe Tomasi Di Lampedusa, the writer whose only noteworthy creative event in life was the publishing of his novel *The Leopard*, sixteen months after his death. Lampedusa did not write and publish actively and regularly. He was more of an avid reader and was known for "his encyclopaedic knowledge of literature and history, on both of which subjects he

possessed a vast library.” Lampedusa has been described as a “provincial aristocrat” who spent his mornings idly browsing through books while having a big breakfast and afterwards meeting people in cafes and listening to “their nonsense”. His obsession with books can be gauged by the fact that he always carried several books in his bag wherever he went. Another notable habit of Lampedusa was using his books as “strongboxes” to store money because of which he claimed that “his library contained two different kinds of treasure”.

Lampedusa has been portrayed as someone who acknowledged his privileged background and possessed earnest levels of self-awareness about the quality of his literary works. He would emphasise upon his solitary life often like once he wrote in 1954, “I am a very solitary person. Out of the sixteen hours I spend awake each day, at least ten are spent in solitude. I do not, however, spend all that time reading; sometimes I amuse myself by concocting literary theories ...”. Although not many works of literary theory were found after his death but his writings on English and French literature were discovered. His pursuit as a teacher of English and English literature to Francesco Orlando instilled in him the desire to write his novel. The level of sincerity displayed by Lampedusa in conducting these classes can be understood by the fact that if he was not happy with his preparation for the classes, he would call his notes as “the worst pages ever written by human pen” and “an utter abomination”. However, these notes have been described by Marias as “not scholarly, but full of wisdom, humour, seriousness and refinement” which are now slowly getting published.

Lampedusa’s interest in lives of writers was roused by the belief that by knowing about their lives, the key facets to their literary works could be understood. Unlike the preceding writers in the book, Lampedusa’s life was relatively free from scandalous events. However, the only piece of gossip that circulated about him was about his impotency which people concluded on the basis of his lack of interest in his wife Licy and them not having any children. His unconventional relationship with his wife in which he maintained a long distance relationship with his wife through

letters has been labelled as “unmatrimonioepistolare—an epistolary marriage”. Marias continues familiarising readers with Lampedusa’s likes and dislikes such as his detestation of melodrama and Italian opera or “anything explicit” for that matter and his love for Shakespeare, particularly his works *Measure for Measure* and ‘Sonnet 129’. A set of very unrelated information about his life flock together like his bouts of insomnia and nightmares, his habit of smoking but never drinking alcohol, his plump body, his shy solitary disposition in public but being a pleasant and sarcastic conversationalist in private and his habit of speaking to his dogs. It was the success of a book by his cousin Lucio Piccolo that made him consider writing a novel and getting it published. However, he still had doubts about its merits expressed his reservations about its quality as- “It is, I fear, rubbish”.

He died on 23rd July, 1957 of lung cancer at the age of sixty in Rome. The details of death of the writers do not end any of the accounts mentioned in the book so far. Lampedusa states that one of the misfortunes in his life was “a certain hardness of heart” with which the biographical account ends.

- *Henry James on a Visit*

Javier Marias begins Henry James’s biographical sketch by drawing a picture of an intensely social phase of his life when he never failed to attend any party that he was invited to. This phase was in contrast to the relatively less social last eighteen years of his life spent in Rye in the company of limited people which also included his neighbours, the writers Joseph Conrad and Ford Maddox Ford. James is said to have great admiration for Conrad’s works but little affection for Conrad himself because of his nationality, his religion and political leanings. However, Marias paints a caricature-like picture of their meetings when they used to address each other using French expressions to show their mutual admiration. Another funny incident involving Ford and James was when once James jumped over a ditch to avoid being seen by Ford as he came across him more often than he wanted to. The incident is rendered more hilarious because of how Marias points out that there was “objective evidence” to prove the truth of this incident.



In the succeeding passage, Marias vividly describes the strikingly huge physique intense stare of James. He, however, conducted himself with others in a rather humourous yet discreet ways. One of the most eccentric traits of James was his use of very oblique and indirect language in order to convey meaning as exactly as he could. This however, made it difficult for people around him to comprehend his words fully. For instance, sometimes it would take him more than three minutes to convey a command to his servant. Once he used the expression, “one of the poor wantons had a certain cadaverous grace” to refer to the ugliness of an actress in an indirect manner.

James was also known for his rare fits of rage apart from which he was a good conversationist with diplomats and chimney sweeps alike. He was however, very particular about rules of hospitality and formed his judgment about the person hosting him as guest based on his adherence to those rules. For instance he liked Turgenev and Maupassant and their works but disliked Flaubert and Rossetti because according to James, they had received him in clothes that he deemed as inappropriate for a host. Thenceforth, he deemed their works as well as their characters as detestable.

The lack of any romantic ties with any women too has been discussed in the subsequent passage of the account. He has been described as a man who found it difficult to begin something but once he started, he used to immerse himself completely in the task at hand. His delusion about his sense of direction being good often landed people in trouble in the form of long and exhaustive detours before arriving at the destination. He had the habit of keeping his library well-organized which he dusted himself with a silk handkerchief. He very rarely spoke about his own works but he did wonder at times why his books did not sell very well apart from Daisy Miller. An endearing gesture by James’ friend, the writer, Edith Wharton was asking their joint publisher to pay larger part of her royalties into James’ account without his knowledge, which he never found out.

He died at the age of seventy-two on February 28, 1916 after suffering from bouts of delirium. The biographical account of James ends with recounting of the first experience of his attack of delirium which made him believe that he was dying and he expressed his encounter with what seemed to him as death as, “So it has come at last—the Distinguished Thing!”

- *Arthur Conan Doyle and Women*

Marias begins this biographical account of the renowned progenitor of the world-famous detective Sherlock Holmes with certain grim particulars about the last few years of his life. His withdrawal from writing and the society at large for pursuing spirituality made him lose his reputation as a writer. Marias proceeds with further recounting the details of Doyle’s tumultuous life. Apart from the Protestant fanatic named Prenimer who caused Doyle to lose an election, the other antagonists in his life were, writer Marias ingenuously, were Professor Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes himself. He often found himself embroiled in fights, most of which were for defending the dignity of woman. On one occasion when Doyle’s son had commented upon the ugliness of a woman on a train, Doyle slapped him remarked, “Just remember that no woman is ugly.” The bias that Doyle displayed towards his children from his second wife Jean over the children he had with his first wife Touie shows his vile and discriminatory nature.

However, Doyle’s knack for meticulous observation was a sought after skill which many people wanted him to use for investigating cases for them. He took up some cases like that of the missing of a woman’s Danish fiancé but he refused most of them. Another significant motif in his life other than letters of admiration and requests for solving cases was the constant arrival of blank cheques in his name. Another literary incident of note from Doyle’s life was his mother’s role in postponement of the killing of Sherlock Holmes. Maria’s draws Doyle’s image as a writer who was fed up of the excessive popularity of the character created by him. People confusing Doyle, the writer with Holmes, the character had bothered him in so many occasions that he eventually decided to

kill off the character. What further bothered him in words of Marias was, “that they did not confuse them enough, and that many people saw him more as a Dr Watson figure than as Sherlock Holmes” because of the difference of physique of Doyle from Holmes’. He considered his historical novels as his “higher works” which were obscured by the over-popularity of the character of Sherlock Holmes.

Before the concluding passage Marias enumerates the writers liked by Doyle such as Poe, Stevenson, Wilde, and Kipling. He was very eager to serve during the Boer war but he was not chosen as a soldier because of his age and could go to the war only as a doctor. He died on 7th July, 1970 at the age of seventy-one in the presence of his family. Marias ends the account by mentioning that Doyle believed that the reason behind the success of his was that he let his story come to life effortlessly and never by forcing it.

## **2.7 Summing Up:**

This witty collection of biographies, *Written Lives*, chronicles the lives of some of the most prominent canonical authors of literature. However, the style of composition grabs the attention of readers in that these big personalities were interestingly depicted as if they are some fictional characters in short stories. Marias’s portrayal of the writers in *Written Lives*, highlights his meticulous speculation, detailed and precise observation, and whimsical and witty employment of anecdotes in his composition, thus confirming his position as a masterful author. Every section that depicted the lives of these authors illuminated not only their personal lives but also Marias’s preference towards them. His humour and affection for Nobakov or Ivan Turganov is in stark contrast to his disdain for Thomas Mann or Yukio Mashima can be witnessed in his definitive portrayal of their eccentricities.

## **2.8 References and Suggested Readings:**

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**UNIT- 3**  
**JAVIER MARIAS: *WRITTEN LIVES***  
**(Supplementary Unit)**

**Unit Structure:**

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Literary figure-wise reading of the book
- 3.4 Summing Up
- 3.5 References and Suggested Readings

**3.1 Objectives:**

This unit continues with discussion and summary of the biographical accounts along with critical commentary on the writing style of Javier Marias in *Written Lives*. This unit aims to achieve the following:

- *read* the representations of the literary figures to understand their unique personalities and get a glimpse of the experiences their creative lives,
- *reflect* upon the importance of reading biographies,
- *analyse* the writing style employed by Marias in the text,
- *familiarise* readers with the new forms of life writing.

**3.2 Introduction:**

This unit will focus on discussion of the lives of the rest of literary figures enumerated in the book *Written Lives* by Javier Marias. The summary of the biographical accounts of the writers along with the discussion about the writing style and tone used by Marias has been mentioned independently.

### 3.3 Literary figure-wise reading of the book:

- *Robert Louis Stevenson Among Criminals*

This biographical account begins with Marias speculating the reasons behind Robert Louis Stevenson's chivalrous and angelic image. He builds up the narrative with incisive remarks upon human nature like "for every true gentleman has behaved like a scoundrel at least once in his life". This is followed by a funny anecdote about a terrible incident of forest fire, accidentally caused Stevenson while conducting an experiment. The details of his fragile physique which was prone to ailments have been delineated while describing his long and arduous journey from Edinburgh to New York to meet his future wife, Fanny van de Grift. They did not immediately get married but once they did, she became an indispensable part of his life. Stevenson's reservations about getting married were mostly caused by the complications of his health which however, did not bother his wife. It rather "helped her to feel useful, and thus proud, and so to derive some benefit from the situation". His wife exercised control over almost all aspects of his life which was detested by Stevenson's friends. Her appearance and dressing sense too has been obliquely ridiculed and her face's "natural expression tended to the unpleasant, authoritarian, hostile and even sour".

Marias' presentation of the biographical account of Stevenson displays an immaculate narrative flow. He connects the various facets of Stevenson's life to his identity as an "elusive figure". Stevenson's fascination for the Evil made him create morally ambiguous characters in his works. He liked participating in blasphemy contests. Stevenson's connections with and tolerance for people who had morally questionable characters further reinforces his obsession with the evil.

Marias familiarises readers with Stevenson's lesser known works. His strong ties of friendship with Henry James have been vividly described which appears in the form of mutual admiration and affection for each other. James' description of Stevenson as "...a beautiful myth—a kind of unnatural uncomfortable unburied mort" is followed by the details of the end of Stevenson's life. He died in Samoa on December 3 in 1894

due to brain haemorrhage at the age of forty-four. The biographical sketch ends with his poem “Requiem”, also inscribed on his tomb.

- ***Thomas Mann In His Suffering***

Like all the previous biographical sketches, this one too begins by directly revealing something pertaining to the writer’s belief about what constitutes good literature. Thomas Mann attached great importance to the fact that all good works of literature should have irony in them, without which the works are rendered lifeless. However, Mann’s own letters and diary entries reveal their overtly serious tone. He put down in them the day-to-day details of his life with a major focus on the state of his stomach and the sexual responses of his body, which have been presented by Marias in a manner that evokes humour. Some examples of these are- ““In the evening, palpitations and stomach cramps”, or: “Indisposed, stomach upset”; “Sexual excess, but although the nervous excitement long delayed sleep, it has proved intellectually rather more beneficial than otherwise.” The incorporation of such unusual yet hilarious details which were originally written with serious intent may also be indicative of Maria’s lack of regard for the writer which he mentions in the prologue to the book.

Another unusual trait of Mann that Marias presents in the sketch is his fascination with observing young men despite having a wife named Katia with whom he had six children. He perceived Rabindranath Tagore’s impression as that of a “refined old English lady” and his son as having “a brown and muscular, a very virile type” physique. He admits to being infatuated by a few more men in such literary gatherings and in other occasions. Marias’ lack of regard for men also stems from the fact that Mann took himself and his works too seriously. His uneasy relations with the servants in his house which often took the form of him rebuking them too have been mentioned. The description of his “solemn” and “impish” appearance is followed by the series of tragedies he had to endure in his life like the suicide of his two sisters and of his son Klaus, whom Marias describes as a more modest writer than his father. He was also disliked by some of his compatriots and had been an exile but the literary success that he gained in many ways compensated for the misfortunes in his life.

Marias, very ingeniously rounds up the biographical account by ending it with irony, the discussion of which begins the account. While providing particular of his death on August 12 in 1955 in Zurich, Marias mentions that no ironical comments were made during the occasion and that he was buried with a ring with a green stone but it was not emerald. This is an attempt at achieving ironic laughter on part of Marias.

