International Research Journal of Humanities, Language and Literature
ISSN: (2394-1642)
Impact Factor 7.972 Volume 12, Issue 3, March 2025
Association of Academic Researchers and Faculties (AARF)
Website-www.aarf.asia, Email : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

# Love, Empire, and Hybridity: A Critical Study of William Dalrymple's *White Mughals*

**(Parvesh Dahiya, Assistant Professor of English,**

**VAKM, Bahadurgarh, Jhajjar, Haryana.)**

Email: dahiyaparvesh1282@gmail.com

William Dalrymple's *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (2002) is not simply a historical account of a doomed romance between a British Resident and a Hyderabadi noblewoman; it is a cultural and political meditation on the complexities of cross-cultural intimacy during the transitional period between late-Mughal cosmopolitanism and early British imperial consolidation. The book, based on over five years of archival research, explores the passionate relationship between James Achilles Kirkpatrick, the East India Company's Resident at the court of Hyderabad, and Khair-un-Nissa Begum, a young Muslim aristocrat related to the Nizam's chief minister. Dalrymple transforms their personal love story into a broader inquiry into what he calls "a period of unprecedented cultural fusion between Indians and Britons" (Dalrymple 6).

The narrative unfolds at a time when India's political geography was being redrawn and when the East India Company, shifting from commerce to conquest, began consolidating power through diplomacy, trade, and military control. Yet Dalrymple challenges the teleological assumption that colonialism always implied rigid separation between ruler and ruled. His Kirkpatrick is not the stereotypical imperialist but a man who "went native," donning Persian robes, learning Persian and Urdu, keeping a zenana, and converting—at least nominally—to Islam to marry Khair-un-Nissa. This portrayal resists simplistic binaries of colonizer versus colonized and instead reveals a fragile world of "mutual fascination, interdependence, and hybridity" (Dalrymple 9).

In reconstructing this world, Dalrymple's *White Mughals* performs three crucial interventions. First, it retrieves from the colonial archive a forgotten history of interracial unions that challenges later Victorian moral codes. Second, it highlights the cultural porosity of the eighteenth century—a time when Mughal and British elites shared languages, aesthetics, and even domestic arrangements. Third, it shows how the rise of evangelical reformism and the racial ideologies of the nineteenth century shattered this fragile hybridity. The

book thus moves from romance to tragedy, both in personal and historical terms: the demise of Kirkpatrick's and Khair-un-Nissa's relationship mirrors the collapse of Indo-British cultural symbiosis.

This paper examines *White Mughals* through the lenses of history, gender, and postcolonial theory. It will analyze Dalrymple's narrative method, his representation of hybridity, his use of sources, and his treatment of gender and empire. Drawing upon textual quotations and critical commentary, it argues that *White Mughals* is as much about the politics of cultural memory as about eighteenth-century love. Dalrymple's historical empathy reconstructs a cosmopolitan moment, yet his narrative also reveals the power structures and emotional costs underlying such cultural crossings.

Dalrymple situates White *Mughals* in a period of extraordinary transition—the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the Mughal Empire's authority waned and the East India Company's power grew. Yet rather than depicting a clean break between pre-colonial and colonial India, Dalrymple emphasizes a liminal space of encounter and exchange. He writes that India "has always had a strange way with her conquerors. In defeat, she beckons them in, then slowly seduces, assimilates and transforms them" (Dalrymple 10). This formulation captures the central paradox of the book: conquest produces not only domination but also desire and transformation.

Dalrymple's methodology combines archival research with narrative reconstruction. He draws extensively on Persian, Urdu, and English sources—letters, diaries, court chronicles, and Company dispatches—to reanimate a world where cultural and linguistic boundaries were remarkably fluid. Kirkpatrick's correspondence reveals his fascination with Indo-Persian culture; he translated Persian texts, dressed in Mughal style, and built a residence that blended British and Indian architectural forms. The historian's task, Dalrymple suggests, is to retrieve these submerged histories of intercultural life from the margins of colonial archives, which often silenced or exoticized them.

The author's research process, as noted in the preface, spanned several years of work in British and Indian archives, including the India Office Records, the British Library, and private family collections. This meticulous archival recovery underpins his claim that many British officials before 1800 lived "in ways that would have been almost unthinkable a generation later" (Dalrymple 15). The narrative strategy fuses microhistory with cultural history: by focusing on one family, Dalrymple opens a window onto an entire historical milieu.

