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From Margaret Noble to Sister Nivedita: Mapping a Colonial Woman's Journey to India in Search of a 'Home'

Abstract: While stories of travels from Britain to India during the colonial times were replete with stereotypes, the journey of an Irish Lady, Margaret Noble (1867–1911) and her subsequent transformation into Sister Nivedita (the one dedicated to the cause) was unique in many senses. Attracted by her Guru (Spiritual Master) she came to Calcutta, India on her spiritual quest in 1898, where she immersed herself in the local culture, learned the language, and significantly contributed to women's progress. Her involvement with local intelligentsia and nationalism highlighted the Indian values, talents and erudition to the outside world. Her journey showcased her spirit that could transcend the rigid European orthodoxy for White women in a colonized land and placed her as one of the leading architects of modern India. Earlier studies have not recognised Nivedita as a social reformer. Most importantly, works on her seldom refer to her struggle and subsequent triumph over limitations imposed on her in terms of racial othering, geographical positionality and gendered subjectivity. This paper addresses her struggle and celebrates her successful navigation in transcending the limitations and restrictions of both her Irish culture and the Indian culture and highlights her significant contributions towards human race at large.

Keywords: Nationalism, Travel, Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Hindu Theology

Introduction

Travelling has been recognised as an important part of human development, an intimate part of human existence, an act of exploration of the self as well as of the others. Bacon in "Of Travels" (1625) suggested that one must travel to become truly educated and enlightened (79). Travel was a regular pastime for the aristocrats, an opportunity that was exclusive for the rich and elite male members of the society, while unchaperoned travel for women from any social class was difficult, to say the least. The advent of colonisation opened travelling opportunities for the White male population, who also saw it as a prospective career (Disraeli, II xiv). And while the White men were sent to colonies like India to execute imperial governance, often their female counterparts, also called the 'mumsahibs',¹ had a chance to accompany them. Of course, their experiences were different, as they had to represent the homeland and appropriate the role of an ideal wife, sister or a girl-friend to the colonial males. Their varied experiences were well documented in travelogues written by Maria Graham, Ann Deane, Julia Maitland, Eliza Fay and many others (O'Loughlin iii).

The handful of White women travelling to India from the West, especially Britain, could primarily be divided into three specific groups. Owing to the extensive circulation of the exotic picture of the country, the rich and aristocratic women came to India to taste the exotic, their trips filled with the excitement of hunting, gaming, and other adventures in the hills and the plains, experiences heavily fanned by their male counterparts and select quarters of Indian royalty. A second group of women came in search of a husband in the colonised country, as there was no dearth of marriageable White men in the East who could guarantee not only wealth but also a respectable life. The third group came as mothers, wives and

¹ The wife of a British official

daughters along with the colonial servants who, as suggested by Percival Spear, were influential in augmenting the already existing gap between the colonizer and the colonized (140). Suresh Chandra Ghosh in *The Social Condition of the British Community in Bengal: 1757-1800* (1970) argued that the raging madness of the colonial memsahibs to keep up with the European fashion would put their sisters across the sea to shame: "If hairdressers could drive a profitable business in Calcutta, so could tailors... a tailor named Martin... found his business so profitable that he refused to exchange it for a post in the Company's service, and at the end of ten years was able to give his friends a splendid dinner and return to Europe with a fortune..." (116).

The White women who travelled to India were mostly accompanied and had social liabilities as well as obligations to bind them. However, to embark on a journey all alone was not quite a usual case for women at that time. The Victorian social code by no means encouraged average female travelers to explore a colonial land without designated supervision. Behind the implication of such restrictive code of conducts, there probably functioned the cultural anxiety over protecting the White females, the prized possession of the empire, and the cherished counter image of the native female. During the Raj, there existed a fear about the White man being influenced into becoming like a native, either by over associating with the natives, or worse, by marrying their women. The women, too, were not free from such speculations. They were not only strictly advised to keep distance from their native counterparts, but there also existed a fear that they might become like them. Ann L. Stoler in her essay "Making Empire Respectable: the Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures" argues that the European White female was made to deal with racial domination and internal social distinctions, differently from the White male "because of their ambiguous positions, as both subordinates in colonial hierarchies and as active agents of imperial culture in their own right" (634).