- *Ivan Turgenev In His Sadness*

Marias begins the life-story of Ivan Turgenev by painting a grim picture of the atrocious environment in which he grew up, which probably made his works brim with pessimism. The cruelty meted out on the servants of the house by his mother and grand-mother have been explicitly depicted. His works have known to bring about political changes in the society of his times. For instance, three days after Czar Alexander read his first narrative work, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, the serfs were emancipated. Despite his literary success, Turgenev had to deal with hatred of his compatriots because of his image as an atheistic "westernized Russian". He had been constant correspondence with his contemporaries like Maupassant, Henry James, Flaubert, and others and used to write about his political views to them. Among other notable relationships that have been mentioned in the account are the ones that Turgenev had with the singer Pauline Viardot and Count Leo Tolstoy. The former was already married and exercised great influence over his life, while with the latter, he had an uneasy friendship caused by differences of opinion. They eventually reconciled. His acquaintance with Dostoevsky too was fraught with problems but he tolerated and forgave him considering his state of being a patient of epilepsy.

He died at the age of sixty-four on September 3, 1883 due to spinal cancer near Paris. Marias, before ending the biographical account of Turgenev, spends considerable space reflecting upon his thoughtful and considerate nature who had often helped his friends in need but was unfortunately duped by many of them. Marias goes on to mention one of his lesser known works, "The Execution of Tropmann" as a piece that powerfully advocates against death penalty.



- *Nabokov in Raptures*

Javier Marias begins Vladimir Nabokov's biographical account using long-winded sentence to describe the former's distinct persona who would freely express his opinions despite being in the foreign land like America. This resulted in many Americans who knew him superficially to refer to him as "That disagreeable old man" and as a misanthrope. Nabokov's years in America as a teacher of literature in Wellesley College and later at Cornell University show the impact of the setting and the people he met there in his works. He did not wholly enjoy the vocation of teaching because of the long hours of preparation that he had to put in before giving the lecture in the classes. He was, however, fascinated with the concepts of 'literature of ideas' and of allegories.

Nabokov's relationship with his craft of writing was not an easy-going one. He would often try to discard his works when he came across any difficulty in completing the work at hand. For instance, it was his wife Vera, who saved the first chapters of *Lolita* from being exhumed by him as he thought the novel entailed a lot of technical difficulties. Nabokov's melancholic and wistful disposition because of his state of living in perpetual exile has been shown in the form of his nostalgic memories of his childhood in Russia and his inability to go back there. His relationship with the places where he had taken refuge during his exile too have been described. His overt praise of America made it seem too contrived. He even acknowledged that exiles "end by despising the land of their exile".

The relationship with his family and the tragedies like the killing of his brother in a Nazi concentration camp and of his father by a fascist have been mentioned. His relation with his contemporaries too have been detailed by Marias. He was not fond of most of the writers but could tolerate Henry James, Conan Doyle, H.G Wells, Biely, Pushkin and Shakespeare. Marias goes on to enumerate an array of people and things that Nabokov detested which is both hilarious and also revelatory of the latter are whimsical personality. He had antipathy towards notable people like Dostoevsky, Dr Freud, and things like "jazz, bullfighting, primitive masks, canned music, swimming pools, trucks, transistor radios,

bidets, insecticides, yachts, the circus, hooligans, nightclubs and the roar of motorbikes, to name but a few”.

He enjoyed solitude and the things he enjoyed doing alone were “hunting butterflies, concocting chess problems, translating Pushkin, writing his books.” When describing the news of Nobakov’s death on July 2nd, 1977, Marias conspicuously writes in first-person, “I learned about his death in Calle Sierpes in Seville, when I opened the newspaper as I was having breakfast in the Laredo.”

- *Rainer Maria Rilke in Waiting*

The biographical account of Rainer Maria Rilke begins with the recounting of his meeting with Leo Tolstoy in which the latter asks the former about what he was currently busy with. To this Rilke replies that he was preoccupied with “the lyric”, which draws rebuke from Tolstoy who considered all forms of lyrics as pointless. However, it did not have any impact on Rilke as he dedicated most of his time to writing lyrics of all forms like lyrical poetry and lyrical prose in his letters, diary entries, travelogues, and his plays. Rilke’s experiences as a secretary to the sculptor Rodin and his short stays in several parts of Spain and his trips to places like Russia, Paris, Venice, Scandinavia, Germany and other places shows the constant flux in which he lived. The sources of finances to sponsor these trips remain obscure but Rilke was known to have romantic or friendly ties with several women from the aristocratic class.

The trope of physical and psychological troubles visible in the lives of almost all the writers enumerated so far by Marias is present in Rilke’s life-story as well. Marias tries to explore the connection between art and the artist’s sufferings in this biographical account too. He delineates how it was the hearing of a voice or probably some kind of hallucination that inspired Rilke to write the famous line, “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the ranks of angels?” This was how Rilke wrote the First Elegy. Another source of his inspiration for writing was his “communing, not just with animals, but with the stars too, with the earth, trees, gods, monuments, paintings, heroes, minerals, the dead (especially with women who had died young and in love)”.

**SAQ:**

How does Marias present his own observations within the self-contained essays depicting lives of the writers in *Written Lives*? (50 words)

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How is Marias' style of life-writing different from the more traditional forms of the genre? (60 words)

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Javier Marias' vivid description of the physical feature of Rilke helps create a life-like picture of him in the minds of the readers. Marias mingles his own observations with those of real acquaintances of Rilke. For instance, Princess Taxis describes Rilke as having "eyes of a woman with just a hint of childish mischief in them". Rilke died on December 29, 1926 in Valmont, Switzerland due to Leukaemia at the age of fifty-one. His epitaph had been inscribed with a lyrics composed by him, "Rose, oh pure contradiction, joy/of being No-one's sleep under so many/lids"

• ***Malcolm Lowry Beset by Calamity***

Javier Marias establishes the calamitous nature of Malcolm Lowry from the onset of the biographical account by revealing an incident from 1946 in which Lowry got into trouble at the Immigration department for being drunk in Mexico. His physique along with the places he had been are illustrated with the help of details from his pictures in which he mostly appears in shorts. This shows his trips to several tropical places and his love for swimming. Lowry's life abound with many dramatic incidents involving excessive drinking and gambling. The incidents in which he often lost the original manuscripts of his writing too have been mentioned. It was his wife Margerie, who saved the manuscript of his most acclaimed work *Under the Volcano* from a fire that had broken out.

Lowry's childhood was marked by the presence of brutal nannies who tried to kill him in more than one occasions. However, Marias expresses his qualms about the reliability of Lowry's dramatic stories.

Lowry was infamous for making up stories. He was considered by those around him to be a merry person despite his frequent visits to psychiatric hospitals and prisons and his alcoholism, his suicide-attempts and eventually attempts to strangle his wife. The depiction of his relationship with his first wife, Jan Gabriel further shows his lack of sexual urges. His phobias and manias further indicated towards his poor mental state. He eventually died by suicide on June 27, 1957 after a violent fight with his wife Margerie.

- ***Madame Du Deffand and the Idiots***

Madame du Deffand's life-story begins with her belief that "her greatest misfortune was to have been born at all." She did not suffer from any big tragedy in her life but she simply suffered from extreme boredom. She has been described as an excellent writer of letters and her correspondences with Voltaire, and Horace Walpole are the most notable ones. However, most of the letters were not written by her and were rather dictated by her because she suffered from blindness. The stories of her earlier days in convent school shows her as a feisty young lady who questioned religion and had criticised the literary tone of the Bible and was impatient with the writing style of St Paul's Epistles.

She lived a brief period of her youthful days as a libertine in the court of Regent Philippe d'Orleans where all sorts of debauchery used to take place. She was popular among the foreigners as well as young French man for her reputation of being friends with famous people like Voltaire, Montesquieu, D'Alembert, Burke, Hume, Gibbon and Fontenelle. However, she had also been known to have been a cold and indifferent person which is revealed by the ways in which she revealed the news of the death of her life-long friend Voltaire and her responses to the deaths of one of her long-time servant and her loving niece, Julie de Lespinasse too were very apathetic in nature.

Marias gives details of her daily routine which was mostly “disorderly” and comprised of hosting guests at supper. She suffered from terrible insomnia and detested artificiality in all its forms. She wanted others around her to like her but would call out those whom she thought of as foolish. Most of the people around her came across to her as idiots. She encapsulated her views on life as, “All conditions and all species seem to me equally wretched, from the angel to the oyster; what is really tiresome is to have been born at all ... I am never contented with myself ... I heartily detest myself”.

Before ending the biographical account, Marias gives us a glimpse of her literary tastes. Marias maintains the pattern of disclosing a very personal fact about the writers just after mentioning the date and the reason behind their death. In case of Madam du Deffand he reveals what she had written in her last letter to Horace Walpole and to Voltaire.

- ***Rudyard Kipling Without Jokes***

Javier Marias draws the image of Kipling as a man who had travelled extensively and came across as a hermit. His poetry is indicative of a certain kind of pain which he felt deep down inside him. The biographical account further elucidate upon his friendship with Wolcott Balestier who died young. Kipling had married Balestier’s sister Caroline and it was Kipling’s friend Henry James and his father who expressed reservations about their union. Despite being friends, James often made fun of Kipling’s love for his motorised vehicle and he would also express his annoyance at being invited by the couple for meal together. Another notable friendship their Kipling shared was with the writer Rider Haggard who would often visit his home and was liked by his children for his story-telling genius.

Kipling’s popularity made him gain a stature akin to a national hero. People were concerned about his health when he suffered from a bout of pneumonia in New York and they were full of sympathy for him when he lost his daughter and son. Kipling did not like jokes, talking about his private life and giving opinions about the works of his

contemporaries. Kipling's nostalgia for the initial years of his childhood spent in Bombay in India and his shift near Portsmouth away from his parents in the care of a sadistic woman is mentioned in his autobiography titled *Something of Myself*.

While describing Kipling's appearance, Marias also remarks upon the fact how in the present times people have the capacity to hold on to their youthful look for a longer time. But Kipling in his teenage years resembled a man of forty years of age. The cheerfulness surrounding his winning of the Nobel Prize in 1907 was dampened by the news of the death of King of Sweden. Marias touches upon some of the well-known aspects of his life like the success of his poem "If", his disrepute as an "imperialist" writer and his harsh opinions like "at the end of the war, there must be no more Germans".

Kipling died at the age of seventy and his ashes have been kept at Westminster Abbey. The biographical account ends with Marias' remark about Kipling that he was widely admired and read and probably not much loved but there were more or less no objections against him by anyone as a person.

- ***Arthur Rimbaud Against Art***

Arthur Rimbaud's mysteriously abandoning the pursuit of writing poetry at a very early stage of life, that is, the twenties, unfolds this biographical account. He used to get tired of being who he was once in every few years which is encapsulated in his words as "Je est un autre" ("I is someone else"). This is proven by the different personas he embodied throughout his life. In his initial years, he was a studious boy who eventually became "iconoclastic lout" who sceptically questioned almost everything which was not well-tolerated by many people around him.

Marias interestingly remarks that the posterity or the future generations have the advantage of enjoying the creative products of a writer whom they would otherwise have found impossible to tolerate in person. Those who knew him recounted that he terribly smelled because he never

changed his clothes and would address almost everyone around him with insults and was mostly in intoxicated state. Through Rimbaud's story, we also come to know about his association with Verlaine which was full of tumultuous events. Despite being married and having a family of his own Verlaine was in a relationship with Rimbaud. Both the men's problematic character could be termed to be on the verge of the villainous. Verlaine often tried to hurt his young wife Mathilde on several occasions like by trying to set fire to her hair, slitting her wrists and hands and once by holding a knife to her throat. Rimbaud too had a penchant for such ferocious acts which he mostly perpetuated upon Verlaine. Once he slashed Verlaine's hand and once he shot with a revolver on his wrist after missing the first two shots.

Marias does not dwell upon the ethical or psychological underpinnings of these frantic acts and moves ahead with the task of further explicating upon the various talents of Rimbaud. He had the talent to learn new languages and musical instruments effortlessly. Marias mentions the excellent biography of Rimbaud by Enid Starkie which gave detailed information about his life after he had left writing poetry. Marias very succinctly mentions the vocations he took up like coffee trading, an explorer and possibly also a slave-trader. Once he had expressed his desire of getting married and starting a family but it did not materialise. Rimbaud's precarious and unstable financial situation and his final years of suffering till his death at the age of thirty-six have been depicted in a fairly elaborate manner. Rimbaud's distaste towards poetry and art in general is summed up by Rimbaud's expressions like, "Screw poetry" and "...art is nonsense."

- ***Djuna Barnes in Silence***

The biographical account of Djuna Barnes begins with a discussion of her silent disposition from the perspective of others around her. She did not have a very productive life in terms of the literature produced by her but had been active as a journalist during her youth. Marias describes her appearance with the help of the photos available of her. She has

been described as more of an elegant than pretty lady whose stature commanded respect. She was known for having affairs with many men and women and one of her notable probable lover was Edmund Wilson. She also faced rape attempt by a hotel porter in Paris and a violent attack by a drunken journalist. Barnes' was also known for her affairs with the writers Anais Nin and Carson McCullers with whom things did not end on a good note.