Scholars have praised this approach for its detail and humanism. Pankaj Mishra, reviewing the book in *The Guardian*, observed that Dalrymple "asks us to invert the usual narrative of imperialism, to see how India, through seduction rather than coercion, conquered the European imagination." Yet, as Mishra also notes, such a portrayal risks romanticizing hybridity and obscuring the material asymmetries of empire. The tension between empathy and critique lies at the heart of Dalrymple's method.

Dalrymple's prose also departs from conventional academic history. His style—novelistic, immersive, and richly descriptive—seeks to bring to life the sensory and emotional worlds of his subjects. He describes Hyderabad's "perfumed streets, echoing courtyards, and marble-inlaid mosques" (Dalrymple 54) to evoke the sensuality that animated Kirkpatrick's fascination with Indian life. Yet this narrative style has drawn mixed reactions. Some historians, such as Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, have admired Dalrymple's accessibility but warned that his literary flair sometimes "blurs the line between history and historical fiction." Nonetheless, as a piece of narrative scholarship, White Mughals exemplifies the power of storytelling to humanize history.

The historian also frames his narrative as an act of recovery and resistance. By reconstructing interracial love stories erased from official memory, Dalrymple challenges the ideological purification of empire. He contends that "Victorian morality rewrote the past to make its own racial anxieties appear timeless" (Dalrymple 23). Thus, his project aligns with postcolonial efforts to "write back" to empire by restoring suppressed forms of hybridity. The methodology is therefore not only empirical but also moral: a re-enchantment of history against the amnesia of imperial ideology.

The central theme of *White Mughals* is cultural hybridity — a state of mutual adaptation and syncretism between Britons and Indians before the rigid racial hierarchies of the Victorian Raj. Dalrymple opens with the observation that in the late eighteenth century, "many British men in India were more Indian than the Indians themselves" (Dalrymple 5). This is not hyperbole but historical fact. Dozens of East India Company officials married or lived with Indian women, learned Persian and Urdu, converted to Islam, and integrated into Indian society. These men, whom Dalrymple calls "White Mughals," defy the later colonial stereotype of the aloof sahib.

James Achilles Kirkpatrick exemplifies this phenomenon. Posted as Resident at Hyderabad, he immersed himself in Indo-Persian culture, adopted Mughal dress, and maintained a zenana in keeping with local customs. Dalrymple writes, "Kirkpatrick spoke Persian better than many of his Indian counterparts and wrote letters to the Nizam in florid Persian prose" (Dalrymple 78). His marriage to Khair-un-Nissa was not merely a private affair but a political alliance that symbolized the permeability of cultural borders. For a brief moment, Dalrymple suggests, the British and Indian elites were united by a shared aesthetic and moral universe.

This hybridity, however, was fragile and contested. It depended on the coexistence of two declining powers: the fading Mughal order and the still-commercial East India Company. Both needed each other, and in this interdependence arose a space for intimacy and exchange. As historian Maya Jasanoff notes in *Edge of Empire*, such "border-crossers" embodied the possibility of "empire as collaboration rather than domination." Yet their very existence became intolerable once the Company's priorities shifted toward conquest and bureaucratic control.

Dalrymple's narrative traces this shift through the changing tone of correspondence between Company officials. Early letters reveal admiration for Indo-Muslim civility; later ones condemn "going native" as a betrayal of race and religion. By 1805, as evangelical reformers like Charles Grant rose in influence, such hybridity was seen as moral decay. "A new mood of racial exclusiveness," Dalrymple writes, "swept through the Company's ranks like a puritanical fever" (Dalrymple 312). The world of the White Mughals was doomed not only by love's failure but by ideology's triumph.

In postcolonial terms, the *White Mughals* represent what Homi Bhabha calls the "Third Space"—a site of negotiation that subverts binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized. Bhabha argues that hybridity "displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination." Kirkpatrick's hybridity, however, is double-edged: while it resists colonial purity, it remains dependent on his positional power as a British official. Dalrymple acknowledges this ambiguity: "For all his immersion in Indian life, Kirkpatrick never ceased to be an Englishman, writing dispatches to London that shaped imperial policy" (Dalrymple 198). Thus, hybridity in *White Mughals* is both a bridge and a contradiction—a negotiation between empathy and empire.

Dalrymple also portrays how Indian elites participated in this cultural exchange. Khair-un-Nissa's uncle, Mir Alam, and other nobles sought strategic alliances through marriage and patronage. The Mughal aristocracy viewed British officers not as alien rulers but as potential clients within existing networks of power. As Durba Ghosh observes in *Sex and the Family in Colonial India*, "Interracial liaisons were not transgressions but transactions within the idiom of kinship and diplomacy." Dalrymple's reconstruction of this world reclaims Indian agency, showing that the love story of Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa was not merely the tale of an Englishman seduced by the Orient but of two worlds meeting in mutual calculation and affection.