One of the socially accepted reasons for these women's travel to the colonies was therefore to make sure that the White men remained uncorrupted by native females. While the colonial government nearly legalized prostitution in India (Liddle and Joshi 73-74), White men were never encouraged to enter into marital agreements with native females for whatsoever reason. Socio-cultural interaction as well as exchanges were not much promoted between the 'memsahibs' and the natives. In the face of the existing binaries of race and gender, Margaret Noble's journey in India was different, as it not only transcended the social, religious, cultural, and even linguistic borders within a colonial land, it also rejuvenated her spiritually and in the process steered an entire country towards progress.

Margaret Noble came to Calcutta, India to fulfil her Guru (Spiritual Master) Swami Vivekananda's dream of an empowered India, and stayed there even after his death. This paper analyses how the Irish lady slowly, but steadily, became Sister Nivedita (literally translated as the one who had dedicated herself to a cause) and how her journey from the West to India in quest of a home (spiritual at first, and then a literal one) shaped her own character, and in the process, brought into limelight India's potential as a modern nation that was systematically denigrated by an oppressive colonial rule.

The biographical accounts of Sister Nivedita's life, written by authors like Debanjan Sengupta and religious figures like Swami Sarvabhutananda confirm that since her childhood, she had a strong inclination towards spirituality due to her upbringing in a deeply religious Irish family. Her natural intelligence and talents made her a woman of letters in London. As a member of The Sesame Club, a hub of London intellectuals, which was frequented by G.B. Shaw, W.B. Yeats and Thomas Huxley, she was well-known in the contemporary literary circle before she met Swami Vivekananda by sheer chance. Although she was initially unsure of Vivekananda's philosophical foundations, she was eventually drawn to the young Indian sage whose intense knowledge, farsightedness, and deep vision appealed to her immensely (Sengupta 23). Swami Vivekananda's influence on her was so profound that she travelled all the way from Britain to India and initially settled in Calcutta to be near him as a sincere disciple. Margaret Noble became Sister Nivedita after becoming the follower of Vivekananda, who had instructed

her to "...stand on your own feet and not be under the wings of... anybody else" (Vivekananda 511). In becoming Sister Nivedita, Margaret Noble gave up her stereotypical role of an Irish woman bounded by Victorian moral codes. Her vow to a celibate life under the aegis of the religious Hindu society Ramakrishna Mission made her an independent woman, who could no longer be controlled by a patriarchal set-up. Her education had given her a fierce spirit that Swami Vivekananda had by then realized through their interactions, and he felt that Sister Nivedita could take over the role of a light bearer in the lives of Bengali women, still suffering from patriarchal domination and prejudices. However, most of the available biographical accounts of her life neglect her spiritual journey, which is the focus of this paper.

As this paper traces Margaret Noble's spiritual transformation to Sister Nivedita, it draws inspiration from Virginia Woolf's words in *The Three Guineas* (1947, 2006): "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country..." (197), to highlight the metamorphosis of a Western woman who deliberately appropriated the identity of an Indian woman at the call of her Guru. Unlike many of the other British women of her time, who stereotypically played the roles of colonial housewives and immersed themselves in decadent luxury, Sister Nivedita abundantly used her agency and connection in Europe as a White woman and brought in meaningful changes to the native culture. It was not an easy task: from a colonial perspective, there was always this 'trap' of getting degraded into a native; from the Indian perspective, she could be another White person with a claim to superiority coming from a non-Hindu religious background and a foreign culture and thus not to be trusted. Nivedita could successfully navigate these challenges as she became flexible in her role-playing, constantly adjusting and changing with her experiences and time.

The flexibility that we see in Sister Nivedita's appropriating this multiple identity came from her extensive travels within India, which made her realise the diversity and the legacy of an old civilisation, especially the Hindu way of living that embraces and nurtures differences for self-upliftment and social empowerment. In her journal titled the *Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda* (1913), Nivedita documented her self-transformation as she closely observed her Guru as a travelling companion. She documented in her journals and diaries how she transformed as a person after coming to India, which further motivated her to contribute to the development of the country at the juncture of its struggle for independence. Lizelle Reymond's biography, titled *The Dedicated: A Biography of Sister Nivedita* (2017), allows the readers to have a sneak peek into the enormous contribution made by Sister Nivedita towards India's regeneration. While Sister Nivedita has been widely celebrated in spiritual circles, her role as a distinct social reformer and crusader has remained under-appreciated. This paper demonstrates her role in shaping India's destiny as a social and political figure that transcends her narrow spiritual identity that was erstwhile celebrated. In the process, it also addresses Nivedita's struggle to transcend the limitations imposed by a patriarchal set-up both in Britain and India, in terms of the gendered role a colonial woman should play in the native land, and her subsequent triumph through resilience and hard work.

