

Indian Beliefs in Short Fiction of Nergis Dalal

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Myriad of literary artists have embellished literature with their works . Some of these stars shone on the firmament of popularity, the readers adored them to their heart and critics evolved new theories based on their works, but there are some others who remained hidden in the oblivion of neglect . Nergis Dalal is one such writer of modern scenario Twentieth century as she is not among those fortune's favourite to be showered with love and praise by fans and critics. She started writing as she was compelled to write by some inner urge :

It is not something that one decides over-night as it were. It creeps up insidiously... a compulsion to express one's innermost thoughts and feelings. A compulsion, as powerful and over-riding as love or sex... to comment. (9 On How I Become a writer)

Born in 1920 she manifested herself in most of the genres. She earned herself the title 'Middle Queen' by contributing her entertaining , cognitive, interesting, enriching articles to various newspapers. Contribution was so profuse that the editor advised her to write in real name also besides writing in pseudonym 'Aries'. But the writing instincts did not let her confine to these middles only and she switched over to fiction writing including five novels and one anthology of short stories 'The Nude'. According to Dalal she wrote to learn more and more about people. In her interview with writer P.C.Javalgi she said "I wrote novels in order to learn more about people and what makes them tick. Also because I like to tell stories". (148 Indian Women Writers in English).

The Nude, a compendium of twenty short stories presents a tableau of different perceptions. The stories are representative of twenty different shades of life and leave some untold eruditions for the readers to understand. Portrayal of beauty tickles us, description of love moves us, East and west encounter compel us to think, and the description of Indian culture and tradition mesmerizes us with its genuine, picturesque depiction .All these themes enthrall Dalal and a sumptuous feast is doled out for the readers. Besides this universal themes some psychological and social themes also dore her stories and she uses melodrama to describe them. But the theme of Indianness is dominant in most of her stories. A person of Indian origin cannot bat an eyelid from the customs , traditions, superstitions and rich culture of India. Dalal's stories are also steeped in these beliefs and traditions of the people. A new dimension has been given to Indian Short stories as Indian beliefs peep in all her stories whether the setting is urban or rural or of very remoter area.India, a land of spirituality, a land of myths and beliefs, and of culture and reverence, and of fairs and processions has allured from time immemorial the writers to give voice to this rich heritage. Being tempted Dalal reflected these in her stories likes "The Silver Stallion", "The Temple Bells" etc. Certain myths and traditions which are handed over from generation to generation , although based on the beliefs of people take concrete form by giving credence by the writer .In the story "The Temple Bells" the faith of people turns into reality when Dilip Singh and Akhtar Singh try to steal the precious jewels from the statue of Goddess. People in the village believe that the bells ring of their own as a warning at the time of some calamity. As Dalal has depicted-

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And one night, when a small fire had started, it was that the bells clanged out vigorously in warning. The startled villagers had staggered to hear the bells tolling persistently and the flames leaping high. They had controlled the fire in time, but ever since everyone believed that in times of danger the bells would ring out a warning (146 *The Nude*).

People of village donate what they can for these three temple bells which have unique clinging sound. When Dilip Singh and Akhtar Singh encroach the temple with the intention to strip the statue of goddess off its ornaments, they are unaware of their fate, although they know all about the strange power of the bells. Even the ornaments of Goddess had unique power. "The people believe these jewels are sacred. No one would dream of touching them. Each one has been offered separately by those to whom the goddess has given help" (145 *The Nude*).

After completing their motif when they turn, the bell began to clang and Akhtar Singh is ensnared in the rope which was always tied with the bells otherwise. They are caught for their doom to be in prison. The belief of the people that the temple bells would ring if there is any calamity, proves to be true, although there was explanation that the bell rang as Akhtar Singh was caught in the ropes but no one knew how it remained loose that night. As Akhtar Singh said :

Whatever explanation you may give, the fact remains that the bells rang and woke up everyone. In a way, you know, I am relieved. I don't think I could have been happy after stealing these jewels.

Dilip Singh does not reply. He lays there cursing softly under his breath. How could he have known that on this one night the ropes would be trailing loose instead of being firmly anchored to the ring in the wall? (149 *The Nude*).

Another saga of reverence and conviction is story "The Silver Stallion". The story reveals the firm faith and beliefs of Indian people in their traditions and customs. Pushkar, a small town in Rajasthan is full of commotion with the biggest animal fair of India. People from remotest area came to sell their animals. Bishen, with his father also comes there in hope to sell his beloved horse, Moti, the jewel among the horses, to the highest bidder. As the horse is depicted :

Even in that multitude of animals, Moti stood out-a spectacularly beautiful horse, half thoroughbred, half Kathiawar pony. His legs were clean and hard, he had a short, strong back and broad forehead. His tail, high and gloss, rippled as he moved.. He was called Moti because he had a shimmer and colour of a pearl (92 *The Nude*).