While *White Mughals* revolves around a love story, it is also a meditation on gender, power, and the colonial politics of intimacy. Khair-un-Nissa, often romanticized in both British and Indian accounts, occupies a complex position as both subject and symbol. Dalrymple resists portraying her as a passive Oriental beauty. Drawing upon Persian chronicles and family letters, he reconstructs her as an intelligent and articulate woman, constrained by patriarchal and colonial forces yet exercising agency within them.

Dalrymple observes that Khair-un-Nissa's family "was at once scandalized and intrigued by her relationship with the Resident" (Dalrymple 126). Her marriage to Kirkpatrick, though conducted under Islamic law, violated both Company regulations and the patriarchal codes of Hyderabad. It triggered diplomatic outrage when British officials accused Kirkpatrick of "abandoning his race." Yet from Khair-un-Nissa's perspective, the alliance offered security and prestige. Dalrymple notes that she was "no mere victim of love, but a woman negotiating survival in a volatile political world" (Dalrymple 137).

The tragedy of Khair-un-Nissa's later life—her widowhood, exile, and exploitation by British agents—exemplifies the gendered consequences of empire. After Kirkpatrick's death in 1805, her property was confiscated, her children sent to England, and her reputation maligned by both Indian and British observers. "Even in the act of remembering her," Dalrymple laments, "history conspired to erase her voice" (Dalrymple 407). This erasure, as feminist historian Antoinette Burton would argue, reveals how colonialism's gendered logic transformed women's bodies into symbolic battlegrounds between cultures. Dalrymple's treatment of Khair-un-Nissa also challenges the Orientalist gaze. In contrast to the exoticized portrayals of Eastern women found in colonial travelogues, *White Mughals* restores individuality and emotional depth. Khair-un-Nissa's letters—though few survive—reveal a woman "capable of passionate reasoning as well as feeling" (Dalrymple 249). Her story complicates both the Western fantasy of the submissive Eastern woman and the nationalist trope of female virtue under siege.

Critics such as Jenny Sharpe have argued that cross-cultural romances in colonial literature often serve as allegories for imperial desire—the colonizer's longing to possess the colonized land. Dalrymple, however, subverts this paradigm. Kirkpatrick's relationship with Khair-un-Nissa is portrayed not as conquest but as surrender. He converts to Islam, wears Indian attire, and builds a house "with domes, minarets, and Persian inscriptions—an edifice of love that defied colonial decorum" (Dalrymple 185). The inversion of power is striking: it is the British official who assimilates, while the Indian woman becomes the custodian of cultural continuity. Yet, Dalrymple's sympathy for Khair-un-Nissa is tempered by the limitations of his sources. The archival record speaks more loudly of Kirkpatrick than of her. The historian's imaginative reconstruction—what he calls "reading the silences"—has led some scholars to question where history ends and empathy begins. Catherine Hall notes that Dalrymple "recreates intimacy with admirable sensitivity, but the gendered asymmetry of the archive still shadows his narrative." The book thus becomes an implicit commentary on historical methodology itself: how to tell the story of a woman whose words were never meant to survive. The fate of Khair-un-Nissa's children, especially her daughter Kitty (Khadija), further dramatizes the imperial politics of domesticity. Sent to England for "proper Christian education," they were absorbed into British society and effectively deracinated. Dalrymple writes, "The children of mixed marriages became the casualties of a new racial order that had no place for them" (Dalrymple 432). Through these individual stories, *White Mughals* exposes how private affections were regulated by public ideologies—how love, in the colonial world, could not remain apolitical alrymple's *White Mughals* is not only a historical study but also a meditation on memory—how empires remember and forget. His narrative alternates between the archival and the elegiac: each recovered letter, each Persian inscription becomes a fragment of a lost world. The book opens with the haunting line: "It is the sad fate of lovers to be forgotten when empires fall" (Dalrymple 1). From the outset, Dalrymple frames his history as an act of resistance against imperial amnesia.

The Victorian rewriting of India's past, he argues, deliberately erased the cosmopolitan intimacy of the eighteenth century to justify the rigid racial segregation of the Raj. "By the 1830s," he writes, "those who once spoke Persian and married Indian wives were denounced as degenerates who had betrayed their

civilization" (Dalrymple 319). The transformation from hybridity to apartheid, from curiosity to contempt, marks the moral trajectory of empire itself. Dalrymple's narrative thus parallels the personal betrayal in Kirkpatrick's story with the civilizational betrayal of India's pluralism.