This paper is divided into sub-sections dealing with Nivedita's spiritual training under her Guru, her involvement in women education and empowerment, her liaison with the local intelligentsia, most notably with Rabindranath Tagore and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose, her support to the cause of Indian nationalism and a final assessment of her pivotal role in India's regeneration.

Sister Nivedita in India: Her Initial Days

Swami Vivekananda was aware of the condition of women in India, who were trapped within the layers of social and religious customs that didn't allow them to understand their real value. Sudha Emani's *The Ideal Woman* (2018) presents a beautiful rendition of Vivekananda's thoughts formerly brought together by Swami Ranganathananda in *Our Women*: "Swami Vivekananda looked upon human

life as an outward expression of our inner spirituality... if women's spiritual core is nurtured, their children would become ideal world citizens" (Emani vii).

For Swami Vivekananda, Sarada Maa (the Holy Mother) was the ideal woman who was full of inner wisdom and a selfless kindness that could heal anyone who would come to her. He believed that if women are given proper education, they will positively contribute to the progress of the nation. His vision of India was built on the idea of gender equality, and he looked up to an ideal woman as the one having "an intense religious consciousness, a rational mind, clarity of thought and a kind heart" (196). During his travel to the West, Swami Vivekananda was very much impressed by the degree of freedom enjoyed by the Western women in comparison to their Indian sisters. In "Vivekananda's Vision of Indian Women and the Situation Today," Anjona Chattopadhyay writes:

Swamiji had praised profusely certain positive qualities which the Western women had. He wanted Indian women to inculcate those qualities. The Western women were educated, beautiful, intellectually sound, and they enjoyed freedom to decide the course of their lives themselves. Women in India too, Swamiji believed, must adopt these good qualities. However, he had cautioned that a balance must be struck between the 'angel in the house' and the 'professional woman' in public life. Women must be allowed to have their own choice in respect of things ranging from very personal matters like marriage to the profession they choose to go for. The new woman must equip herself with knowledge which may help her in asserting her own identity, confidence and self-respect. (39)

Swami Vivekananda could locate these positive qualities in Margaret Noble, the Irish Lady that he met. So, when Margaret Noble approached him for guidance, he urged her to come to Calcutta and serve India.

A ship named "Mombassa" brought her to Calcutta, the first capital of British India, and she took shelter in Bagbazar, one of the most elite and conservative quarters of Calcutta, where she began her training in Bengali, as arranged by Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda had understood that if the lady had to stay and work for the development of the local women, then she must become one of them or at least have an in-depth idea about their society and culture. It was on the morning of March 29, 1898, that he officially made Margaret his disciple through a ritualistic process during which she became a part of the Ramakrishna sect. She was renamed Nivedita, a Bengali word for the "truly dedicated."

After coming to Calcutta, along with her immersion in the local culture, Nivedita earnestly submitted herself to the spiritual tutelage of her Guru, who had been initiated by Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and instructed to simultaneously serve the world along with his spiritual practices. In this way, one could contribute to the greater good of the society while striving for one's own personal upliftment. Swami Vivekananda followed the same model while training Sister Nivedita. He initiated her into spirituality by teaching her meditation and ways of controlling the mind, body, and emotions. At the same time, he instructed her to take up the cudgels of social service for the marginalized Indian population, especially women, reeling under the oppressive colonial rule. Emboldened by his instructions, Sister Nivedita then dedicated herself to social service. Her extraordinary social works manifested her true devotion to her Guru, and the contribution to women upliftment was the first step on her journey.