Her childhood and adolescent were full of strange events. For instance, at the age of seventeen she was given away to man named Percy Faulkner by her father and grandmother. Marias speculates this could probably the reason behind her lack of regard for works of William Faulkner, with whom the man shared the same surname. Marias mentions that Faulkner too was not very fond of her. However, her contemporaries like T.S Eliot, Dylan Thomas, James Joyce and Lawrence Durrell appreciated her work. Her family's distinctive trait was the unusual names of the members and their inclination towards "eccentric spiritualism". She was married to Courtenay Lemon for three years and had no children borne out of the marriage. Her most passionate relationship was with the sculptress, Thelma Wood with whom she lived in Paris. Her most notable relationships with a men was with a German named Putzi Hanfstaengl through whom she got the opportunity to meet Hitler once.

The biographical account ends by connecting the conclusion with what Marias begins the account, that is, the predominance of silence in Barnes life. She once wrote, "I like my human experience served up with a little silence and restraint. Silence makes experience go further, and, when it does die, gives it that dignity common to a thing one had touched and not vanished." She had once expressed that there should be a law to kill the old. She died on June 18, 1982 as a nonagenarian.

- ***Oscar Wilde After Prison***

This biographical account unfolds with a rather detailed description of the softness and griminess of Oscar Wilde's hands and other people's reaction to a handshake with him. Wilde had the ability to charm people



despite people not liking him at the first instance of meeting him. Wilde was also known for his physical prowess and had been known to have fought four bullies who had come to disturb him during his student days at Oxford. He had to serve prison sentence due to the trials with Marquess of Queensberry who was the father of his lover Bosie. His years in prison had changed him considerably. An incident recounted by Ford Maddox Ford about Wilde shows him getting frightened easily by a group of bullies. He was afflicted with obesity and found it immensely difficult to carry on with writing. However, he had not lost his gift for lively conversations and story-telling. Andre Gide had described him in his post-prison years as “a poisoned creature” who drank excessively which worsened his health.

Oscar Wilde was a bisexual and was still married to Constance Lloyd with whom he had two children. Another notable relationship he had been in was with an Irish lady who eventually married Bram Stoker. Marias remarks within parenthesis about the Irish lady’s inclination towards men with “strong emotions”. Not much is known about his wife but a great deal of information about his lover Bosie or Lord Alfred Douglas can be found because of his literary works. Marias depicts the views of the contemporaries of Wilde to give us further details of his life. His actions showed his interest in diverse religions like paganism, Catholicism and Protestantism.

Marias refers to Wilde’s words, “Life sells everything too dear, and we buy the most wretched of its secrets at a monstrous, infinite price.” and connects it with the information pertaining to the end of Wilde’s life as, “He stopped paying that price on November 30, 1900, when he died in Paris at the age of forty-six, after a death agony that lasted more than two months.” Wilde exhibited his witticism even in his last moments. He had ordered champagne and remarked, “I am dying beyond my means”.

- ***Yukio Mishima in Death***

Unlike the rest of the biographical accounts in this book, Javier Marias begins this one by alluding to the end of Yukio Mishima’s life. He

enumerates several disagreeable traits of Mishima such as the various “stupid things” he did in his life and his penchant for attracting attention towards himself, his fascination with “violent death”, phobia of being poisoned and erotic fascination for injured masculine bodies in his imagination. Mishima is one of the three writers towards whom Marias expressed his lack of affection in the prologue to the book. Marias’ lack of affection are very evident in his description of Mishima’s cunning to avoid going to war by manipulation and lying to the doctor about his symptoms. He however, justifies his evading of fighting during the war in a rather circumlocutory manner in autobiography, *Confessions of a Mask*. Marias mingles sarcasm, irony and wit to express his lack of regard for Mishima. He describes Mishima’s narcissistic traits like “having artistic-cum-muscleman photographs taken of himself” of which one image had arrows stuck in his sides and with ropes tying his wrists. Marias goes as far as giving graphic description of the images which aroused Mishima sexually.

Mishima’s self-centred nature is further highlighted with his obsession for having pictures which depicted him as a larger than life personality. He acted in his own movies, and composed songs and plays in which he himself played all the characters. His airs of self-importance are elaborated further with the descriptions of his attempts at self-promotion. He considered himself worthy of being honoured with the Nobel Prize and was shocked he did not receive it. In this biographical account Marias also indirectly reveals his own personal political position. For instance, when he mentions how Mishima once had told a right-wing extremist that he wanted to identify his literary work with God, Marias states that the latter was “perhaps, accustomed to such delusions of grandeur.” Mishima got married to Yoko Sugiyama who fulfilled all the six criteria set by Mishima. His close acquaintances remembered him as a person of good humour and he was praised for taking his wife with him to the trips abroad which was unusual for men to do during those times. Marias also sarcastically takes a dig at Mishima’s “hagiographer”, Marguerite Yourcenar who was always full of superfluous praises for him.

Mishima's failed attempt at creating an army of his own named Tatenokai was also what resulted in his decision of performing hara-kiri which too did not initially go on as smoothly as he had envisaged it to be. After some struggle it was performed successfully by one of his comrades, Furu-Koga. The biographical account ends with Mishima's father's reaction of embarrassment rather than grief upon hearing the news of his son's dramatic death.

- *Laurence Sterne at the End*

Laurence Sterne's biographical account begins with the portrayal of the difficult times which his family had to endure on account of the meagre earning and constant travelling compelled by his father's career in the army. Sterne got his impeccable sense of humour from his father but no substantial wealth from him. His father died when he was seventeen years old. Laurence Sterne got monetary support from his wealthy relatives which helped him study in Cambridge and eventually become a vicar in Yorkshire. Despite his inadequate means, Sterne often indulged in fun activities like opening a club named Demoniacs with his affluent friend John Hall-Stevenson, in which they drank and listened to good music and danced together.

Although Sterne had a passion for literature which was evident from his love for Cervantes, Rabelais, Lucian, Montaigne and others, he discovered his talent for writing only after the success of a satirical piece written by him on local politics. The drastic change in his life brought about by the success of his magnificent work *Tristram Shandy* has been depicted through the details of his frequent travels to London and meeting the reputable contemporaries of his times like the painter Reynolds, the actor David Garrick. His cordial and cheerful nature made him more popular among the people.

However, one notable personality who did not like Sterne or his work was Horace Walpole. While presenting the dynamics of their problematic relationship, Marias alludes to the life-story of Madame du Deffand who was very close to Walpole. Whenever Sterne visited Paris, instead

of meeting Madame du Deffand he would go to her rival Julie de Lespinasse and Baron d'Holbach who introduced him to Diderot. The eminent Dr Johnson too did not find Sterne very agreeable. Sterne's ill health had been a cause for concern by the people around him and often when he had been away from England for a long time, people assumed he was dead and would mourn for him. He wrote about his trips to the different places he had been to in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. He obliquely mentions about his separation from his wife Elizabeth in the book. He possessed a calm demeanour even during times of crisis like his house being set on fire. He had been in relationships with various women and the most remarkable one with Eliza had been described with the help of letter he wrote to her. She was a married woman living in India with her husband at that time. His contemplations about his mortality are vividly described in his letters to his close ones. Despite his imminent death, he kept writing and eventually breathed his last on March 18, 1768, at the age of fifty-four.

- ***Fugitive Women***

In this section of *Written Lives*, Javier Marias presents brief biographical sketches of some prominent women writers. He writes about Lady Hester Stanhope's talent for satire, her beauty, intelligence and her ability to host political supper parties. She was known as a wealthy unmarried lady who travelled extensively around the world. Marias paints a picture Lady Hester as someone who with the prowess of her charm could win over any one. However, she did not have good relationship with any women she knew. Marias ends the brief biographical account by describing her last years which she largely spent smoking in her room. She was surrounded by thirty-seven servants but none were to be found after her death as they had all fled with all her belongings.

Marias delineates the life-stories of other prolific female writers like Vernon Lee who was known for being excellent at striking brilliant conversations, Adah Isaacs Menken who was very popular as a theatre artist, Violent Hunt who was known for her neo-Gothic tales and dramatic love-life, and Julie de Lespinasse who was known for her passionate

letter-writing. Marias ends this section with a biographical account of Emily Bronte. Marias presents a series of lesser known but important facts about her childhood and how she got initiated to the world of literature through the Irish with supernatural themes tales she used to hear from her father. Bronte was nicknamed by her sisters as “the major” for her decisive nature. Marias throws light on the relationship with her brother and the circumstances leading up to her death just three months after her brother’s death.

• ***Perfect Artists***

Marias interest in unravelling the lives of creative personalities makes him extend the book further in its subsequent editions. This final section of the book is dedicated to observing the notable portraits of some of the writers selected by Marias. He analyses the portraits of Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, Edgar Allan Poe, Andre Gide, Joseph Conrad and others to reveal through them more about their personalities. Thus, Marias introduces a new form of life-writing by focusing on the ways in which the renounced writers of the past wanted to mould their public image through the way they posed for their portraits.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Write a short note on the writing style of Javier Marias in *Written Lives*. (about 100 words)

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2. Why do you think Marias recounts the events of the lives of the writers in a fashion that does not follow any fixed chronological structure? (about 100 words)

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3. What factors could have motivated Marias to describe the portraits of the famous writers in the book? (about 150 words)

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### 3.4 Summing Up:

Javier Marias is considered as one of the most intriguing contemporary writers of Europe, as well as one of the most celebrated Spanish novelists and translator. He excelled as a writer in both fiction and non-fiction that includes fourteen novels, several collections of short stories, and essays. His elegant style and intricate plot structure attracted readers across the world. His works were translated in over 46 languages globally. His work, *Written Lives*, is an eclectic collection of biographies of twenty six literary figures who did pioneering works in the literary realm. Noteworthy, his collection portrayed writers who lead fairly disastrous lives, rather than the gentle, quite ones. His characters are mostly eccentrics and of chaotic mental disposition but were extremely passionate about one thing in common, that is, literature. From the absentminded Joseph Conrad, to the linguistically punctilious Henry James, to the self-obsessed Yukio Mishima, to the simple but resilient Lawrence Sterne, Marias's *Written Lives* sheds light upon the lives of well-known literary figures in a quirky, interesting way.

### 3.5 References and Suggested Readings:

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**UNIT- 4**  
**NINE LIVES: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED**  
**IN MODERN INDIA (Background)**

**Unit Structure:**

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 A Note on William Dalrymple's Life and Works
- 4.4 A Note on Life Writing
- 4.5 A Note on Travel Writing
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References and Suggested Readings

**4.1 Objectives:**

After reading this Unit, the learners will be able to-

- *get* an outline of life and works of William Dalrymple,
- *understand* Dalrymple's vision in his work,
- *introduced* to the genre of travel writing and its epoch,
- *get an overview* of academic studies in travel writing.

**4.2 Introduction:**

William Dalrymple is one of the most famous travel writers and historian who is originally from Scotland. He is widely popular as a historian because of his in-depth narratives that provide a historical outlook to the stories in his books. After his first visit to Delhi in 1989, Dalrymple has been living there on and off. While staying in India, he spends most of his time at his farmhouse in Mehrauli. William Dalrymple's works suggest an oeuvre of different types of writings which include journalistic discourse, documentaries and even various multi-media works. His works are associated with the Middle East and Central and South Asia. His



works have borne him many honours in the form of awards and titles. He is a co-founder of Jaipur Literary Festival. He lays an extensive focus on Indian life and culture in his work *Nine Lives*. The chapter will introduce the students to the author and his important works. It will also lay out the features of life-writing and travel writing. The students will benefit from this unit for a better understanding of Dalrymple's work.

### **4.3 A Note on William Dalrymple's Life and Works:**

An important Scottish writer and curator, William Dalrymple is an historian whose works have delineated some of the most important aspects of South Asian societies. Dalrymple was born on 20th March, 1965. His interest in India has given us a beautiful representation of different regions with their individual features that are weaved in their past and present. He published his first travelogue *In Xanadu: A Quest* in 1989. The book retraces the travel route of Marco Polo and Dalrymple gives us the particulars of his travel from Jerusalem to Inner Mongolia. The book is an important landmark in Dalrymple's writing as well as his interest in exclusive cultures and their exploration. His second book, *City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi* (1993) helped him gain the attention of the literary world. The book won him the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1994. It explores the mythology and history of the Delhi city from its ruins to its modern nature. It compiles the anecdotes to the historical framework and the final outcome proves the excellent literary acumen that Dalrymple brings to his narratives. His work *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (2002) explores the dynamic relationships between the Indian elites and the officials of British East India Company during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. As he describes the lives of some of the British officials who were married to the Indian women, he also highlights the permeable boundaries of Christianity and Islam that come into play during that pre-modern era. The book not only challenges the conventional perception of the history but also brings into light the forgotten side of history. His other book, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857* (2006) outlines the fall of the Mughal Empire and emergence of the British Raj. This crucial

moment of history is skilfully portrayed by Dalrymple with the help of official documents, firsthand accounts and a vivid description.