The father and the son come to sell and yet not to sell Moti as he is so favourite, so close to their heart. Restlessness of Bishen takes him to Pushkar lake. His heart can not be controlled as it wants some way out to save Moti. In Pushkar there is a legend that - "On the night of full moon, if you float a lighted wick down the waters of the Pushkar lake, and it reaches the temple in the middle, then whatever you have wished for, comes true." (93 *The Nude*)

The boy can think nothing else and in a minute his wick was among the thousands of other floating lights. Sometimes faith does miracle and the miracle happened. On the same night the Jesuit priest is planning to save villages from draught and asks for monetary help from Rajendra Singh the tall aristocratic Rajput, for which he is ready.

"I tell you sir, all I need is ten thousand rupees to work a miracle here.(P.94 The Nude) Meanwhile they are attracted towards the silver stallion and after hearing the story of Bishen Father Kerry chooses his first target village of rescue, Bishen's village Neelkote. "Now my friend, this will be our first village We will move inwards, towards the lake. This village has been chosen for us. I will start with Neelkote. The first link in my chain."He turned to Bishen" (97 *The Nude*).

Thus the legend of lamp fulfills the wish of the innocent boy as he thought that his wick would have reached to the temple of Brahma, and in other words to the abode of Gods who in turn saved Moti from being auctioned. As P.G.Javalgi has mentioned it "Bishen attributes this good luck to his floating of lamp in the lake in front of the temple of Brahma"(99).

Story "The Seller of Mantra" is the zenith of faith of Indian people. The story is about the faith of people who are gullible enough to be the prey of tricks of religious entities to redress their grievances and the person who is unable to get a job with his education can earn money even by selling mantras.

It is said about mantras, if they are pronounced correctly with correct intonation and pronunciation, can do miracle and this hidden treasure of mantras has prospered and flourished India since time immemorial as they brace people in their calamity. The protagonist is a defeated, irremediable, dejected young man with an honours degree in English and with no hope for job. Bitter experiences and encounters of life leave him shattered as he spent all the money given by his father and the outcome is nil. The only way appears to him is to commit suicide by drowning himself in the Ganga. "It could even be the ideal way to die . For someone who had no job, and no prospects of getting one, it might be the only solution. To glide away quietly and reach, finally, the abode of gods. It would be an honourable way to die" (206 *The Nude*).

Dalal has also found out the belief of people related to Holy Ganga in the words- "Pilgrims sought here an adjustment between reality and dreams, secure in the knowledge that no matter what they did, a plunge in the holy water washed them clean of all sins" (205-206 *The Nude*).

Life sometimes has queer way to help the dejected , disappointed, frustrated human beings. The words of a vendor "A lucky mantra for you, young sir ? Sir, in this book you can find a mantra to help you win fame , money, love, eternal salvation. A mantra to help you get a job." (206), brought him back from his reverie and he spent last of his money to buy the ancient book of mantras which had remedy for all problems. The book did miracle as he sat thinking under a tree people came to find remedial mantra for their ailments and grievances. Mantras were to them like crutches in their calamity as there was hope that now their sorrows would be removed. "Sir, please sir. Maharaj huzoor, saintly one. Give me a mantra... I have a young wife, maharaj. A beautiful , young wife. Give me a mantra to appear young in her eyes. To appear strong, virile, handsome."(206 *The Nude*)

There are mantras for beauty, for good wife , for job etc. Now the life comes back for the protagonist. A defeated man with the wings of faith begins to take people out of the snare of difficulty.

I gave them only what they want-what makes them happy, what gives them hope .What more could anyone ask ?The boy who has a mantra to help in his exams, is protected , confident, fortified. He will not fail. The ones who want husbands, love, peace, a child-all go away satisfied, filled with the conviction that their dreams will come true (212 *The Nude*).

In this ancient land of India , a land of temples and worship, a land where people think by heart and not by brain, even mantras can give new life. Not only the protagonist finds the way to live, he gives a new way to the people at the time of difficulty."I give them the ability to think positively and with conviction. What is wrong with that? I do only good" (212 *The Nude*).