Dalrymple's narrative technique reflects this dual purpose. He moves fluidly between historical exposition and novelistic detail, using vivid description and interior speculation to evoke emotional immediacy. The result is a hybrid text—part history, part biography, part lament. This blending of forms mirrors the hybridity of his subjects. As historian David Cannadine observes, "Dalrymple's prose is itself a form of cultural syncretism, combining the precision of the archive with the sensuality of storytelling."

One of Dalrymple's strengths is his ability to reanimate spaces. His descriptions of Hyderabad—the palaces, bazaars, mosques, and gardens—create a living tableau of a city poised between Mughal grandeur and colonial modernity. "Hyderabad in the 1790s," he writes, "was a city of mingled tongues and mingled blood, where Persians, Arabs, Hindus, and Englishmen met under the arches of Charminar" (Dalrymple 62). This architectural and linguistic hybridity becomes a metaphor for the cultural world Kirkpatrick inhabited. Yet Dalrymple's lush prose occasionally borders on nostalgia. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) warns of the tendency to aestheticize the East, turning it into a site of lost beauty rather than living history. Some critics argue that Dalrymple's fascination with Mughal India risks romanticizing the past. However, his approach differs from Orientalism in one crucial respect: rather than depicting the East as static and passive, he portrays it as dynamic, adaptive, and transformative. His India is not a backdrop to British heroism but an active participant in shaping colonial modernity. Dalrymple's historical empathy also carries a political undertone. In the post-9/11 world, when *White Mughals* was published, his portrayal of Muslim civilization as tolerant and syncretic served as a counterpoint to Western narratives of cultural clash. He explicitly states in interviews that the book "was written in the shadow of a world increasingly divided by faith and suspicion." The eighteenth-century Indo-Islamic world thus becomes an allegory for coexistence—a reminder that pluralism once flourished where empire later sowed division.

Furthermore, Dalrymple's narrative style exemplifies what Hayden White calls the emplotment of history—the shaping of events into a moral and aesthetic pattern. The love story between Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa serves as the emotional axis around which political and cultural histories revolve. Through this structure, Dalrymple transforms archival fragments into moral allegory: love becomes resistance, hybridity becomes loss, and memory becomes redemption. In reimagining empire through emotion rather than ideology, Dalrymple contributes to what Antoinette Burton describes as the "affective turn" in postcolonial historiography. His history feels rather than merely argues; it seeks empathy as a mode of understanding. This emotional intelligence distinguishes White Mughals from traditional colonial histories and aligns it with the works of Amitav Ghosh, who similarly fuses archival research with narrative imagination to recover subaltern cosmopolitanisms.

Since its publication in 2002, *White Mughals* has been celebrated for its scholarly rigor and literary grace, while also sparking debate about historical representation, Orientalism, and the ethics of empathy. The book won the Wolfson Prize for History and was praised by critics across both academic and popular circles for its ability to humanize the past. Yet, as with most postcolonial histories written from a British perspective, it has also faced scrutiny regarding positionality and narrative authority. In The Guardian, Pankaj Mishra hailed *White Mughals* as "a profound and compassionate reconstruction of an age before the British forgot how to love India." Mishra emphasizes Dalrymple's sensitivity to cultural difference and his ability to reverse the imperial gaze, making the British the subjects of scrutiny rather than the agents of domination. Similarly, in *The New York* Review of Books, historian Maya Jasanoff praised the work as "a portrait of empire in its most intimate and ambiguous form." However, critics such as Robert Travers have argued that Dalrymple's narrative "tends toward romantic melancholy rather than structural critique." By focusing on the exceptional rather than the typical, Dalrymple risks suggesting that empire was redeemable through individual affection. Travers notes that "to understand the Company's power, one must look not at its lovers but at its ledgers." Such critiques remind us that cultural hybridity, while emotionally resonant, existed within an unequal economic and political framework. From a theoretical standpoint, *White Mughals* can be read through the lens of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which conceptualizes hybridity as a space of negotiation that undermines colonial authority. Kirkpatrick's cross-cultural transformation exemplifies what Bhabha calls "the third space of enunciation," where identity is constantly being remade. Yet, as Bhabha warns, hybridity is not liberation but ambivalence—both subversive and complicit. Dalrymple's narrative captures this ambivalence vividly: the Resident's love for Khair-un-Nissa challenges imperial boundaries but cannot escape them. Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" also resonates in this context. Khair-un-Nissa's near-silence in the archival record exemplifies Spivak's question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Dalrymple attempts to make her speak by reading between the lines of patriarchal and colonial texts, but the result is necessarily speculative. As historian Indrani Chatterjee observes, "Dalrymple's Khair-un-Nissa is an act of historical ventriloquism—sympathetic, yes, but mediated through the voice of empire." This tension between empathy and appropriation remains at the ethical core of *White Mughals*. In contrast, feminist critics have lauded Dalrymple's recovery of female subjectivity within a male-dominated archive. Durba Ghosh, whose *Sex and the Family in Colonial India* (2006) explores similar themes, argues that Dalrymple "opens an emotional archive long neglected by political historians." By centering intimacy, he redefines what counts as historical evidence: love letters, domestic architecture, and even the design of clothing become texts of empire. Postcolonial scholars have also compared *White Mughals* with Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992), another cross-cultural narrative that blurs the boundary between history and ethnography. Both works challenge Eurocentric historiography by foregrounding entanglement rather than separation. Yet while Ghosh's tone is anthropological, Dalrymple's is elegiac. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir remarks, "Dalrymple mourns the loss of hybridity; Ghosh seeks its persistence."