His other important works incorporate *Delhi: City of Djinns* (1998), *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009), *The Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1707-1857* (2015), *Koh-i-Noor: The History of the World's Most Infamous Diamond* (2017), *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (2019). Beyond the scope of writing, William Dalrymple has also been active on other engagements. He has contributed in the promotion of cultural dialogues as well as occupied himself with the advancement of literature. He was one of the founding members of Jaipur Literary Festival in 2006 and contributed to its advancement which can be seen in the current times as it is one of the most celebrated literary festivals in the world. A platform that welcomes the intellectual exchanges, the Jaipur Literary Festival hosts renowned scholars, authors and thinkers of the contemporary relevance. He has also curated a number of exhibitions which also shows his curiosity towards the visual arts. He organised "Princes and Painters in Mughal Delhi 1707-1857" in 2012 at the Asia Society, New York. It showcased the Mughal Empire and its artistic finery and achievements. It also highlighted the keen eye that Dalrymple has for the aesthetics in the empires of history.

His works are best known for the encapsulating storytelling and the academic neatness that he brings in the narrative. His historical narratives target the wider audience and help not only the general public but also the scholars to access the complex historical data. His writing challenges the standard historical narratives and breathes life into the forgotten chapters of the history. He has been awarded with many honours for his exceptional writing ventures which include awards like Wolfson History Prize (2003) and Duff Cooper Memorial Prize (2007). He has been an active scholar who has contributed essays and articles on culture and society as well as shared his views on politics.

It can be said that Dalrymple's works have highlighted the multifaceted historical perspectives on the South Asian history and his works stand

as the legacy of his hard work. His remarkable contribution to the world of literature and intellectual discourse can be seen from his commitment to establish literary festivals and promoting art exhibitions. William Dalrymple is a leading figure in the historical non-fictional writing.

#### **4.4 A Note on Life-Writing:**

Life-writing is an umbrella term under which different sorts of writings that represent a material connected to the real-life world or true-life-accounts are covered. According to scholar Zachary Leader:

‘Life-writing’ is a generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed. These writings include not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries, autobiographical fiction, and biographical fiction, but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings ... marginalia, nonce writing, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms (including blogs, tweets, Facebook entries) (1).

A form of elucidating the self, life-writing describes a broader picture of the historical context, the cultural subtext and societies. Starting from the St. Augustine’s *Confessions* to the essays of Michel de Montaigne and *The Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the genre’s evolving nature can be observed with the simultaneous development of social structure, cultural context and the understanding of the self. There is also a dimension of cultural identity and its related deviations in the construction and understanding of the personality. As different cultures have different framework, this provides a multiple perspective on personal narratives. Life-writing in its various forms often initiate the debate of authenticity and properness of the real world as represented in the written word. Also, in various cases of autobiographical writing, the individual and his full representation comes into question with the choices he or she makes to highlight the events which are deemed necessary for writing. Thus, life-writing becomes a sort of political act where the narrator assumes a position of control and drives the narrative

towards end. Let us understand this with a simple thought experiment; if you are to describe one of your important life-events to a friend, how will you describe it? Would you change the name of the places and characters? Would you present yourself differently as compared to in the real situation? Would you omit some individuals and focus only on the material that would extract the reaction you desire from the listeners? If these questions are relevant to the situation and the description, then it is clear that the process of writing lives is also a matter of choices and expectations.

The case of travel writing is unique in this regard. The travel writing is an area from where one can understand the perspectives of different cultures, their interaction, as well as the fact that how the writer has acquired and circulated the knowledge of societies and regions through his writing. The genre of travel writing, as described by Carl Thompson, “encompasses forms as diverse as the field journal, investigative report, guide book, personal memoir, comic sketch and lyrical reverie” (xvi).

**Check Your Progress**

Q. Write a short note on major historical non-fiction works of William Dalrymple.

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**4.5 A Note on Travel Writing:**

Travel writing makes effort to understand, explain and retain the essences of personal experiences of places, their culture and historical significance. With the help of the narrator, the readers delve into the world of exotic cultures, unfamiliar locations and diverse traditions that represent the values of human solidarity and connection. The travel writing traces its history to the ancient time when the travellers documented their visits and experiences mostly for the purpose of tracing back their journeys

to improve navigation. It was, however, the age of enlightenment and discovery, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, that rigorous efforts were put to reach different shores of the world by the European powers and hence the notes of travels took the shape of literary output. With the rise in readership and European expansion of power, the demand for the exotic and adventurous journeys emerged and with it the narrative technique of the documentation enhanced. The travel writing hence forward became a form of narrative art that can encapsulate the readers to engross them in the foreign cultures and traditions.

Travel writing has the capacity to lift the readers and transport them to the unknown places, unique cultures and at the same time provide the distinctive perspectives to understand the world. It enlarges our vision and scope of learning as different people and their peculiar cultures surprise the readers. This form of writing offers multiple perspectives and various styles of representation. It puts forward not only factual data in the form of reporting, but also present a more subjective approach of the author and hence it takes into consideration autobiographical, anthropological as well as historical data. Most of the good works in this genre focus on cultural nuances, epistemology as well as the connection among the beings, and not just a mere overview of the landscape. The emotional aspect of the genre helps to enhance its demand and make it memorable for the readers. The genre demands an immersive writing style that can go to the depths of the nuances of any details and seeks to capture the essence of places. It uses vivid descriptions and expressive language with an effort on illustration. Travel writing foregrounds the complexities related to the cultural exchange and challenges that are faced by the readers to empathize with a foreign lifestyle. Hence, the task to introduce and familiarize an unknown land and its people is handled by the powerful graphic description of the writers. Travel writing hence acts as a bridge between the different cultures and the writers are the best communicators amongst them.

Just like the evolving nature of travel writing, the nature of studies on travel writing is also expanding with time. Thinkers like Sara Mills, Marie

Luis Pratt and Dennis Porter helped to consolidate the subject in the academic world. Edward Said's seminal work on postcolonial studies, *Orientalism* (1978), remains a big influence on travel writing studies. However, the latest developments in the research of the field have taken into consideration a multi-focal approach on the subject. Carl Thompson writes in this regard that:

Recent scholarship and theory has of course remained highly mindful of, and extensively focused on the intersections that may exist between travel writing, knowledge and power, especially in the era of Western imperial dominance from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries (xvii).

The sources for academic studies in travel writings can be traced to the reports and writings that are available of the early adventurers and explorers that documented their journeys. Marie Louis Pratt, in her important work *Imperial Eyes* has investigated the imperial nature of early narratives of travel writing. A central theme in the studies of travel writing is the connecting space where the unfamiliar comes into contact. It is what Marie Louis Pratt calls the "contact zone"; it is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6). Her comprehensive work describes the power dynamics underlined within such narratives, where the writer acts as a mediator between his/her own culture and the space of the "other". As we have already mentioned, Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* deals with this encounter of the two cultures and perception created by the dominant narrative of the other. Said puts the focus on the feature and narrative style with which the other is represented. If one looks at more contemporary works on travel writing studies, Tim Youngs' *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900* is a work that prioritises critical analysis of the conditions that produced these narratives both on the part of the recorder (traveller) as well as the recorded (place and people of the new place). It focuses on how the writers and explorers of the period portrayed East and Central

Africa. The articulation of identity through the narratives and the representation of subjectivity are recurring themes when it comes to travel writing. It is a challenge for the writers as their views are often, either consciously or unconsciously, motivated by their own cultural perspective as well as its biases.

### **Stop to Consider**

Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is a milestone in the development of postcolonial studies. It fundamentally exposes that the Western representation of the Orient, that is East, is biased, stereotyped and based on power politics. This discourse hence is perpetuated by many scholars, writers as well as artists. He asserts that West has construed a homogenized and distorted image of the Orient to rationalize dominance and colonialism. The work sparked a new dynamic in the postcolonial theory and cultural studies. It prompted re-evaluation of the epistemology and questioned the global power politics. The work remains influential in countering Eurocentrism and evokes nuanced views on cultural relationships.

While studying the travel narratives, scholars often stick to the discourse analysis as a methodology to understand the perspective of the writers or the narrator. There are also examples of ethnographic approaches in the field as the researchers involve themselves in practicality of the lived experience between the traveller and the encountered communities. This is a more common method in anthropological studies. The most popular approaches have to be the postcolonial as well as feminist perspectives that are commonly applied to delve into the discreet power formations and marginalisation that underlies the narratives. In this prospect, one can take the example of Chandra Mohanty's work entitled *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* which explores the involvement of gender perspective and its importance as an intersection in travel writing.

Travel writing in the globalised world has a bright scope in terms of reaching the reading audience. It is a great tool for the writers to introduce different lands and cultures to their readers. The newly refined approaches in the narrative techniques will help the writers to promote a healthy cultural perception. In this regard the academic scholarship will help to understand the nuances of understanding cultures. The case of William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* is unique. Although the narrative is involved in the writer's travel and exploration of the unknown landscape of a very remote India close to the bursting cities, he has also engaged in exploring the historical data and brings before the readers a very unmitigated truthfulness in his narrative. He does this by focusing more on the perspective of the subjects and giving them proper space in the narrative.

**Check Your Progress**

Q. Describe how travel writing reflects or challenges colonial narratives and discuss the connection between travel writing and postcolonial studies.

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**4.6 Summing Up:**

In this unit, we have learnt William Dalrymple's life and important works that he has penned. We have also learnt about the convincing and comprehensive storytelling of his works. We are then introduced to a brief summary of the meaning and scope of life-writing and its forms. Then we studied the overview of the travel writing and its importance as well as how the field is approached by the scholars. The students through this unit have been able to understand the emerging trends in the research of travel writing. In the next unit, we will understand the substance of William Dalrymple's text *Nine Lives* with the help of brief summaries of each chapter from the text.



#### 4.7 References and Suggested Readings:

Dalrymple, William. *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Hulme, Peter and Tim Youngs, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Leader, Zachary. Introduction. *On Life-Writing*, edited by Leader, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 1-6.

Pratt, Marie Louis. Introduction. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, by Pratt, Routledge, 1992, pp. 1-11.

Thompson, Carl. Introduction. *The Routledge Companion to Travel Writing*, edited by Thompson, Routledge, 2016, pp. xvi-xx.

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**UNIT- 5**  
***NINE LIVES: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED***  
***IN MODERN INDIA***  
**(Reading the Text)**

**Unit Structure:**

- 5.1 Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 An Overview of the Text
- 5.4 Chapter-wise Summary and Analysis of the Text
  - 5.4.1 The Nun's Tale
  - 5.4.2 The Dancer of Kannur
  - 5.4.3 The Daughters of Yellamma
  - 5.4.4 The Singer of Epics
  - 5.4.5 The Red Fairy
  - 5.4.6 The Monk's Tale
  - 5.4.7 The Maker of Idols
  - 5.4.8 The Lady Twilight
  - 5.4.9 The Song of the Blind Minstrel
- 5.5 Summing Up
- 5.6 References and Suggested Readings

**5.1 Objectives:**

After reading this Unit, the learners will be able to-

- *learn* and interpret the text very closely,
- *appreciate* Dalrymple's narrative style,
- *comprehend* the summary of the chapters,
- *form* a better understanding of the text and its context.

## **5.2 Introduction:**

This unit will explore William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* and provide a brief summary of the text. The unit deals with each chapter separately so that it will be easier for the readers to understand the text. Each chapter deals with different lives. The fabric of the text is weaved with multiple experiences of the author-narrator and the individual study of the chapters will help in comprehending the text better. Moreover, this unit will provide a basic understanding of the narrator's perspective. While most of the narrative stories are based on the author's first-hand experience, hence it is assumed that he is the narrator, Dalrymple has been careful enough not to impose himself in the text and its narrative style takes care of that by giving the characters voices. Dalrymple's characters are not passive mouthpieces of the narrator; rather they actively participate and make their presence felt with their statements and point of views which the author respects by not manipulating or opposing them. The readers will find such nuances of the text highlighted and discussed in this unit.

## **5.3 An Overview of the Text:**

The book is an exploration of deep spiritual and diverse religious beliefs that are present in India. It was first published in 2009 and explores lives of nine individuals. Each of the individuals in each chapter are shown to be involved in different devotional trail and unfold subtle interpretations of the divine and faith. Darlymple has skilfully woven a narrative that is a collage of different locations and their discrete religious practices. From a refugee Buddhist monk's confession of confrontation with violence in Dharamsala to the efforts of a Theyyam dancer at Kannur, and from the local bard of a traditional folk song based on a regional hero Pabuji in Rajasthan to the awe-inspiring lives of Bauls in West Bengal's Tarapith, the narratives of the book roam the length and breadth of India. The book establishes Dalrymple's mastery in riveting storytelling which captures the essence of the characters. It also reflects his meticulous studies of the subjects and powerful observations made by

him during the research. *Nine Lives* goes beyond the boundary of individual religious practices and connects with the universality of faith. Providing a solid historical context for each of the stories, the book offers to take the readers on a complex journey into the cultural, spiritual and religious mosaic of India.

#### **5.4 Chapter Wise Summary and Analysis of the Text:**

Let us discuss the text in details.