Custom of human sacrifice also finds place in her story "The Sacrifice". This age old custom is still practiced in some of the remoter areas even today. The story gives other dimension to the custom. Mr. Triana, a foreigner comes to see India. After soaking his eyes in the beauty of nature he becomes desperate to see malnourished, gaunt, skinny people of India. For this he hires Pritam Singh as a guide and goes to remoter areas with his two more companions Mrs. Jordan, and Miss Helen. On the way he poured out his pet hate for India. "Floods, famine, corruption, greed and overpopulation. And there is nothing you can do about it without foreign aid. And yet you have the nerve to call yourself independent" (31 *The Nude*).

He goads Pritam Singh to speak something in return but his silence was everlasting. Being an expert guide Pritam Singh tells Mr. Triana about the custom of human sacrifice in case if there is no rain.

But these villages around here are interesting. In the old days this is where they offered human sacrifices to the rain-God. Now, of course, it is not allowed, but the older men still believe that this famine could have been averted with a sacrifice. The gods are angry, they say (32 *The Nude*).

Miss Helen was shocked to listen that a person is killed to save many others When Mr. Triana reaches the bungalow, it is dark but the people who gather there, are like a feast for him to feed on .Those poverty stricken multitude are as photogenic as he wants . "Mr. Triana rubbed his hands in glee'. Good, god, I'll get some wonderful pictures tomorrow" (33 *The Nude*).

Next morning in excitement Mr. Triana goes alone to have photographs. The undernourished, emaciated, cadaverous poverty stricken hoi polloi of India inveigle him to be captured in camera and in overexcitement he touched a lady to make pose.

Mr. Triana was pleased. This was even better than he had expected. He would get some wonderful pictures. He walked up to a young woman who lay half naked, with a baby at her breast. The child looked like a foetus, so shriveled and shrunk and tiny it was... Mr. Triana leaned downwards and put his fleshy hand on the thin shoulder of the woman. He was doing no more than trying to move her out of the shadows, but at once there was a sort of stillness in the air (36 *The Nude*).

The whole village gathers and he can not avert his fate . Despite all his efforts , despite offer of money, he is sacrificed by thin, gaunt, skinny yet self respecting, Self esteemed and kittle people. They killed one to save others.

In other countries it may be laziness, it may be indolence and lethargy of the people but to people of India it is the way of life that they leave all their cares and anxieties on God. The firm faith that God will save them under all circumstances, sustains them and make them able to survive and face all the oddities of life. Story "The Temple of Shiva" exposes the same firm faith.

The story is of an area which was notorious for dacoits called 'daku' but the village is safe and is never been pillaged by them due to the firm faith of people that lord Shiva will save them. In village there are grandfather and the grandson who are the ardent devotee of Lord Shiva. The small boy goes to offer incense and flowers to lord Shiva, crossing numerous hurdles. As Dalal says-

"Cresting the top, he entered the forest, plunging through hanging vines screening small pathways . Between him and his objective was a narrow gorge where a huge rock had fallen aslant, barely touching either side. The boy slid down and stepped carefully over. Right at the end it was necessary to leap over to the other side. He did this easily before scrambling up the hill. Now It was easy going. Already he could hear the peacocks. Here there were more vines, an old crumbled wall, and then broken steps going down, down into Shiva's temple, buried now for hundreds of years." (186-187 *The Nude*)

On returning the boy overhears the dacoits that they will attack the village . The whole village is terror stricken, but the faith of grandfather and grandson becomes the strength of the whole village and they are ready to save all the people. Grandfather plans that all the people would take shelter in the temple except him as he knows what to do with the dacoits. The boy is happy to know the scheme and becoming the leader he takes the villagers to the temple. The grandfather assures : " Have no fear for me, little one . The daku will not harm me. I know what to do,' and he whispered into the boy's ear. The child laughed aloud and ran off to complete his special errand" (190 *The Nude*).

When the inevitable moment comes the village echoes with the fire of guns . But the grandfather poses as though he may be suffering from smallpox. With his knowledge of herbs he is able to have patches and the dacoits attack only to listen to the concocted story of the grandfather that the whole village had gone from the village to avoid being infected with the same disease only to return after the death of the old man.

Yes, smallpox. They have gone- every man, woman and child. They will return only when the vultures have picked the flesh from these old bones. They saw the vultures, hunched on the trees, waiting. They could hardly get away fast enough, firing in the air again for courage" (192 *The Nude*).

Thus the faith in God gives that inner strength of wisdom and pluck to face the dacoits. "It was neither guns nor Shiva, but the courage of an old man and the intelligence of a child.' In the quietness of the morning, he felt the first surging of hope. Hope for his village and the people in it, for they too belonged to the world" (193 *The Nude*).

