

## **Dr. Brian Weiss's *Many Lives Many Masters* and *Only Love Is Real*: A Contemporary Re-invocation of the Reincarnation Myth in Literature**

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The term “myth” in popular usage is a synonym for “illusion”, “legend”, or false propaganda, or in an earlier literary sense, of decorative or illustrative material. In a critical sense, however, “myth” becomes a heavy synonym for “belief” or sometimes “convention” or “higher truth”. Reincarnation, as a word, also has several connotations. Throughout my paper, the term “reincarnation” is used in the sense of “rebirth in a different body”. The reincarnation myth articulates the hypothesis of pre-existence and thus the implication of the continuity of a living entity even after the physical demise of a living being which is usually referred to as the soul. According to Hindu Philosophy, the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation are inextricably linked to each other. The basic argument here is that the environment that a man is born into is a result of his actions in his past life. In the West, the doctrine of reincarnation had its origination in Greek Philosophy and termed as “Metempsychosis”. Its most famous philosophic exponent is Plato who embodied it in some of his greatest works. In Plato’s view, birth did not mean the creation of a soul as the number of souls was fixed but only a transmigration from one body to another. Plato’s theory of transmigration expostulates the idea that souls of both the good and the evil come together to draw lots, and choose their bodies according to their tendencies and the bent of their characters. Some prefer to be born as animals, such as lions and eagles or some other animals while others try their luck in being human beings. Thus the reincarnation myth incorporates the many moral presuppositions that sanction the moral values of a society and grapples with the essence of the human psyche.

### **Contemporary Worldview of the Reincarnation Myth**

The two most influential belief systems of contemporary Western society, “conventional” Christianity and Rationalism, undermine the reincarnation myth as a retrograde belief. The “conventional” Christian belief that an individual’s suffering on this earth would be compensated by a place in Paradise after death is in opposition to the Hindu Philosophy wherein suffering was explained in terms of past life actions. Rationalism debunks the doctrine of reincarnation on the grounds of insubstantial empirical evidence. Despite the overwhelming influence of these two belief systems, a substantial number of Westerners , nevertheless, entertain some kind of belief in reincarnation. In a study conducted by Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse titled “A

Very Private Belief: Reincarnation in Contemporary England” and published in the *Sociology of Religion*, they sought to ‘explore what reincarnation means to some of those who believe in it, why they find it attractive and how it relates to other aspects of their life...’ It was a small intensive interview study of a group of English people who take seriously the possibility of reincarnation. The study concluded that ‘reincarnation is, indeed, for them a very private belief, detached from religious and other affiliations, from the New Age, from popular literature on the subject, and from everyday life... reincarnation may prove prototypical of a kind of new religious belief that requires no Church, sect or cult for its sustenance. It is similar to old style folk religion in that it need not be integrated into a systematic worldview, but is unlike folk religion in that it is not handed down within a local community. It is perhaps the folk religion of the media age, where the television, the bookshop, and the internet transmit bites of religious “information” in which private individuals take an interest, without any consequences for their behavior, conversation or affiliations. It is the ultimate detached, private belief.’

This microcosmic study is in many ways representative of the complexity of religion and personal beliefs in modern life. In recent decades a renewed interest in reincarnation has been noticed among the Europeans and North Americans despite belonging to a societal structure that negated such beliefs. Even scholars have researched and recorded the issue of reincarnation. Psychiatrist Ian Stevenson from the University of Virginia, conducted more than 2,500 case studies over a period of 40 years.. Ian Stevenson’s *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* and Jim B. Tucker’s *Life Before Life* are published reports of children’s memories of earlier lives. It thus appears that the general notions bound up with the conception of reincarnation has gained wide acceptance in the West with the simultaneous rise of the modern/post-modern individualistic spirit. With conventional Christianity floundering to provide an answer or solace to individuals caught up in the complexity of modern life, especially in times of personal crisis, the reincarnation doctrine solved intellectual questions, notably about suffering and justice.

It is in this context I would like to analyse Dr. Brian Weiss’s *Many Lives many Masters* and *Only Love Is Real*. Both these texts are based on clinical records of Dr. Weiss’s patients Catherine and Elizabeth. Dr. Weiss, a prominent psychiatrist, met his patient Catherine while working as the Chief of Psychiatry at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami. When conventional methods of therapy failed to cure her symptoms of anxiety, panic attacks and phobias, Dr. Weiss resorted to “hypnosis” to treat her. It is from this hypnotic state that Catherine started recalling her “past-life” memories and in the process dramatically altering the therapist’s long held beliefs. *Many Lives Many Masters* is based on Catherine’s recollections of her “past-life” memories and the messages that she conveyed from the “spirit entities” on the secrets of life and death.