##### **5.4.1 The Nun's Tale:**

The first chapter is about Prasannamati Mataji, a Jain nun, who has taken diksha (a ritual of initiation). It is set in Karnataka's Sravanabelagola which is a town sacred to Jains for more than 2000 years. It was here that Chandragupta Maurya took self-imposed fast as an atonement for all the killings he had committed. There is a big statue of Prince Bahubali, a Jain hero, who became the first human being to attain moksha (enlightenment/spiritual liberation). It is a temple for the Jain monks and here the narrator meets Prasannamati Mataji who is a Digambara nun. The Digambara monks and nuns follow the most severe form of the Jain values. The temple has marble images of the Tirthankaras (Liberators). These ascetic figures, also known as the Jinas, have shown the road to Nirvana and successfully liberated themselves from the samsara (the illusory physical world). Hence, they are also known as the 'ford-maker' which is the direct translation of Tirthankara. Mataji tells the narrator that Jains practice aparigraha (giving up possessions). She had wandered in many places of India barefoot and practiced fasting just like other Jain nuns. She avoids violence in its entirety and lived a compassionate life. She shares that one of her attachments was with the nun called Prayogamati with whom she had been friends for more than twenty years. As Prayogamati passed away, Mataji realised that the bond was too strong for her to get detachment from. Prayogamati took sallekhana (a ritual of fasting till death) in her last stage of life as she fell ill first with TB and then malaria. When questioned by Dalrymple that whether sallekhana is a form of suicide, Mataji replies that:

It is quite different. Suicide is great sin, the result of despair. But sallekhana is as a triumph over death, an expression of hope... We believe that death is not the end, and that life and death are complementary. So when you embrace Sallekhana you are embracing a whole new life – it's no more than going through from one room to another (Dalrymple 5).

Prasannamati was born in a rich family of Raipur, Chhattisgarh in 1972. She was known by the name Rekha. When she met Dayasagar Maharaj, a Jain monk, at the age of thirteen, she was instantly attracted towards his teachings on how to live a peaceful life and avoid violence. She joined Sangha (Jain community) when she was fourteen but she was taken home after two months. Then she returned against her family's will and eventually led a life in Sangha's norms. Her guruji taught them rigorously and for her the Sangha gave her a second life. She believes it has given her a rebirth.

She met Prayogamati in one of her visits to a village along with the Sangha members. They both took diksha together. For twenty years they were close friends. The life after diksha was not normal as told by their Guruji. He said that they were "never again to use a vehicle, to take food only once a day, not to use Western medicine, to abstain from emotion, never to hurt any living creature" (Dalrymple 21). When Prayogamati was diagnosed with advanced TB of the digestive system, she decided to embrace Sallekhana and giving up her body with her own will. After her demise, Prasannamati took the first solo walk. When the narrator meets her for the last time, he is told that she has also chosen the path of Sallekhana. The chapter ends with a sad tone that although the scriptures are full of tales of people meeting old friends, and husbands and wives and teachers from the past but no one controls these chances and Prasannamati realises that she has lost her friend Prayogamati forever.

#### **5.4.2 The Dancer of Kannur:**

The second chapter centres around the life of Hari Das, a theyyam dancer in Kerala's Kannur. He has been practicing the dance for more than twenty-six years. He explains that God enters the dancers' body like lightning and for the entire performance it is the god which the theyyam dancers are impersonating is in control. They only get themselves back when the dance is over. Each of the dancers in Hari Das's group that the author-narrator meets lead a double life. They only become gods in theyyam season and in the normal days they pick up other works. Hari is manual labourer who builds wells and in weekends he serves as a warder of Tellicherry Central Jail. Hari Das describes that the dancers become deities during the theyyam season and states that "though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and castiest Namboodiri Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet" (Dalrymple 33).

Although Kerala has been a place of global importance in terms of trade, especially when it became India's station for Spice Route, and welcomed Jewish, Romans, Arabs and later Portuguese, it has remained still a very conservative as well as hierarchically rigid society. Kerala's cosmopolitan nature in terms of trade route does not align with its social ambience. The narrator explains the caste discrimination of present and its historical episodes. He further explains that theyyam dance is the inversion of Keralan way of life because it is the Dalits on whose body the gods choose to appear, making the dance rituals free from Brahminical apparatus' influence. Dalrymple writes that:

In many of the theyyam stories, a member of the lower castes infringes or transgresses accepted caste restrictions and is unjustly punished with rape (in the case of women) or death (in the case of men, and sometimes women too), and then is defied by the gods aghast at the injustices practiced by the Brahmins and other ruling castes (36).

Hari Das believes that the theyyam dance surely helps the Dalits to respect themselves and recover their dignity. He documents some of the stories behind the dancing deities, like the anecdote of Pottam Devam

in which Lord Shiva teaches Adi Shankacharya to refrain from discrimination and prejudice against the Pullayas (Dalit). Hari Das was from a very poor family and following his father's footsteps he also learnt the art of theyyam. After a rigorous training for three years, Hari Das performed his first theyyam at the age of seventeen. He claims that unlike other Keralan dance forms like Kathakali, theyyam is totally dependent on artist's strength and skills. In this dance, there is no screen between the audience and dancers, so the performance demands a skill of perfectionist. The dance form demands that an artist must devote his heart, body, mind and soul to the performance. Other than the nuances of performance, Hari Das also explains the politics of RSS and CPM in Kerala. While the different political parties support different deities, theyyam becomes more popular and hence it generates more patronage. Hari Das points to the fact that he is certainly generating more income from his theyyam performances than what his father did. As the new boys are joining different jobs, he believes there is a looming fear of scarcity of theyyam performers. The gap between the believers and non-believers in such deities is filled by the evidences of miraculous healing and devotees getting their wishes fulfilled. When the author-narrator visits Hari Das's place again after two months, he heard such stories of fulfilment and the people who were benefitted had also arranged a performance. There he met Hari Das again who was still performing.

### **Stop to Consider**

Theyyam is a dance form popular in North Kerala, India. It is native to Kerala and represents ritualistic and traditional values. A blend of folk and tribal traditions, the dance combines a form of complex music and drama. The performers wear intricate makeup and elaborate costumes to showcase a divine being. Different dances representing specific deities hold special values and hence are performed in sacred spaces. Theyyam dance represents a deep artistic and spiritual expression rooted in the cultural memory of the region.

### 5.4.3 The Daughters of Yellamma:

Devadasi is a term that describes those women who were dedicated by their families to the goddess Yellamma. The belief dictates that after the ritual they can no longer be allowed to marry and establish a new life. Set in Karnataka's Belgaum, the narrator tells the story of Rani, one of the devadasis that he met during his visit to Belgaum. The narrator visits the Ninth century Yellama temple at Saundatti with Rani and Kaveri (Rani's friend; also, a devadasi). Rani was dedicated by her parents against her will and later introduced to the sex work by her aunt who was also a devadasi. She had travelled to Bombay and joined a brothel there. She returned to her village with one son and one daughter. During her later life, she had a daughter with a local man who visited her frequently. When asked by the author-narrator, she reveals that she had lost both her daughters. He later finds out that they both had AIDS and Rani is also HIV positive.

Dalrymple goes deep into the history of the Devadasis. The word itself comes from the two Sanskrit words "deva" (God) and "dasi" (a female servant). The origins of this institution go back to a very foggy history where the experts challenge each other on the exact timeline of its development. While some experts trace its legacy to ninth century, others argue that Mohenjodaro sculpture that shows a naked dancing girl, dated 2500 BC, is also an idol of devadasi. Dalrymple writes that:

By the time of Ashoka in 300 BC, a piece of graffiti in a cave in the Vindhya hills of central India recalls the love of Devadinna, a painter, who had fallen for 'Sutanuka, the slave girl of the god'. There are large numbers of images of temple dancing girls from the first centuries AD onwards, and detailed inscriptions and literary references from the sixth century (65).

There are inscriptions found at Alanahalli (near Yellama's temple), at Virupaksha (near Bijapur) and at the Chola temples around Tanjore in Tamil Nadu. These descriptions, however, do not always restrict the temple girls to concubines and dancing girls, there were other temple



women who were regarded more as nuns engaged in taking care of the temples. The Portuguese traders who visited Vijayanagara in southern India during sixteenth century described these temple women as mistresses and highlighted their sexual side. It is not an uncommon instance or an odd description, within Indian literary output of that period there are several poems which are explicitly sexual that describe these women. These poems that represent the joy of sexuality should not be restricted to their vulgarity, rather they represent a metaphorical connection with the divine which is typical of the Pre-colonial India and it is now lost in time. During the Middle Ages, many devadasis were the daughters of grandest families that included princesses of Chola royal family as well. Today however, the devadasis are drawn from the lowest castes and the honoured position of the devadasis during the ancient times has relegated to being sex workers. Dalrymple also accuses the colonial and postcolonial regimes for this institution's gradual degradation. He writes:

In the nineteenth-century, Hindu reformers, reacting to the taunts of Victorian missionaries, began to attack the institution of temple dancers and sacred prostitution. Successive waves of colonial and post-colonial legislation slowly broke the ancient links that existed between the devadasis and the temples, driving them out of the temple precincts and eroding their social, economic and spiritual position (Dalrymple 71).

In 1982, the Karnataka government passed a legislation banning the dedication of the girls. Such decisions have criminalised the process and there are evidences that it has now gone underground which targets mostly the poor people. Dalrymple provides the historical context of this institution with the proper tangible data that showcases his grip on the subject.

#### **5.4.4 The Singer of Epics:**

The fourth chapter explains to us the life and work of a bhopa in Pabuser, a village in Rajasthan. A bhopa is a local shaman who is expert in the

magical healing and also, as explained in the text, a bard who tells the story of local epic. We are introduced at the beginning of the tale to the family of one of these bards of Pabusar, Mohan and his wife Batasi. They are among the last people who live by singing a Rajasthani epic named The Epic of Pabuji. The profession is a hereditary one and has been in their family for a long time. The epic is almost 600 years old and it describes the feats and valour of warrior Pabu, a local semi-divine being and one of the gods for many local residents including Mohan. Pabu is presented in the epic as a protector of cows “who died protecting a Goddess’s magnificent herds against demonic rustlers” (Dalrymple 79). The four-thousand-lines long poem takes almost five nights of recitation to complete when performed eight hours a day. It is always performed by tying a background picture, a sort of painting that explains the events of the epic, called phad. A strip of cloth made into a foldable design, a phad is actually a sort of portable temple of the God Pabu.

Dalrymple has visited many performances of Mohan and now he has come to visit their village. He learnt about this Rajasthani tradition when he was staying in Rohet Garh, a fort outside Jodhpur. The narrator explains how the conservative state like Rajasthan still managed to survive the customs which are similar to when practiced during the days of the Maharajas. Being remote, many of the areas in Rajasthan remained princely states under Raj and they continued the customs even after India’s independence. Dalrymple states that:

Every prominent family of the land-holding Rajput caste, I discovered, inherited a family of oral genealogists, musicians and praise singers, who celebrated the family’s lineage (87).

These epics circulating around Rohet dealt with the heroes who rescued cattle from the dangerous rustlers and sometimes sacrificed their lives in this brave pursuit. These bhomiya (martyr hero) became legends and through the long-preserved stories their figures became demi-gods. The stones were erected in their names and the miracle stories of the hero

saving his people coming out of death circulated among the community people. Thus, these particular heroes are worshipped as gods by particular communities.

The author states that unlike Yugoslavia where the oral culture saw a swift fall in popularity, in the land of India this tradition has managed to survive. He states the story of a bard whom his friend met in South India in the 1970s. The bard was able to memorise the Mahabharata, the famous Indian epic which is fifteen times longer than the Bible. Dalrymple concludes that people in India are culturally erudite. He gives an example for this fact and states that in India after the 2004 tsunami, people turned to the catastrophic incidents presented in their great epics for the explanation instead of turning to disaster movies for clarification. Dalrymple talks about the once popular Muslim epic named Dastan-i Amir Hamza or Story of Hamza. The story was a popular epic in the Islamic world but in India it found its own life in the Mughal period where it was reimagined to fit in Indian context in Urdu through retellings. The narrator laments the fact that in this date the Dastan-i Amir Hamza no longer exists as an orally performed epic and he fears that soon the popular epics like Mahabharata and other Hindu epics may also share the same fate as they are popularised in recorded forms.

The other popular poem in Rajasthan is called “The Epic of Dev Narayan”. The narrator meets Laxmi Kumari Chandawat who had written down the epic for the very first time. Dev Narayan tells the epic of revenge by the eponymous hero who later becomes the deity of Gujar community in Rajasthan. A bhopa named Lakshminarayan from a village near Jaipur recorded the story. The printed edition of the epic filled 626 pages. Rani Laxmi describes that one of the reasons for the tradition to die out is because there is a change in the audience and culture. She states that:

‘When the stories used to be told, everyone had a horse and some cattle. Now, when a bhopa tells stories about the beauty of a horse, it doesn’t make the same connection with the audience. And then there is the question of time: who has the time these days to spend four or five nights awake, listening to story?’ (Dalrymple 95)

The same also applies to the limited number of bhopas that are coming out at the present time. The narrator agrees with the conclusion of Milman Parry that it is the ability of the bhopas or bards to read that has ended the tradition or their ability to memorise a whole epic rather than the change in audience. Indian famous folklorist Komal Kothari also agrees to this conclusion.