Sister Nivedita as a Social Crusader: Education, Empowerment and Service

In spite of all the support and inspiration that Sister Nivedita received from her Guru, her task was not an easy one. Nivedita was fighting against all odds as the contemporary Hindu society was full of prejudices against women's education. A majority of the population even in a city like Calcutta believed that a woman who received education was destined to be a widow soon after her marriage. Child marriage was common at that time, and therefore not much importance was given to educating women (Idisha Biswas 2). The purdah system, a practice of secluding women from the outer world or public

view, was very much prevalent, making formal education for girls a real challenge. There were some schools for women established by members of the British gentry, but the Hindus were suspicious of their intentions of converting the girls to Christianity. Partha Sircar in his article "Early Women's Education in Bengal and India" comments that it was in 1849 that John Drinkwater Bethune established an influential school for women, which probably was the only one to attract a considerable number of female students. However, most girls were left uneducated owing to the conservative social structure and practices. To counter this, Nivedita had to act prudently, as she was still considered an outsider as a White woman, an "othered" entity subjected to religious and cultural suspicion.

To overcome the limitations she was facing as an "outsider," Nivedita started making friendships and alliances with the local people, especially the local intelligentsia. As her immediate goal was to set up a school exclusively for girls, she needed an insight into the socio-cultural complexities that existed in Bengal at that point in time. In the nineteenth century Bengal, to run an institution for women's education required a lot of support from the male elite of the society. Nivedita's sharpness of mind and visible erudition was highly respected within the core circles of Brahmo Samaj, and because of that she was invited to deliver a lecture on every Thursday.² Clearly, she used such exchanges to highlight her plans involving female education. The eminent Tagore family (the famous Rabindranath Tagore belonged to this family) was one of the most influential Brahmos of that age and their socio-cultural influence was immensely high. David Kopf in *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (1979) commented that the members of the Brahmo Samaj were the "progressive wing of the Bengal intelligentsia" and were known to respond favourably to intellectual imports from the West, ranging from the Unitarian Social Gospel to the latest European philosophical and theological schools, such as humanism and positivism. Hence, due to their exposure to European education and philosophy, Nivedita found natural allies in the members of the Brahmo Samaj clan. The spontaneous association of Nivedita with the Brahmos also allowed them to somehow strengthen their belief in the nineteenth century European liberal education. This worked in favour of Nivedita's educational plans for the women of Bengali society, and made her a highly known and much revered personality of the progressive Bengali community (Kopf 89). This helped Sister Nivedita significantly in her future endeavours in and around Calcutta.

On the other hand, Sister Nivedita continued with her alliance with the local women to launch her school. In those days, she did not find a lot of women of her stature and merit; however, through her loving nature and her appropriating the native language, she made quick inroads in many aristocratic families. Her biggest acceptance came in the form of Sri Maa Sarada Devi, wife of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. In her diary, she recorded the day of March 17, 1898 as "A Day of Days." On this day, along with two other European ladies, she met Sri Maa Sarada Devi, who embraced her as her own daughter and called her by the name of 'Khooki' (a little girl) from that very day. An overwhelmed Nivedita felt assured of her acceptance in the Indian society the moment she was so warmly received (*Nivedita of India* 19). The importance of this acceptance was later stressed by Swami Sarabhutananda in *Nivedita of India* (2002), where he describes how Sri Maa Sarada's wilful visit to Nivedita's school for women brought in a lot of excitement and joy in Nivedita's life. Nivedita started a school for girls in 1898 and the young girls from all over the city enrolled to attend her classes. Speaking about Sarada Devi's visit, Nivedita recorded in her diary, "I cannot imagine a grander omen than her blessings, spoken over the educated Hindu womanhood of the future" (22).

² Established in 1828, Brahmo Samaj was not just a group of religious practitioners of monotheism, but a collective social circle of the crème de la crème of the Bengali society, who earnestly valued Western education to a great extent.