At the very outset in the Preface, Dr. Weiss narrates a brief history of his scientific qualifications and his background to hammer home the point that his belief in reincarnation is based purely on the revelations by Catherine and not on any previous leanings towards Oriental Philosophy or Reincarnation as he himself states: ‘Nothing in my background had prepared me for this. I was absolutely amazed when these events unfolded.’ (*Many Lives*, p. 10)

Dr. Weiss’s third book *Only Love Is Real* speaks of the enduring nature of love, and of ‘soulmates, people who are bonded eternally by their love and who come around together and together again, life after life.’ It recounts the unfolding of the past lives of two individuals Pedro and Elizabeth, separately, during Dr. Weiss’s hypnotic regression sessions and the gradual discovery on the part of the author narrator as to how deeply intertwined they were in their past lives. The book ends with the union of these two lovers who had loved and lost each other across many lifetimes. The message that the author narrator derives from the hypnotic regression of Elizabeth is that love is the ultimate truth and the only godly and spiritual attribute that can guide mankind towards the right path, “Love is the ultimate answer. Love is not an abstraction but an actual energy, or spectrum of energies, which you can ‘create’ and maintain in your being. Just be loving. You are beginning to touch God within yourself. Feel loving. express your love.” (*Only Love*, p. 65)

### **Validation through the Narrative Style**

The narrative style adopted by the author narrator effectively presents the reincarnation myth as a validated reality. The first person narration and use of the two narrative modes ‘mimesis’ and ‘diegesis’ (Gerard Genette) in tandem becomes an effective tool for clinching the argument. The scenes where Catherine and Elizabeth narrate their past-life experiences are presented in a mimetic manner thereby creating the illusion for the reader of hearing and seeing those experiences themselves. Dr. Weiss’s comments on the unfolding of Catherine and Elizabeth’s past-life memories as both an onlooker and narrator gives the narratorial voice a credibility which then imposes a convincing impact on the reader. Chapter Two of *Many Lives Many Masters* contain the first narration of Catherine’s past-life memories. This part of the narrative makes use of the mimetic mode which presents in a scenic way the unfolding of events, “I see white steps leading up to a building, a big white building with pillars, open in front. There are no doorways. I’m wearing a long dress... a sack made of rough material. My hair is braided, long blond hair.” (*Many Lives*, p.27)

This is a style which speaks directly to the readers and appeals to their visual faculty, thus creating the illusion for them to see and hear things for themselves. The author

narrator's desisting from the diegetic mode of narration or summarizing the events of Catherine's past-life memories enhances the credibility appeal of an extraordinary tale which might not find many takers. The author narrator then records his immediate response, "I was confused. I wasn't sure what was happening. I asked her what the year was, what her name was." (*Many Lives*, p. 27). Dr. Weiss reflects, "I had examined thousands of psychiatric patients, many under hypnosis, and I had never come across fantasies like this before – not even in dreams. I instructed her to go forward to the time of her death. I wasn't sure how to interview someone in the middle of such an explicit fantasy (or memory?), but I was on the lookout for traumatic events that might underlie current fears or symptoms." (*Many Lives*, p. 28) This response strikes an immediate chord and identification with the skeptics, as was Dr. Brian Weiss, then, with his scientific training and family background. The author narrator's state of denial and his reluctant acquiescence creates a convincing impact on the skeptical reader that it is not an uncritical rendering of the reincarnation myth. He states,

"I was stunned! Previous lifetimes? Reincarnation/ My clinical mind told me that she was not fantasizing this material, that she was not making this up. Her thoughts, her expressions, the attention to particular details, all were different from her conscious state. The whole gamut of possible psychiatric diagnosis flashed through my mind, but her psychiatric state and her character structure did not explain these revelations." (*Many Lives*, p. 29)

For Dr. Weiss, the ultimate validation of Catherine's past-life memories came in the form of revelations about his personal life from the Master Spirits through Catherine and to which Catherine had no access, "Your father is here, and your son, who is a small child. Your father says you will know him because his name is Avrom, and your daughter is named after him. Also, his death was due to his heart. Your son's heart was also important, for it was backward like a chicken's. He made a great sacrifice for you out of his love. His soul is very advanced... his death satisfied his parents' debts." (*Many Lives*, p. 54) The veracity of the revelations needed no more testimony than the implicit admission of the truth by the author narrator himself and his belief that "Catherine could not possibly know this information. There was no place even to look it up." (*Many Lives*, p. 56)

In his third book *Only Love Is Real*, Dr. Weiss employs the same narrative technique whereby Elizabeth and Pedro speaks in the direct speech while describing their past-life memories; thus, enhancing the credibility of the unfolding memory. While conveying the 'message from the Masters' that love is the most positive and powerful emotion/energy, the author narrator's language is couched in the language of a romantic ideal. Thus a desired fantasy conveyed as the absolute truth,

“All is love... All is love. With love comes understanding. With understanding comes patience. And everything is now.”(*Only Love*, p. 64)

Such utterances strike a chord with the readers as it stirs the deepest human yearnings.