It was at Rani Laxmi's palace that Dalrymple first witnessed Mohan's performance. The narrator learned that the epics "were regarded as sacred texts, their form strictly fixed. Bhopas such as Mohan were no more free to tamper with the text than, say, a Catholic priest was free to alter the words of consecration at the holiest moment of the mass" (Dalrymple 97). The Pabu epic also feature an episode where the demi-god goes to rescue camels from Ravana and this is where this folk epic is linked with the Ramayana. Komal Kothari sees this relation not as something odd, rather he thinks that the classical epics and folk epics are "tributaries of the same river" (Dalrymple 98). A bhopa is a shaman and a community healer. Mohan has performed such healing practices but he credits Pabuji as the healer and not himself. From his explanations one can easily see that Mohan has faith in the powers of Pabuji almost to the point of blindness. But such is the power of faith and devotion in humans.

The narrator cites the work of John D. Smith, a scholar who completed his PhD on the subject of bhopas of Pabuji, who believed that among other reasons, the broadcasting of Indian epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana is also responsible for the gradual demise of local epics like Pabuji story. When asked about the survivability of the phad, Mohan seemed very optimistic. He acknowledged the challenges that the Pabuji story had to face, but he believed that as the story has survived all the changes in so many years, it will continue to survive in the coming years as well because it is an important part of their lives and tradition.

**Check Your Progress**

Q) What is oral literature? With the help of Dalrymple’s note on Pabuji, explain how oral literature is losing its significance.

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**5.4.5 The Red Fairy:**

Chapter 5 of the book talks about the Red Fairy of the Sindh province in Pakistan. Dalrymple welcomes the readers into the story with the geographical delineation of the place, describing its fertility, green fields of paddy and mango trees. He also narrates the poor lifestyle and lack of law and order in the area where landlords have private armies and insist on continuing a form of slavery. The narrator also talks about the presence of dacoits (highwaymen) and their robberies on his way to Sehwan, a town where a Sufi shrine is situated. For the narrator, this province of desert and rock filled hills has become a site for the growth of Hindu-Islamic union and syncretism of their values. He further claims that the geography has provided a perfectly nurturing ambit for the proliferation of Sufism which maintains that “all religions were one ... merely different manifestations of the same divine reality” (Dalrymple 113). He then describes the history of Sufism and its philosophy briefly, adding that:

“The Sufis believed that this search for God within and the quest for fana– total immersion in the absolute – liberated the seeker from the restrictions of narrow orthodoxy, allowing the devotee to look beyond the letter of the law to its mystical essence ” (Dalrymple 113).

The Sufis used more vernacular languages like Sindhi and Punjabi or the different forms of Hindi to connect well with the masses through their poetry and songs. Shah Abdul Latif was a Sufi saint and expressed his teachings and wisdom through poetry. His verse collection is named

Risalo. Dalrymple visited the tomb of this Sufi saint and attended 'Urs, a celebration commemorating the demise of a Sufi saint, where he witnessed loud music and singing which is very contrary to what Islamic puritans approve of. He also visited the dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and met Lal Peri. He attends dhammal, a "devotional dance to the saint" (Dalrymple 116). He witnessed that the dancers danced in the ecstasy and what started as meditative and prayerful moves, slowly increased "to something more wild and frenzied and ecstatic" (Dalrymple 118). All who attended started to chant in a way of almost shouting "Dum Dum Mustt Qalandar!", "Jiya Jhule Lal!", "Ya ali! Ya Haidri!" etc. The narrator traces the history of the Sehwan Sharif to the Hindu Shaivite sects. He informs that the dhammal word might have been derived from the damaru, a hand-held sounding drum of the Hindu god Lord Shiva. The dance is also an essential feature of Nataraja, one of the forms of Lord Shiva. The dhammal is attended by many Hindu pilgrims as well and many believe that it has a healing ability.

Lal Peri was born in Bihar and her mother gave her the name Hina. After her father's death, she met a fakir who lived in her village's shrine. The fakir taught her the prayers and meditation. But soon, the Hindu-Muslim division erupted and took a bloody turn. She managed to flee with her mother, uncle and brothers to then East Pakistan. They stayed at one of her cousin's and they were welcomed there. In 1971 war, the family was separated again and she, along with her brother, made a journey to Punjab of Pakistan while her mother and other siblings stayed in East Pakistan. She worked in a cotton factory in Multan where she first thought of becoming a Sufi. She left Multan after her brother's death in an accident and reached Sindh as her dream guided her to the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. She told the narrator that it had been twenty years since she arrived there. She believed that she was protected in the shrine by the unknown power and she desired to protect the teachings of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Shah Abdul Latif.

Dalrymple shares the fears of Lal Peri on Islam's changing nature in South Asia towards being more radical and only text centric orientation.

He cites the destruction of the shrine of Pashto poet-saint Rahman Baba in Khyber Pass as an example. Rahman Baba was a national poet of the Pashtuns and many musicians and poets used to gather in his shrine. Tila Mohammed, the shrine keeper, tells the narrator in his 2003 visit how the students of Saudi-funded Wahhabi madrasa were threatening the activities of the shrine. These students accused the shrine of idolatry and immoral behaviour. They asked women to stay at home and not to attend any events in the shrine. On 4th March, 2009, Taliban destroyed the shrine chamber in a dynamite blast. This fundamental opposition of women's involvement in music is opposed by "modern Wahhabis, and their South Asian theological allies, the Deobandis and Tablighis" (Dalrymple 135).

Dalrymple then describes the efforts made by people like Mian Mir and Mughal prince Dara Shukoh to mitigate the Hindu and Islamic traditions by emphasising more on Sufi teachings. He mentions Shukoh's *The Compass of Truth*, a book dedicated to Sufism. He meets Maulana Saleemullah, the director of a Deobandi madrasa in the locality of Sehwan bazaar. The director's views are strictly against Sufism and its practice. He considers Sufism as full of magic tricks and believes that "it is just superstition, ignorance, perversion, illiteracy and stupidity" (Dalrymple 138). Saleemullah's religious beliefs are strictly based on the Quran and his views never deviates from the book. The number of such madrasas, according to the author-narrator, are increasing in Pakistan. This has led to the decline of Barelvi form of Islam which is Sufi-minded and a quick surge in the popularity of politicised form of Islam like Deobandi form of Wahhabism. Saleemullah suggests that if the Caliphate is established in Pakistan, the shrines and mazars will be destroyed. Dalrymple, along with Lal Peri, visits Sain Fakir who lives in the place called Garden of the Panjethan. There he discusses the future of Sufism in Pakistan and a real threat that it faces from the hardline Islamist groups and mullahs. They also talk about the ways of Sufism, teachings of Quran and the Sufi explanation of Jihad.

#### 5.4.6 The Monk's Tale:

The chapter begins with the Buddhist monk Tashi Passang's statement on difficulty of a monk to choose violence. The narrator is at the "Tsuglag Khang, the temple attached to the Dalai Lama's residence-in-exile in Dharamsala, high above the Kangra Valley and the dusty plains of Punjab" (Dalrymple 146). The place is full of Tibetan monks who are also refugees living in this place popularly termed as Tibet-in-exile. Passang was born in Tibet and wanted to become a hermit until the Chinese came. As the situation demanded, he had to drop his monastic vows and lift the arms against the Chinese invasion. He sees this move as his way of protecting the Chinese soldiers from committing a serious sin, that is the effort to destroy Buddhism in Tibet. He states that "you can choose to take upon yourself the bad karma of a violent act in order to save that person from a much worse sin" (Dalrymple 148). However, this move was a fiasco against the Chinese army because the monks were not trained to fight, they only knew how to pray. After Passang fled from Tibet, he spent time with Indian Army's Tibetan unit and now he lives in a wooden hut in Dharamsala. He now recites the repentance mantras and believes that the accumulated bad karma will be removed if he bows towards Buddha and his teachings. He cites Angulimala's complete turnaround from a killer to a monk as an example of Buddha's power. He still hears the war noises at night but now he is committed to follow the Buddhist way of repentance and gather forgiveness.

#### **Stop to Consider**

Angulimala's story is an important episode in the Buddhist belief. Initially he was known by the name Ahimsaka and he was a bright student. One version of the story tells that jealous by his progress in studies, the other students turned their master against him. The master told him that as a final gift he would take 1000 human fingers. Set to meet his master's demand, Ahimsaka turned into Angulimala, a highway bandit, until he met Buddha. Buddha's guidance to Angulimala has wide ranging significance in the Buddhist wisdom. The story teaches the significance of compassion and potential of redemption in human beings which symbolizes the Buddhist way of life.



McLeod Ganj, a town above Dharamsala, is a miniature Tibet. It features Tibetan Parliament as well as its Home Ministry. Passang has found shelter in an old people's home in this place. The house holds 150 inmates who were part of the Tibetan resistance. Tashi Passang was born in Dakpa country of Kham province in Tibet. His family was a small landowner living a semi-nomadic life and their lifestyle was motivated by the Buddhist teachings. Passang was encouraged to join the Dakpa monastery by his great-uncle. He worked hard to memorise the scriptures and turned out to be a good disciple. He was taught to concentrate on the deity, Guru Rinpoche and Lord Buddha. He had also spent time in cave as a training to master the hermit lifestyle. His life changed as the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1950. The overwhelming number of Chinese soldiers squashed the antiquated Tibetan forces and in 1951 compelled the Tibetans to sign Seventeen Point Agreement with China and they also visited in monthly basis Dakpa monastery. Passang states:

Their colonel wore spectacles. He was polite at first. He said they had come to help Tibet be self-reliant and they would return back home when they had taught us to be modern. He said they had come to bring justice, and to help the poor, and to make Tibet a good country, like China (Dalrymple 157).

In 1954 the Chinese killed monks and bombed a monastery in Kham province. Other rumours of such tortures and killings also spread across the monasteries of Tibet. Soon Passang's monastery and others joined hand in the rebellion against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Passang states that "many fighters – some said 15000 – had gathered in Lhoka to the south and founded a resistance movement called the – Chu zhi Gang-drungor Four Rivers, Six Ranges" (Dalrymple 158). Tashi then went to hide at the camp on the mountain where he used to pasture the yaks. The PLA, however, inhumanly tortured his family, especially his mother asking his whereabouts.

In the meantime, narrator gives us various examples of persons in the Buddhist history and cosmology who chose violence for the defence and protection of the dharma. He gives the examples of Yamantaka, the

Conqueror of Death and Chakrasamvara, a deity who has four head and six arms. He states that:

Such angry and violent protectors are common in Tibetan Buddhist art, and correspondingly popular in Tibetan devotion; they use their powers for good of humanity, warding off demons and the creatures of darkness, subverting the ancient warrior imagery of Tibet and utilising it for peaceful ends (Dalrymple 161).

Passang's mother died from the injuries that the Chinese afflicted. He was in turmoil because he felt hatred for the Chinese and since Buddhism forbids one from engaging in anger and hatred, Passang committed himself in praying and reciting mantras. In the next episodes, Passang describes how His Holiness Dalai Lama had escaped from the Chinese trap with their help and gone into exile. They reached the Indian border after losing many of their men. Passang later states that his faith has been made strong by this event and he thanks the protector goddess, Palden Lhamo. He only crossed the border because he believed that they will be strong enough to fight for the dharma again. He mourns the life of exile. He states that:

We had lost our country. We were in exile, dependent on others, with no will or right to do what we wanted. We hoped that someone would arm and help us, so that we could recapture Tibet, but nothing happened. Our only hope was in following His Holiness (Dalrymple 169).

Post 1962 Sino-Indian war, Passang joined Special Frontier Force of Indian Army and also participated in the liberation of Bangladesh. However, all these actions seemed futile to him and he felt as only serving the means of others. Post retirement in 1986, he came to Dharamsala and started to make good quality prayer flags as he knew the mantras. In 1995 he decided to become a monk and took his vows from the Dalai Lama. He also mentioned that he has freed himself from his hatred for Chinese and also fortunate enough to talk to his brother in Tibet through phone call. The chapter ends with a hopeful statement from Passang who believes Tibet would be free one day.

#### **5.4.7 The Maker of Idols:**

The chapter is situated in a village of Tamil Nadu. Srikanda is a Spathy (an idol maker) and his family history goes back to the time of Chola Empire where his ancestors were bronze casters of great reputation. Dalrymple arrived there during the preparation of Tamil New Year. Srikanda is the president of Swamimalai Lions' Club. He was introduced to the narrator by a man named Mr Krishnamurthy, proprietor of Sri Murgan Hotel. Srikanda's family has been engaged in the work of bronze idol for almost 700 years from the time of Rajaraja I (AD 985-1014), a great king of Chola Empire. His ancestors assisted in building two great Chola temples, Tanjore and Gangakondacholapuram, and settled in Swamimalai. Srikanda is making idols for Indian temples as well as for foreign ones. His largest order was from Iskcon. He describes his statues not as something as lifeless, rather he regards them as deity. Once he completes the making process, the idols are no longer his and they have their own identity as he believes that they come alive. Swamimalai is celebrating the marriage of Valli, a beautiful dame of divine origin, and Lord Murugan, the son of Shiva. People offered fruits and sweets and lit incense sticks in honour of the two idols of the Gods set on the chariot passing through the village.