Speaking about her experiences during her initial days in Calcutta, Sister Nivedita in *The Web of Indian Life* (1904), revealed many of her experiences as a European lady in a colonial land. Her free movements within the quarters of the White gentry of the ruling class as well as the native residents allowed her to grow a rationally conceived and emancipatory idea about the nation in which she had to function. Even after her conversion to the Ramakrishna Order, she did not limit herself to select religious duties, but rediscovered her role as an educationist dedicated to the development of the women of colonial Bengal. In her epistolary reminiscences anthologized in *Letters of Sister Nivedita, Vol. I* (1913), she indicated that her life before responding to the call of Swami Vivekananda was quite different and her rather uneventful life transformed into an absolutely unique existence after his magic touch. Vivekananda's influence and his deep assurance could be traced from the early days of her stay in Calcutta. Nivedita also recounted how she initially felt confused and missed her homeland after reaching Calcutta. Her job was difficult and challenging, as she negotiated a seemingly opposite culture. Describing her initial experience, Sister Nivedita wrote to Mrs. Eric Hammond: "I cannot find the exact word you see... The Swami thought it was temper... The last 4 weeks of the voyage were full of joy—the middle 3 emphatically and increasingly so. Now I feel a little bit of England still there..." (*Letters of Sister Nivedita, Vol. I* 20).

Her acknowledgement of the existing English culture in her, which was also noticed by the Swami, was eventually put to the use of the nation. Her physical journey into a new culture allowed her to rediscover herself within an overarching light of Indian civilization. Her relentless excitement was quite visible in her letters to her own people back in her country, which also suggests that the physical separation from her own motherland did not affect her, but empowered her to dedicate herself towards the greater good of humanity, under the noble guidance of Swami Vivekananda.

Sister Nivedita's second part of the training, namely the selfless service to humanity, was manifested during the outbreak of plague in Calcutta in 1898. She personally got involved in taking care of the infected patients and organized regular cleaning programmes for the locality to control further spread. She distributed pamphlets among the mass with general information. She battled not only against plague, but also against the superstitious misconceptions about the plague vaccinations. She received tremendous support from the local learned population that gave her the platform to undertake such social activities with more enthusiasm. However, such occasions also revealed the difficult nature of her work. In her newspaper column, "Calcutta Notes by an English Lady," which was published on March 4, 1898, she wrote how unnecessary fear among the natives regarding plague inoculation had started mob agitation and how the local government had to step in to pacify the angry crowds:

A few great Hindu families, notably the Tagores, stood firm, in the hope of allaying the agitation, but nothing was availed till at noon on Saturday the Government issued a proclamation announcing that optional inoculation was to make segregation unnecessary, and that the feelings of the people would be respected as far as possible even in case of an epidemic. (28)

When for the second time Calcutta became infested with plague in 1899, even then Nivedita dedicated herself to serve the plague victims. Her selfless and sincere service is remembered not only by the Bengalis of that time, but the entire fraternity of public health and hygiene in colonial India.

Sister Nivedita and the Contemporary Intellectual Fraternity

As mentioned earlier, Sister Nivedita started interacting with the local intelligentsia as soon as she landed in Calcutta to understand and immerse herself in the Bengali culture. Due to the scarcity of educational opportunities for average Bengali women, Nivedita's initial associations consisted of the erudite male elite of the society. Other than Rabindranath Tagore, she also came in touch with Acharya

Jagadish Chandra Bose, the eminent Bengali scientist. Their initial interactions turned into deeper friendship and Sister Nivedita, Rabindranath Tagore, and Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose collaborated to highlight the achievements of "native" science and literature to the outside world. Systematic degradation by the colonial rulers and their apathy towards the native population had cast a deep shadow over the achievements of the Indians. For example, Jagadish Bose's staunch nationalism had gravely worsened his reputation among the colonial rulers. His scientific achievements were deliberately overlooked and "the Education Department of British India Government was not favourable to Bose" (Sengupta 43). Debanjan Sengupta, in his book *Nivedita & Rabindranath: The Relationship Unveiled* (2019) elaborates on how after apprehending the tension between Bose and the British Government, Nivedita intervened and thought of another way to help Bose, the scientist, continue with his work. She involved Rabindranath Tagore in her plan. In a letter that she wrote to her friend, Miss Mcleod, Nivedita unveiled her plan of helping Jagadish Chandra Bose: "Without saying anything to him [Prof Bose], I have written to Mr. Tagore to ask, cannot some Hindu prince undertake the cost of him and his work? Would it not be heavenly, to have a Native Government take up a scientific work which the British were not large-minded enough to protect?" (*Letters* 438). The plan was successful, as Tagore did convince the Maharaja of Tripura to help Bose financially so that he could continue with this scientific commitment (Visvanathan 45). Sister Nivedita's contribution to the scientific career of Jagadish Chandra Bose indeed remained crucial and came at the right time.