Dalal has all praise for this kind of faith and even for superstitions for they give that inner brawn and courage which is invincible but she derides and mocks the

spurious saints and fake sadhus who play with the feelings of people. Her Story "roses, roses All the Way" reveals her rejection of these type of saints. India is abode of saints and hermits. All the mysteries and secrets of spiritual enlightenment are clad in the saffron robes but sometimes this saffron robe or the form of a guru is too fake to believe even the genuine.

In the story an elderly spinster Miss Malik, searching for happiness is entrapped in the noose of phoney guru. She looks after her ailing mother but when her mother died she is left alone. With the advice of her friends and relatives she begins to travel and is carried by her destiny to an ashram Which she thinks her way to spiritual enlightenment. "For the first time there was purpose in her life. The head of the ashram had undertaken her instruction himself, and she was well on the way to what she called 'spiritual liberation'" (84 *The Nude*).

On birthday of swamiji Miss Malik is enticed by the beauty of rose flowers which were in full bloom and blossomed in the garden of narrator. She could not resist the desire of asking for flowers. Besides giving the flowers the narrator also offers tea to the lady but she bursts into tears as it was the part of her abstemious behavior to leave tea which is her favourite.

I did not mind this at all, said Miss Malik, wiping her eyes with the rather grubby end of her sari. Infact, I welcomed it. It seemed to give my life some purpose. But then swamiji discovered my passion for tea. I never thought I could do without it. I drank it all times of the day and sometimes, at night. When I was tired, or cold, or lonely or for no reason at all, I had a cup of tea. It seemed a harmless enough addiction. But no one in the ashram, it seemed, drank tea or coffee, and I was forbidden to brew my own (84 *The Nude*).

Getting the flowers, she is overwhelmed and she invites the narrator to ashram to witness the ceremony of darshan. Miss Malik is elated to decorate the fresh roses there in the room as only she can manage to get them in this season. When Swamiji comes the women lie prone and guruji gave a few rose petals, a pinch of ash, a small piece of coconut..Miss Malik eulogized swamiji.

He is so strong, so wonderful really. He denies himself more, fasts for days on end, meditates for hours, observes mauna, days when he does not speak at all, drinks nothing but plain, cold water; he is an example to all of us (85 *The Nude*).

Miss Malik offers the narrator to visit the whole ashram. This sojourn brings them to a room at the back of the ashram. To her surprise the air is filled with the fragrance of tea and on peeping she finds swamiji relishing the most expensive tea. The sight not only shocks Miss Malik but also detaches her from the life of a recluse. "The shock at once causes disillusionment, she takes her baggage and stealthily leaves with her hostess for the hotel immediately she gives up all her austerity" (100 Javalgi).

Now Miss malik is educated enough to enjoy life .Her white sari is changed into dark blue silk sari. She says-

They say no experience is wasted. Now I know what I am going to do enjoy my life, I shall go back to my to my house and renovate it-new carpets, curtains, furnishings and the most sybaritic bathrooms you have ever seen. I shall read

enormously-every new book that comes out, and listen to music. I shall grow roses, and here she looked at me mischievously, and drink tea! (90 *The Nude*).

India is replete with those ersatz saints but this fact is disclosed to innocent people when it is too late and no remedy can rescue. The other dimension of this belief is that sometimes God Himself saves a criminal if the crime is done for a good cause. Story 'The Alabaster Goddess' is the best example.

Narrator of the story is fond of going to peaceful surroundings and exploring tranquility. Once when he was caught in a storm, he had to take refuge in an ancient temple of Alabaster Goddess among hills. He is surprised to see the monks reading books the whole night. Narrator is happy to see the Goddess :

She was about two and a half feet high with the usual swelling curves of the Indian goddess, but there was also an extraordinary delicacy about the line of cheek and throat, and a smile of ineffable sweetness on her face. Her hands, with their long tapering fingers, were decorated with rings (41 *The Nude*).

As he is mesmerized with the goddess so he is astonished to see the saint, speaking perfect English and more astonished on the statement that he was expecting the narrator but he is also satisfied as :

To have found in hills of Garhwal a monk who spoke English with the fluency of an Englishman was strange enough; that he had been expecting me was only a continuation of his strangeness. But I had lived long enough in India to know that anything is possible (42 *The Nude*).

As the things unroll the narrator came to know that the monk is the first criminal, Harold Jerrold of his career as a police officer in charge. He used to be a calm civil engineer but was tortured by his wife.

She was a big woman, tall and broad, and subject to the most terrible fits of anger... Sometimes in her rage, she would sweep all my papers to the floor, screaming and yelling, and flinging her great arms about, with so complete a lack of control, that it made me feel physically sick to watch her (46 *The Nude*).