#### **Stop to Consider**

It is believed that Valli was born from a deer. The glance of sage Sivamurti made the deer pregnant and once born, she was raised by the King Nambiraja. She was believed to be the most beautiful girl of Tamil Nadu. When Lord Murugan fell in love with her, he tested her nature by appearing before her as a feeble old man. She was kind to him but hesitated to give consent on his marriage proposal. Vally fell in love with Murugan when he revealed his divine form and it is their marriage that is being celebrated in Swamimalai.

Dalrymple states that “there are few places in the world where landscape and divinity are more closely linked than in Southern India” (Dalrymple 183). He explains from his perspective the nature of South India’s believers. The people here believe that everything is linked with the story of Gods and their involvement in this mortal plain. One will find stories associated with a stone, river or even temples where gods are involved either in the making of them or through other ways. The gods are believed to be more territorial and this is why they are given a tour of the land just like a king visiting his kingdom. It is in these tours that all the devotees, irrespective of their castes, could get the blessings of the gods. Once the idols are returned to the temple, they “are bathed in milk, curds, butter, honey and sugar, before being anointed with sandalwood paste and dressed in the finest silks” (Dalrymple 184).

The first portable idols of the deities started to appear in the tenth century. The Pallava monarchs of Kanchipuram seem to have started this tradition. The Cholas donated deities to the temple in Tanjore and Rajaraja I contributed the most. The narrator then claims the dancing form of Lord Shiva, the Nataraja, “arguably as the greatest artistic creation of the entire Chola dynasty” (Dalrymple 185). The Nataraja form signifies both destruction and creation with the help of the deity’s one hand holding fire and the other holding a Damaru. The narrator then goes on to discuss the sexuality and its expressiveness in the sculpting art of the Indian medieval temples of the Hindu faith. He cites the example of sculptures of Khajuraho and Konarak. He examines the poetry and sculptures of the Chola period. He states that artist’s effort in presenting the sensuality in the deities is the divine beauty expressed in this manner. Srikanada describes the process and mentions that:

The Shilpa Shastras that guide us as sculptors lay down certain norms about the correct proportions for each god. We believe that unless these proportions are exactly perfect, the god cannot live in the idol. As sculptors, we struggle to become master craftsmen just so that we can begin to convey the beauty of the deity (Dalrymple 191).

Dalrymple goes on to describe the rich greenery of Kavery Delta and how the river Kaveri is trudging forward with its slow twist and turns.

He describes what regarded as the Golden Age of Tamil culture during the reign of Rajaraja I. He meets Shankara Narayan who is a singer of Thevaram devotional songs. These hymns are written by many saints over a thousand years ago and it is these oral memories that generated the focus on Chola bronzes for devotion. The narrator visits Srikanda Stpathy's factory where he is shown how the idols are made from the combination of Kaveri alluvium, coconut husks, bronze etc. The process is done under strict rules that include the timing of carving deity's eyes and Sanskrit incantations that are to be used during the process. Srikanda states that "for us art and religion are one: only when there is prayer can the artist make a perfect sculpture" (Dalrymple 197). He explains how his father and grandfather taught him. However, he is worried about their next generation as they are choosing new paths. The chapter ends with Srikanda stating his concern that the skill that is in their blood might get lost to the age of computers and globalisation.

#### **5.4.8 The Lady Twilight:**

The chapter describes the life of Manisha Ma Bhairavi who is the devotee of the goddess Tara and lives in Tarapith, West Bengal. The narrator describes Tarapith as eerie "with a sinister reputation" (Dalrymple 205). It is a Shakta pith where, according to the narrator, the tradition of sacrifice is still a living reality. Ma Bhairavi is living with her partner Tapan Sadhu. The descriptions in the chapter are of sinister nature. She chooses the best skull, mostly human skulls, for the purpose of rituals. As the goddess Tara is believed to be attracted by the skulls, it is the ambition of her devotees to collect the skulls from the cremation ground. Manisha and Tapan do not seem as sinister figures to the narrator, rather their behaviour is described as gentle and quietly spoken. For Manisha, the place is not frightening and it is the people's perceptions of them as evil and frightening that has harmed their reputation. Their community in Tarapith encourages them to take care of one another when there is need. The narrator describes that their belief system and faith healing activities are challenged by the then ruling Communist Party and they were dismissed as practitioners of superstitious forms of Hinduism.

Manisha believes that it is the goddess Tara that has brought her devotees to Tarapith. She even claims that she has seen the glimpse of the goddess in her dreams and saw a jackal which is the goddess's vehicle. At times the description seems a little too much oriented towards excessive belief. Manisha states that:

The skulls give us power and charge our prayers with their shakti. The spirits help bring them to us, and they remain with the skull. We take good care of them, and feed them with rice and dal. Then they protect us, keeping us away from evil and death. They help us to awaken the goddess (Dalrymple 209).

Dalrymple discusses the geographical location of the Tarapith temple and also describes the origin of the goddess Tara's name. The goddess is also an important figure in Buddhist cosmology and it is believed that she entered Bengal through Tibet and hence her another name is "Chini Tara". The goddess is part of the divine feminine known as the Ten Mahavidyas and her sisters are also associated with disturbing details of divinity. They represent the threshold between the divine and the demonic. They are realised through the tantric rites which are now rare and once were very popular in India. The narrator states that "the word 'Tantra' is a reference to ancient texts that deal with yogic practices, magical rites, metaphysics and philosophy" (Dalrymple 213). The tantrics are in contrast with what society's norms demand in a social being; they encourage an individual relation with the deity and a life inspired by this. The narrator differentiates the Tantra cults of Western people from that of Indian Tantric practices, especially with references to pleasure. He notes that Tantric traditions were harmed by the Islamic invasions, European missionaries and Hindu reform movements. The worshipping of Devi cults and Shakti divinities hence were affected and deemed as superstitious or anti-modern. However, at Tarapith, one sees the totally upside-down version of the ordinary life where the acts of asceticism are extreme almost to the consideration of madness.

The narrator meets a politician from Bihar named Milan Ghoshal who sacrifices a goat for Maa's blessings in the upcoming elections. He finds that there is a difference between Milan's seeking of worldly power and Manisha's vision of Tara as a provider of love in a motherly figure. Manisha was born in Ariadha town situated at the south-west Bengal. Born in a poor family, she was married off when she was sixteen. She started having fits soon after her marriage and one day she decided to end her married life and left the house. She left behind three daughters and joined Maa Tara at her temple. She lived with Tapan Sadhu whom she met when she was living in Kali Mandir at Calcutta. She is taught Tantra by him and she explains that she collects the skulls to visualise the goddess. Tapan Sadhu also had a family that he left behind because of goddess Tara's calling. When his wife passed away, he attended the cremation but his only son would not talk to him. He has now accepted Manisha's daughters as his own but it is clear from his explanations that he misses his son. While all the devotees appear for the sacrificial ceremony on the night of Amavasya, Tapan and Manisha also get ready for the ceremony. The chapter highlights the sacrifices that these sadhus have made in order to follow what they believe as their destiny.

### **Stop to Consider**

Tara is a goddess, with immense compassion and benevolence, in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Often imagined in her blue complexion, she is regarded as savior and a guide to her devotees who helps them attain enlightenment and spiritual freedom. She is one of the goddesses in the Hindu Tantra that believes in Ten Mahavidyas, an association of Ten goddesses that are associated with powerful cosmic powers. These goddesses are representations of divine feminine energy of the universe. Author David R. Kinsley in his book *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyashas* offered powerful insights in this regard.

#### **5.4.9 The Song of The Blind Minstrel:**

On the day of Makkar Sankranti, Bauls (meaning “mad” in Bengali, but the term is used for wandering minstrels) meet at Kenduli, on the bank of the river Ajay to celebrate their annual festival. The narrator gets there to meet Kanai, a wandering Baul who is also an acquaintance of Ma Manisha from the previous chapter. Bauls believe that the god lives within us and it is through enlightenment that one meets the “Man of the Heart” (Moner Manush) that is within us. Dalrymple writes that “man is the final measure for the Bauls” (235). They travel from village to village singing the ballads and songs of love and brotherhood. They sing of Radha and Krishna’s mad love, the transitory property of life and the goal to win not others but one’s self. The narrator meets Kanai as well as his friend Debdas and Paban Das Baul, one of the most celebrated Baul singers. They sing songs in unison and as they move on it seems that their unison is reflected in their passing of verses back and forth as philosophical questions and answers.

Kanai was born in Tetulia and by the time he reached the age of eleven, he had lost his father as well as his only brother. A smallpox infection took his eyesight in his first year. He went to Gyananand Sadhu’s ashram in Mallarpu where he was welcomed by Gyanand and he also made sure that Kanai’s mother and sister were looked after. It was Gyananand Sadhu who taught Kanai to aspire for inner knowledge. Commenting on the life as a Baul, Kanai states that “it is the best life ... the world is my home. We Bauls can walk anywhere and are welcome anywhere ... I cannot complain. Far from it – I am often in a state of bliss” (Dalrymple 245). Kanai’s companion Debdas had a very different story. He was born a Brahmin but felt more closer to the life of the Bauls. When he heard Sudhir Das Baul singing on the occasion of Saraswati Puja at his school, he was lost in the music. He later attended the festival of Kenduli and decided to leave his house for good. When he met Paban and Kanai in a train, he was already living as a Baul. A bond of friendship was created in this manner amongst the three.



The narrator stays for five days with Kanai and Debdas during the festival. He describes the approach of Bauls towards sexuality. He meets Bhaskar Bhattacharyya who is a Delhi based writer and Bhaskar explains to him the view of Bauls on sex life. The Bauls try to channel the sexual urges as a process for reaching the divinity within one's self. Dalrymple states that:

For the Bauls, this sexual exotica is part of a much wider set of yogic practices which aim to make the sacred physiology of the body supple and coordinated with itself, using the mystery of breathing, meditation, posture and exercises as a way of charging and taming energies and drives, and perfecting the body in order to transform it (Dalrymple 256).

Marriage is hence very important in this regard for a Baul. Debdas is married twice and Kanai also has a wife, Arati. On the last day of the festival, the narrator meets an old Baul couple, Subhol Kopa and his wife Lalita. The couple explains to him that the songs help them to transcend the material life and find God within oneself. Their songs and poetry teach to seek God in every being and everything. The songs make the Bauls forget what sadness is and add colours to their lives.

**Check Your Progress**

Q. Discuss briefly the common themes in William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*.

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**5.5 Summing Up:**

The unit has provided the students with meticulous summary and explanation of the chapters that will guide them in the comprehension of the text. The works of William Dalrymple need a thorough reading as they are categorised often as well researched historical non-fiction. The

unit has provided details of the important terms and tried to explain some of the important context on which Dalrymple has based his writing. Each chapter is explained separately for the convenience of the students and they have learnt how to approach the text for the maximum benefit. The students are encouraged to read the text for a better comprehension and understanding of the nuances that Dalrymple's writing hold.

### **5.6 References and Suggested Readings:**

Dalrymple, William. *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Hulme, Peter and Tim Youngs, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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## UNIT- 6

### NINE LIVES: IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED IN MODERN INDIA (Supplementary Unit)

#### Unit Structure:

- 6.1 Objective
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Critical Reception
- 6.4 Narrative Style in *Nine Lives*
- 6.5 Themes in *Nine Lives*
- 6.6 Summing Up
- 6.7 References and Suggested Readings

#### 6.1 Objectives:

After completion of this unit, the students will be able to–

- *reflect* on the critical reception of the book,
- *understand* the nuances of Dalrymple’s narrative,
- *learn* different themes that are presented in the text,
- *evaluate* Dalrymple’s work as an example of life writing,
- *understand* the basics of Dalrymple’s worldview and research.

#### 6.2 Introduction:

In the previous units, we have gained an overview of life and works of William Dalrymple as well as understood an overall substance of his book *Nine Lives*. This unit will deal with the additional information and analysis of his works. The students will find the unit very helpful while analysing and reviewing the work of William Dalrymple. They will be able to comment on the critical reviews on the book by the contemporary thinkers. The students will also understand the important themes and ideas used by Dalrymple in the text. They will also be able to closely

study the narrative style of Dalrymple. As this unit progresses, the readers will find it very helpful in their understanding of the main text.

### **6.3 Critical Reception:**

William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, published in 2009, is an exploration of the diverse spiritual landscapes of India through the lives of nine individuals. Each story delves into the complexities of faith amidst the changing socio-economic fabric of modern India. The book has received acclaim for its humanism, research, and Dalrymple's storytelling. In this section, we will discuss the critical reception of *Nine Lives* by reviewers and scholars on its thematic depth, literary merits, and occasional criticisms. Dalrymple's work is praised for its empathy and understanding of India's spiritual and cultural nuances. Some of the reviewers appreciate Dalrymple's turn from focusing on travel to focusing on people and their lives. In a review in *The Guardian*, Ruaridh Nicoll writes:

that this book also makes its political points more powerfully than any newspaper article, while quietly adjusting a reader's attitude to faith, builds its importance. It meets Dalrymple's own criteria as set down in his recent article, displaying a deep knowledge of the culture, yet is intimate with each interviewee. This is travel writing at its best (Nicoll).