### **Intertwining of Reincarnation Myth and Modern Psychology**

Dr. Weiss in his two texts *Many Lives Many Masters* and *Only Love Is Real*, through the narration of two real life stories involving past-life memories, delves into the fundamentals of man's existence and the belief in the immortality of soul or a living entity that continues even after the physical death of an individual. Catherine in *Many Lives Many Masters* and Elizabeth in *Only love Is Real* was tormented by phobias, panic attacks and fear of death. Gradually, with every session of hypnotic regression, Catherine's "phobias and panic attacks had just about disappeared. She had no fear of death or dying. She was no longer afraid of losing control."(*Many Lives*, p. 92) The author narrator also mentions that people with Catherine's symptoms were usually treated with high doses of tranquilizers and antidepressants alongwith intensive psychotherapy or made to attend phobia group therapy sessions. The medical prognosis for such symptoms was deficiencies in one or several brain chemicals. But it was remarkable that Catherine was nearly cured without the use of medicines, traditional therapy or group therapy. The author narrator's search for a plausible scientific explanation for these occurrences leads him to ask, "Could the memories be carried in her genes?" as a man of science he himself reasoned the answer, "Genetic memory requires the unbroken passage of genetic material from generation to generation. Catherine lived all over the earth, and her genetic line was interrupted repeatedly... And what of her survival after death and the in-between state? There was no body and certainly no genetic material, and yet her memories continued. No the genetic explanation had to be discarded."(*Many Lives*, p. 105) Then the author narrator toys with the idea of Carl Jung's idea of the "Collective Unconscious" which is not personally acquired but "inherited" somehow in the brain structure. But he reasons, "Catherine's memories were too specific to be explained by Jung's concept. She did not reveal symbols and universal images or motives. She related detailed descriptions of specific people and places. Jung's ideas seemed too vague. And there was still the in-between state to consider. All in all, reincarnation made the most sense."(*Many Lives*, p. 106) Dr. Weiss infers that the root cause of many of the incurable psychosomatic diseases in individuals may not be due to any physical deficiencies or traumatic experiences in this life. The answer lies somewhere in the realm of the supra-rational. The reason behind the incurable psychosomatic diseases he infers lies in lives lived before the

present. Thus his texts are an exposition of reincarnation as a reality and capable of proof as is demonstrated by the disappearance of neurotic fears and anxieties in Catherine and Elizabeth, two of Dr. Weiss's patients, through hypnotic regression. Hypnotic regression, a tool of modern psychology, thus, becomes a conduit for the exposition of a supra-rational reality. The regression into the past-lives of the protagonists to cure inexplicable psychosomatic diseases and, infact, finding a cure reaffirms the belief that the soul is the carrier of an individual's psychic life through countless lifetimes. It is a re-invocation of the reincarnation myth debunked by Christianity and Rationalism. In so doing, it questions and subverts the dominant values of contemporary society, based on Christianity and Rationalism. The author narrator thus harks back to a mythopoeic psychology to delve into the mysteries of the human psyche. The messages that the Master Spirits convey through Catherine and Elizabeth during their hypnotic regression and the author narrator's communication with the highly evolved spirit entities provide a subtext for the speculation on the deepest human experiences, needs and aspirations. A mythopoeic perception of human emotions thus calls forth for an alternate set of values for mankind whereby love, charity and fellow feeling should be the reigning order instead of the materialistic aggression of the age.

### **Conclusion**

The message gleaned through a reading of the two texts is that reincarnation is the mechanism through which "a soul can evolve and be transformed even through the most ignoble of lifetimes. It is the learning that is important, not the judgement." (*Only Love*, p. 16) Thus the reincarnation myth implicit in both the texts emphasize the continuity of an individual's psychic life to be the consequence of unlearned lessons in one lifetime and the carrying over of human emotions from one lifetime to the next, thus implying the creative/spiritual evolution of the soul through numerous lifetimes. This is a departure from and also a reiteration of the reincarnation doctrines of Eastern Philosophy. The Hindu and Buddhist philosophy of *karma* expounds that an individual can create "good" and "bad" *karma* and thus reap, accordingly, suffering or happiness in his or her next incarnation, thus emphasizing the retribution and reward principle of the doctrine. The idea implicit in the two texts is of learning and developing from one life to the next which is analogous to the western notions of self-determination and progress. Moreover, the idea that all individuals have some autonomy in choosing whether, or how fast, they learn, and hence how soon, and in what form, they reincarnate echoes some of the western notions of free-will. Also, the growing belief in the reincarnation myth in contemporary western society mirrors the changing perceptions of what constitutes the essence of human existence.

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