Despite its romantic inflections, *White Mughals* remains a valuable contribution to the historiography of early colonial India. It bridges the gap between academic history and narrative literature, reviving the

eighteenth century as a moral landscape of encounter and loss. The book's lasting significance lies in its refusal to simplify: it neither glorifies empire nor condemns it absolutely, but reveals it as a site of human complexity where desire and domination were inseparable. William Dalrymple's *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* stands as a rare synthesis of history, literature, and moral reflection. It reconstructs not merely an affair between James Achilles Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa, but an entire civilizational ethos that briefly flourished before being extinguished by the racial puritanism of empire. Through meticulous archival work and lyrical narration, Dalrymple revives the forgotten cosmopolitanism of eighteenth-century India, when hybridity was both a social reality and a creative force. The book's enduring achievement lies in its challenge to the master narrative of colonial history. Against the conventional portrayal of the British as distant rulers, Dalrymple presents them as participants in a shared world of cultural negotiation. The figure of the "White Mughal" encapsulates a moment when boundaries of race, religion, and language blurred—when conquest had not yet hardened into apartheid. Yet, the tragedy of *White Mughals* is not merely romantic; it is historical. The fall of Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa's union mirrors the collapse of Indo-British intimacy under the pressures of imperial ideology.

Through postcolonial lenses, the text exemplifies both the promise and the peril of hybridity. It illuminates the subversive potential of cultural crossings while revealing their dependence on unequal power structures. Dalrymple's narrative thus operates in what Bhabha calls "the in-between," where meaning and identity remain perpetually unstable. The story's moral resonance extends beyond the eighteenth century: it speaks to our contemporary world, where religious and cultural divides once again threaten coexistence. Ultimately, *White Mughals* is as much about the ethics of remembrance as about love or empire. In resurrecting Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa, Dalrymple performs an act of historical justice—giving voice to those silenced by both colonial and patriarchal history. The book reminds readers that empathy is itself a form of resistance, that to remember is to defy the homogenizing logic of power. "The past," Dalrymple writes, "is never dead; it lies waiting to be rediscovered in the dust of forgotten lives" (Dalrymple 435). Through that rediscovery, *White Mughals* becomes more than a historical narrative—it becomes a plea for cultural humility and the recovery of shared humanity.

## Works Cited


Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Burton, Antoinette. *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915*. University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Cannadine, David. Review of White Mughals, by William Dalrymple. London Review of Books, vol. 25, no. 7, 2003, pp. 16–18.

Chatterjee, Indrani. "Intimacy and Empire: Reading Dalrymple's White Mughals." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2004, pp. 44–58.

Dalrymple, William. *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*. Penguin, 2002.

Ghosh, Amitav. *In an Antique Land*. Granta, 1992.

Ghosh, Durba. *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hall, Catherine. *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867*. University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Jasanoff, Maya. *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East*, 1750–1850. Knopf, 2005.

Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. "Hybridity and Loss in White Mughals." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2004, pp. 27–43.

Llewellyn-Jones, Rosie. "Review: White Mughals and the Historical Imagination*." Asian Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2004, pp. 191–94.

Mishra, Pankaj. "Before the British Forgot How to Love India." *The Guardian*, 8 Mar. 2002.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 1978.

Sharpe, Jenny. *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak*?" In Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg*, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Travers, Robert. "Love and Empire." *Past & Present*, vol. 182, 2004, pp. 189–208.