Dalrymple's art of storytelling receives widespread admiration. Lopitha Nath writes that “his nine lives show the juxtaposition of the traditional with the modern, which is one of the hard realities throughout the fast-changing landscape of India. He weaves the mystical, religious, traditional, political historical and the humane into one saga of life and existence in this new India” (237). His narrative technique, weaving history, religion, and personal stories, is highlighted as a significant strength, offering a panoramic view of India's spiritual traditions against socio-political changes. The book has been praised for its diverse representation of religious practices and cultural insights. This diversity underscores the complexity of India's religious landscape, showcasing Dalrymple's commitment to portraying a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices.

Despite such praises, *Nine Lives* has also faced criticism and the book poses doubts to some of the serious critics who discuss its limitations. In this regard, Hirsh Sawhney writes in an article published in *The Guardian* that the “failure to discuss the state of Christianity in modern India evokes a world partitioned into anachronistic, seemingly irreconcilable compartments – a Judeo-Christian world that is solely western, and an India that is a colourful eastern repository of spiritualism, wisdom and suffering” (Sawhney). However, this viewpoint is more of an exception than the norm, as the majority of responses celebrate Dalrymple's nuanced understanding of India.

Hence Dalrymple's book has been received with immediate critical acclaim. It has been celebrated for its empathetic portrayal of spiritual life in India, literary elegance, and deep cultural insights. Dalrymple's ability to humanize diverse individuals against India's changing landscape reverberates with readers and critics. While there are occasional notes of caution about Dalrymple's outsider perspective, they do not significantly detract from the book's impact. *Nine Lives* stands as a significant contribution to the understanding of contemporary Indian spirituality and culture, offering a compelling exploration of the sacred in modern India.

#### **6.4 Narrative Style in *Nine Lives*:**

William Dalrymple's work *Nine Lives* comes almost after two decades of the publication of his first book, *In Xanadu* (1989). In his first book, we saw a very young traveller Dalrymple who made a journey following the route of famous explorer Marco Polo along with his two friends. He was twenty-two years old when he wrote the book. The work clearly establishes Dalrymple in the ambit of travel writers as it is modelled on the traditions of British travel writing (Gibbons 98). His early travel writings show a very crude and young writer who is not very sensitive towards others and focused on writing with his perspective rooted in the domestic point of view. However, the trend changed as he evolved into a writer who became an exceptional storyteller that had well-researched overview of his topics. Many believe

that this change in writing comes from the change of his approach on subject not as a travel writer or a traveller but as a person who has understood the political, cultural, social and economic scenario of his subjects. Thinkers have differentiated this approach from that of travel writing and they have compared it with different genres such as literary cartography and deep-mapping, but most of them agree to call it place-writing, considered as a sub-genre of travel writing. This sort of writing focuses not on the movement of the observer and his descriptions, rather it focuses on the subject in consideration and his place as studied for a long period with properly collected data. The travel writing had become mundane because of the transitory nature of things, hence the demand for a subject with stability emerged. William Dalrymple himself states that:

an informed observer roots and immerses himself in one place, committing time to getting to know a place and its language ... many of the most interesting travel books are by individuals who have made extended stays in places, getting to know them intimately (Gibbons 101).

William Dalrymple in his book *Nine Lives* has focused more on people than on the places in which they live. He has closely studied their peculiar ways to follow what they have believed in. So, Dalrymple's works have become a sort of combination of both travel writing as well as life-writing and in the case of *Nine Lives*, he has definitely given an upper hand to the life of his subjects instead of the places they inhabit. His narrative style showcases this as he explores the diversity that lingers in the rich tapestry of Indian society beneath the outer layer of globalisation.

There is a shift in William Dalrymple's narrative style in this work compared to some of his previous works where the trope of a "funny foreigner" was an integral part of the narrative style and that highlighted the narrator's perspective (Gibbons 105). His narratorial first person voice is less oppressive and provides wider space for the subjects to express themselves. He has framed the sequence of events, used reported speeches and considered to put the first person narratorial voice within quotation marks. The narrator, in many of the episodes,

includes the life of people who have devoted themselves to phenomenon of serving and taking care of a deity or demi-god. It is in this regard that the narrative of Dalrymple not only includes the life of these devotees but also the life of the deity himself or herself, as we can see in the case of Pabuji epic. So, the nine lives not only include the lives of the devotees from the perspective of the narrator but also the life of the demi-gods or goddesses from the perspective of the devotees. This uniqueness is peculiar in the case of South-Asian culture where there are numerous religious sects and beliefs which have given birth to many life-stories of heroes, saints, demi-gods as well as devotees who achieved oneness with the god and became immortal.

In the chapters it is apparent that after introducing his subject in the first section, the narrator in the middle section delves into the historical as well as archaeological evidences of the topic in discussion. His episodes in the book show his acumen in immaculate storytelling and empathetic proximity towards the subjects. He weaves the narrative around the individual tales of various characters with a subtle understanding of the cultural factors. His narrative entails a rich description of details that vividly brings forth the landscape, cultural settings and characters, all interlaced in the compact chapters. Whether he describes a landscape of Shehwan, or the religious town of Sravanabelagola, even while describing the details on the ancient idols, Dalrymple's language enhances the readers' sensory perceptiveness that immerse them in the narrative.

It is apparent from the narrative of Dalrymple that he is deeply engaged in the interests of his subjects and it highlights the empathetic nature of the narrative. This empathetic approach allows the readers to hear the other side of the story, that is, the story as lived by the characters and not just described by the narrator. Hence, this style of the narrative connects the readers to the individual spiritual journeys of the characters as well as their philosophy of life. As already mentioned, Dalrymple's chapters engage in multiple explorations at the same time. From a different perspective on subjectivity, Paromita Patranobish writes that:

The encounter in *Nine Lives* is not just between the traveller and his subjects, but between humans and god, text and interpretation, norm and subjectivity, tradition and modernity, art and worship, which destabilise the formulation of difference and separation as a condition for the encounter (44).

Hence, the chapters have a focused gaze not only at the lives of the characters, but also at cultural, socio-religious and historical extents that have tremendous impacts on their lives. Such approach helps the narrator to keep a keen eye on the nuances of the description and includes depth in his articulation. Dalrymple avoids to indulge in stereotyping and he understands the layers of cultural tapestry that is holding the fabric of Indian religious traditions. Dalrymple's research in the historical and anthropological field is well integrated in the narrative and it is seamlessly reflected through his presence as narrator. The blending of research in the stories makes them more credible and broaden their scope to include history, culture, religion and society.

Although the chapters tell different lives, the themes and experiences of the stories are shared in each chapter and hence it gives the storytelling a sense of interconnectedness. This pattern is repeated throughout the book and helps the narrative to transcend from being mundane and shadows the differences of the characters. Dalrymple's writing style invites the readers to enjoy the journeys that each of the characters make in their lives and connects the stories to intellectually engage in the exploration of their spiritual journeys.

**Check Your Progress**

Q. Evaluate how *Nine Lives* has been received by critics and delve into the ways in which Dalrymple has contributed to shaping our comprehension of spirituality and the varied religious practices in today's society.

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### **6.5 Important Themes in *Nine Lives*:**

William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* takes the readers on a riveting journey of spirituality in the different shades of modern-day India with the exploration of nine individuals' lives. It enriches one's understanding of various versions of faith that India garners in its rich socio-cultural and religious expanse. It delves into many categories of people who have peculiar ways of experiencing and exploring their faiths and each kind has a different story to share. There are however common themes that run throughout the narrative and provide a sort of coherence to the stories. We will try to learn and explore some of these themes which will help us understand the text better.

One of the important themes is the diversity itself. One can easily discern the diverse spiritual practices that each of the chapters in the book talk about and yet all the acts of the characters are directed towards some meaning that they inculcate through the understanding of their lives. Dalrymple showcases the spiritual diversity that the Indian society is imbued with and across different religious faiths and traditions like, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sufism or other local forms of worshipping. If we look at the story of Prasannamati Mataji, the Jain nun who devoted her life for the religious belief that she followed, we can say that her devotion to her faith is very different from that of Hari Das, the theyyam dancer. However, both the characters are driven by a strong belief in their peculiar ways of accessing spirituality in which both are common as Prasannamati chooses Sallekhana to become one with the ford makers of Jainism (called Tirthankaras) and Hari Das uses theyyam dance to establish a connection with the gods and for a short period of time he actually becomes the deity that he is impersonating.

Every individual narrative in the book involves a transformative individual journey. This recurring theme is associated with the journey that is made geographically to different locations as well as the spiritual transformative journey that one undertakes within the self. There is a commonality in the characters of a strong will and complete devotion as well as perseverance towards what they believe. Tashi Pasang's story here

serves as a perfect example. Pasang chooses violence in the most brutal part of Tibet's history during Chinese invasion and later on he is trying to live a life according to the Buddhist non-violence way. He manufactures well-printed prayer flags and tries to lead a peaceful life. He believes that being able to forgive was the most challenging part for him after the atrocities that Chinese imparted on his family, especially by torturing his mother. In Buddhism, the anger and hatred are perceived as sin and Pasang tried very hard to refrain himself from falling into the clutches of such emotions. Thus, Pasang's self-transformation is obviously a great fit for him. Other transformative journeys in the book include the stories of Lal Peri of Sehwan, Prasannamati Mataji, Manisha Ma Bhairavi and the Bauls of West Bengal. All the episodes of these people are connected through challenges in life, individual growth and finally the transformative experience. These common experiences highlight Dalrymple's vision of universal aspects of seeking the divine.

Multi-dimensional aspect of faith in India is also a commonly reflected facet in the book. The dimension of pilgrimage and sacred places is regularly repeated in each of the episodes. Dalrymple takes the readers to the sacred sites such as the town of Sravanabelagola, Yellamma temple at Saundatti, Tsuglag Khang in Dharamsala, Tarapith in West Bengal and many such places where the devotees believe that some form of divine is manifested. These spaces are significant because they are permeated with spiritual significance and hence, they become the site for exploration for believers, religious gatherings and where different rituals are performed. For example, Lal Peri (the Red Fairy) of Sehwan believes that the dargah of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar gives her protection and it is here that she feels being loved and guarded. The place empowers her to cope with the challenges that come her way.

One of the important features of the text is the representation of wider cultural and religious milieu that the characters encapsulate in their stories. While exploring their individual journeys, William Dalrymple keeps a keen eye on the historical significance as well. He subtly captures the historical and cultural features of the related events and gives emphasis to explain how the social and cultural factors influence the religious and

spiritual practices. It showcases how the fabric of Indian society is a complex assimilation of several features. The narrative showcases a syncretism of belief system in the lives of the several characters where interaction between different faiths and dialogue of agreement as well as of difference takes place. There is an example of Sufi saint who has drawn inspiration from both Hindu and Islamic traditions and accrued the best qualities of both faiths. Dalrymple's narrative showcases how different boundaries of faiths and their doctrinal dissimilarities can coexist in the modern Indian society; though in their marginal form.

The challenges and conflicts faced by these people who are at the margins of the society is an important aspect of Dalrymple's narrative. He has highlighted the challenges they face from the mainstream singular form of beliefs that the large number of people in society propagate. For example, he highlights the Pabu epic's representation of Ravana episode as a rare instance and fears that such variations might disappear in the powerful Hindu narrative that are mainstreamed through television and written literature, especially due to the large production of Ramayana and Mahabharata epic. Dalrymple writes that

It is exactly these sort of regional variants, and self-contained local cults which are being lost and menaced by the slow homogenisation represented in what the eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar has called the new 'syndicated Hinduism' of middle class urban India. (Introduction xiv)

Dalrymple's narrative does not shy away from revealing the challenging aspects of the lives of these individuals who are adhering to their traditional practices in a world where the change is an everyday feature. His narrative is a testimony of the realities of the impact of modernity on tradition and the struggle to preserve the ancient heritage that some communities or individuals follow against the sweeping force of globalisation. Such themes disclose the complexity of the narrative in dealing with subjects that are in evolutionary restructuring at the present time. Hence in *Nine Lives*, the convoluted form of spirituality in India is deftly explored, engaging in themes that are common among various faiths.

### Check Your Progress

Q. Examine the recurring themes present in the various narratives of *Nine Lives* and explore how Dalrymple skillfully integrates them to form a unified exploration of spirituality.

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### 6.6 Summing Up:

In this unit, the students have learnt how the book has been critically received by its reviewers. They have understood the importance as well as limitations of Dalrymple’s narrative. Moreover, the students are introduced to the narrative style and techniques used by Dalrymple to convey the stories of his characters. They have been introduced to the important themes that are recurrent in the book and they are provided proper explanations of the important aspects with solid examples. For further study on the subject, the students are advised to read other books by William Dalrymple. Also, they are advised to read suggested readings provided in this unit.

### 6.7 References and Suggested Readings:

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