On the other hand, she was also a prime contributor in making the translated works of Tagore available to the European audience, as she was personally selected by Jagadish Chandra Bose as possibly one of the best translators for Tagore's works. At Bose's suggestion, Rabindranath Tagore after a lot of consideration selected five of his short stories to be translated in English which were "Post Master," "Nisithe" (At Night), "Kankal" (The Skeleton), "Cabuliwalah," and "Protibeshini" (The Lady Neighbour). However, the final selection was made by Bose, and Nivedita settled for translating the stories titled, "Chhuti" (The Leave of Absence), "Cabuliwalah," and "Dena Pawna" (The Dowry Death). Of all the English translations of Tagore's works that were published and circulated, it was critically accepted that the best ones were done by Nivedita (Sengupta 48).

Debanjan Sengupta comments: "The innermost emotions of Tagore's story were conveyed to the western readers by the sensitive expertise of Nivedita. The Bengali literary world is indebted to Sister Nivedita for being the first English translator of Tagore stories" (47-48). However, the reception did not turn out to be as grand as it was expected. It becomes very clear in a letter that Bose writes to Tagore on January 16, 1901:

When may I get the second volume of your story collection? Three from the first have been translated. It is impossible to preserve the elegance of your language in English. I just cannot help it. But of course there is beauty in the story line. These days short stories of the countries like Norway, Sweden or Italy are a popular read here. I like to publish your write ups to help compare with those. In this land the Kipling worshippers are a majority, so don't know whether your stories would be popular. (Geddes 223)

Irrespective of the initial reception, Sister Nivedita paved the way for launching Rabindranath Tagore's works in the literary field of colonial Britain. It was not an easy task for her, as she was bringing a native author to a snobbish literary circle which was already deeply prejudiced by Rudyard Kipling's portrayal of the subcontinent in his writings. Sister Nivedita's efforts came to a full circle when Tagore won the Noble Prize in Literature in 1913, as the first Asian.

The popular belief of the "white man's burden," a colonial idea popularised by a poem written by Rudyard Kipling which associated White people, especially in the colonies, with the task of managing the affairs of colonised subjects as their moral duty, was thus overturned by Sister Nivedita through her

actions. She did not act from her vantage point of a member of the colonising race; rather she worked as an ally and in the process, she successfully demonstrated the artistic fervour, resilience and scientific temperament of the subcontinent. She was instrumental in bringing into focus the underappreciated voices and thereby claimed a permanent place in Indians' hearts.

Nivedita and Indian Nationalism

The journey of Lady Margaret Noble alias Sister Nivedita, that had begun as a response to the call of the Guru, evolved with time. Her travels all over the country with Swami Vivekananda made her understand the pressing needs of the nation and she tried to inculcate the essential values of humanism among the masses. As a true disciple of Vivekananda, she did not restrict herself within the margins of religion, but served the country and its people in the most pragmatic ways. Her anti-colonial standing was always quite prominent and she openly criticised the colonial rule for oppressing the Indians. In his essay, "From Noble to Nivedita: Sister Nivedita and Her Passages through India, 1895-1911," Somak Biswas comments that, according to Sister Nivedita, the swadeshi or the extremist movement of Indian independence allowed the people of the country an opportunity to be respected by the whole world, something that was denied to them by the colonial masters (794). Her dedication towards the Indian struggle of Independence was inspiring because, in spite of being a White woman, she made it a point to stand up for the oppressed colonised nation and its people, vis-à-vis the existing colonial structure prevalent in India at that time.

Other than being a social reformer, a patient healer and a wonderful educationist, Sister Nivedita was also a staunch supporter of Indian freedom struggle. She formed active liaisons with the votaries of the nationalist movement in Bengal. During the 1905 Bengal Partition movement, Sister Nivedita tried to help the nationalist leaders in every possible way. She was quite close to Indian nationalist, philosopher and poet Sri Aurobindo and, using her contacts in the British circles, she would often pass on information and warn him about their future plans. For Nivedita, political freedom was synonymous with freedom of the mind. Hence, she participated in the freedom struggle as part of her humanitarian work. It is therefore no wonder that she never aspired to appropriate a political leadership role during the time; she was happy to be in the background helping the cause of the Indian nationalist movement against the British subjugation.