The things became unbearable for Harold as no servant used to stay so the house always remained dirty and untidy. The home was like hell because of the choleric wife.

The worst experience was when Harold brought a boy of about fourteen or fifteen years, to work. The wife derived strange pleasure in torturing the boy and this made his hair curled.

I came home earlier than usual one evening. I pushed open the door, and seeing no one in the front rooms, went into the pantry. My wife was holding the lad by his hair in a vicious grip and there was a look of devilish pleasure on her face as she shook him about violently. The naked delight, the gloating pleasure she seemed to be deriving from it, was revolting. But worst of all was the boy himself. Perhaps it had happened many times before, or perhaps he realized her enormous strength-for he lay still, making no more to defend himself, while the tears dripped slowly from under his closed lids (48 *The Nude*).

Harold, being weaker endures all the tortures of wife but when the limits are crossed there is remedy and what can he do. The thought to kill the wife is so alluring that he makes plan and kills her.

I continued to say nothing. I accepted all her taunts in silence. I waited. Every night I would take her a glass of hot milk laced with brandy, when she was in bed. One night I managed to crush two sleeping tablets into the mixture. She drank it without suspecting and fell into a deep, heavy sleep. It was then that I took the pillow and held it over her face until she was dead (48 *The Nude*).

The feeling of release and freedom was unique .Harold feels no remorse, no repentance as he does not think himself guilty. As he was interested in writing history, he wanted to complete his work so it was necessary to escape and to the utter frustration of police officer in charge, he escapes. As Dalal writes :

India is a vast place in which to disappear. The river banks are alive with naked fakirs, whose long hair and ash smeared faces make them indistinguishable from each other. The hills are peopled with stray monks. I got off the bus a few miles from Mussoorie-nobody noticed me going (49 *The Nude*).

Harold changes his appearance and takes shelter in a temple, which is dilapidated. In India one can easily take shelter in temples and other religious buildings as the doors are always opened.He had to complete his work. He renovated the temple and in ruins found the alabaster Goddess. In this country of theist people nobody who becomes the caretaker of temple can remain hungry and with the offerings of people to Alabaster Goddess Harold survived.Now Harold was before the police officer as his work of writing history was complete , he was ready to surrender .He made a request to officer to get his work ,the history of Moghuls , published. For so many years Alabaster goddess saved a guilty yet innocent man and when now he was ready to surrender the police officer was restless. And at last :

I went back quickly and awoke my guide. I took the books the old monk had given me and wrapped them in my bedding. We crept through the door silently without waking anyone. Who was I to disturb the peace in a man's heart; or the quiet of the hills (50 *The Nude*) ?

Sometimes even a crime is accepted by god and in India people are so pure at heart due to the nearness of god that they are ready to accept their crimes even years after and are ready to be punished. This concept of faith and belief of people is everlasting .it flows in the blood of people.The writer could not resist herself from depicting the belief of people in the purity of city and even in purity of animals and birds. In her story ' the temple of shiva' the bird peacock is described as telling the boy the time of worship. "Grandfather, the peacocks are calling. Is it time to make offerings in the temple" (184 *The Nude*) ?

The people in India have as much reverence and respect for birds and animals also as for their god. For them the life is precious as in the story when the soldier says that one can shoot peacocks to eat, they taste better, grandfather says- "The peacocks are sacred -- beloved of the gods, they are to be cherished and protected. Even to point a finger at them will bring misfortune" (186 *The Nude*).

For this reason the birds as well as animals are worshipped and fed. Not only birds and animals which have life, the lifeless cities are also adored. In her story 'the seller of mantras' Dalal reflects the faith of people in the purity of Rishikesh city.

Rishikesh is one of those places that could exist only in India: a town dedicated to the salvation of souls. Every second person, it seemed, wore the saffron robes of the holy man. It was not so much a town as a pattern of consciousness, emphasizing the illusion of identification. Pilgrims sought here an adjustment between reality and dreams, secure in the knowledge that no matter what they did, a plunge in the holy water washed them clean of all sins (206 *The Nude*).

Thus the stories of Nergis Dalal are the reflections of faiths and beliefs of Indian people. Consciously or unconsciously these beliefs are in blood of people, in the darkness of pessimism these give optimism to people. Even the floating lamp, mantras, sacrifice embrace people and they come out of the calamities. The themes are so beautifully depicted or entwined in the story that the readers not only enjoys but also feels happy to find the reflection of his heartfelt beliefs.

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