Sister Nivedita was a sensible, rational, and brave woman. She carefully kept in mind Swami Vivekananda's instruction of strictly maintaining a marked distance between the Ramakrishna Order and political associations. Therefore, she gradually disassociated herself from the religious society and continued with her political journey. Though such a decision caused her immense pain, she still thought that Vivekananda's vision of a great India can only be achieved in a free country, and she relentlessly worked towards achieving it. Still, her allegiance to the Ramakrishna Order was never severed as such; she identified herself as "Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda" until her last breath (Sarvabhananda 6).

Swami Prabhananda writes: "Sister Nivedita loved India as her own land and served Indians as her own people, but we are yet to comprehend the magnitude of her contribution to this country. If ever we are able to do so, we would certainly wonder whether such a person really existed" (qtd. in Sarvabhananda 3).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Sister Nivedita was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, her recognition was not limited to her identity as a spiritual seeker. Her journey was relentless and earnestly directed towards the mission of helping others. Free from material attachments, Nivedita embarked on a journey of her

own and in her travel, inspired an entire nation towards the path of self-realisation. Although there is no dearth of documents on Sister Nivedita, not much work has been done to highlight her role in the nation building. Her contributions to women's education, the social upliftment of a colonial land and the nationalist struggle for independence need to be collectively understood in the light of the history of India. In the western world, her recognition has not been as much as it should have been, despite her prolific humanitarian work in colonial India. Her character is an amalgamation of spirituality, service, intellectual liaison and nationalism dedicated to India's cause.

Nivedita was one of her own kind and her passion lifted the poor and the needy all through. Rabindranath Tagore fondly reminisced Nivedita's transformation from a spiritual aspirant to a social worker and called her the "Lokmata," "the mother of the people." Tagore openly acknowledged her inner spirit which embodied the true essence of motherhood and wrote:

She was in fact a Mother of the People. We had not seen before, an embodiment of the spirit of motherhood which, passing beyond the limits of the family, can spread itself over the whole country. We have had some idea of the sense of duty of man in this respect, but had not witnessed wholehearted mother-love of women. When she uttered the word "Our People" the tone of absolute kinship which struck the ear was not heard from any other among us. (qtd. in Sarvabhutananda 91)

Coming back to Virginia Woolf's thoughts quoted at the beginning of this paper, "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country..." (197), we can further conclude regarding Nivedita's uniqueness. Neither her race nor her country of origin could define her work or the temperament with which she submitted herself to the national cause of India. Her conscious decisions, from immersing herself into the practice of Hinduism, a religion so deeply condemned by Christian missionaries, to working for the progress of the colonised subjects in the field of education, science and even sanitation, testifies to her bold stance against the Empire. She made India her home, a place where she eventually died. Her initial love for India rose out of her consideration for her Guru Swami Vivekananda. She transcended this limitation and appropriated a citizenship out of a deep love for India. This was reflected in everything she did in the later part of her stay in India until her death in 1911.

Margaret Noble's journey from Ireland to India revealed before her an entirely new spectrum of human civilization. It was not only a chance for her to explore the East, but also to work towards realising her true potential as a benevolent caregiver of humanity. In a colonised country, she had to battle with a plethora of cultural and socio-political disarrays and yet she strengthened her inner values and functioned to the best of her abilities to work towards the greater good of humanity. Sister Nivedita could have limited herself by embracing the spiritual values of India; but she chose to aspire for more than that by fully committing herself to the holistic development of India vis-à-vis the British imperial rule.

Nivedita was a phenomenal woman who inspired an entire nation. But her greatest acknowledgment came through a poem titled "A Benediction" that was written for her by Swami Vivekananda, her beloved Guru. The poem aptly sums up all that she was and had become during her journey in India:

The mother's heart, the hero's will
The sweetness of the southern breeze,
The sacred charm and strength that dwell
On Aryan altars, flaming, free;
All these be yours and many more
No ancient soul could dream before-
Be thou to India's future son
The mistress, servant, friend in one. (1-8)

Traditionally, in India, it is the disciple who pays homage to the Guru or the teacher. The poem composed by Swami Vivekananda inverts the tradition as it not only acknowledges her innermost qualities but also regards her as an exceptional being, a unique combination of a kind mother and a wise hero, who helped then and continues to inspire many Indians even today.

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