

The Swami and the Sister

Research >
South Asia

Hindu ascetic tradition, much like its Christian counterpart, glorifies world weariness (*vairagya*) which, for all intents and purposes, stands for renunciation of woman and wealth: *kamini-kanchana*, to quote Sri Ramakrishna. However, between *kamini* and *kanchana*, the former is characterized as the root of evil, at the same time that the man is identified with the ultimate good, salvation (*mukti*). Such a gendered attitude to spiritual life condemns female sexuality and represses natural masculinity. The male Hindu ascetic thus cultivates female paranoia, deeming it the *summum bonum*, thereby rejecting his manhood. Therefore, a yogi is to achieve his ultimate goal (i.e. realization of the divine or epiphany) by the process of his systematic castration. The drama of the struggle to accomplish self-annihilation in order to realize the self, reached a tragic denouement in the life of Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Datta) after he had come in contact with Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), a popular young *sannyasi* (female ascetic), in the West.

By Narasingha Sil

The relationship between Nivedita and Vivekananda has been virtually canonized in the hagiographic literature, written to glorify the Anglo-Irish disciple of a world conquering missionary and visionary of colonial Calcutta. Consequently, generations of Indians, as well as enlightened foreigners, have become familiar with the image of a Western woman shaped by a princely Hindu apostle for the great task of social and spiritual regeneration of renaissance India. However, a sober, critical reading of the sources reveals a different side to these two fascinating personalities: their triumphs and tragedies make them truly human, and bring them down from artificial, Olympian heights to be closer to us.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble's (1867-1911) life as a school-teacher was moulded by her twin religious and romantic heritage. On the one hand, her father was a minister and she went to a Congregationalist school, on the other, her grandfather had been an Irish revolutionary. According to her brother Richmond, she was also a highly sentimental and romantic woman easily drawn to men of intellectual disposition. Prior to meeting Vivekananda in London, she had harboured no ideal of a socio-spiritual mission in life. No doubt she was acquainted with Christian literature, had read Matthew Arnold's poetic biography of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, and acquired a smattering of Hindu religious philosophy. She presumably made these readings in preparation for her visit to the Hindu monk who had created such a sensation in London high society, thanks in part to the most effective public relations work of his English host, Edward T. Sturdy.

Noble had experienced two failed romances. Her first lover and fiancé succumbed to tuberculosis before marriage. A second lover jilted her for another woman. When she first met her future guru in October 1895, she was immediately charmed by the attractive, exotically dressed young man muttering 'Shiva Shiva' in a rich baritone voice. Thus she easily overcame her disappointment with his sermons, which she had initially considered unoriginal, and continued to cultivate his company.

Vivekananda, too, must have been struck by the personality of this energetic young woman of immense charisma and charm. Indeed, Margaret was almost a female counterpart of the handsome, eloquent, and beautifully attired young monk from a far-off land. On numerous occasions, during conversation, Vivekananda made numerous claims and innuendos, encouraging Noble to think of him as a heroic figure. It was the Swami who first suggested Margaret work for the social betterment of India, promising her all the necessary help. She was so overwhelmed by this invitation and, at the same time, by his solicitude, that she offered herself to him unhesitatingly and unconditionally. Though the monk turned down her frank and sincere overture, insisting upon his celibate status as a renunciant, she still went to Calcutta, only to be disappointed again, as her mentor had scheduled no programme for her. Margaret whiled away her time for nearly a year visiting people, listening to Swamiji's sermons and conversations, and travelling to the northern mountains. 'What am I doing for so long? Why doesn't the Swami speak to me about work?' Margaret wrote to Sara Bull, Vivekananda's Norwegian-American devotee. The acme of her disappointment was reached during her sojourn to the shrine of Amarnath in Kashmir with her guru in the summer of 1898.

The Amarnath episode is shrouded in mystery and mystification. Indian scholar-devotees and the hagiographers of the Ramakrishna Order wholeheartedly agree that this was a pilgrimage of momentous consequences for Margaret's ascent to further spiritual heights. However, a close reading of sources such as her own account, as well as her letters to her friend in England, Nell Hammond, and to her American friend, Josephine MacLeod, reveals a more personal and human story. It appears that Swamiji wished to spend the sultry summer months in the coolness of the hills so as to



Swami Vivekananda
(1863-1902)

allow his newly arrived Western devotees some respite from Calcutta's heat and humidity. One of the principal reasons for visiting the Himalayas was his desire to impart a secret spiritual lesson to his 'daughter' (Margaret) in a lonely place. He, however, never gave her any of the divine arcana while claiming that he had a vision of the Lord Shiva and had received the boon of voluntary death (*ichchamrityu*) from the great god. The original manuscript of Margaret's diary contains her frustration, her outrage, and her demand that her guru treat her with respect, be it as a woman or as a disciple. Her disappointment was aggravated a few months later when Vivekananda initiated her as a *brahmacharini* (female monastic initiate), which she deemed lower in status than the *sannyasini* she had wished to become.

However, Nivedita (Margaret's new monastic name) never actually believed in the career of a renunciant. She loved good clothes and the company of the Calcutta elites, and had a strong opinion about womanhood and the role of a wife. She was even quite candid about the 'union of sexes'. Most probably she had decided to leave home permanently for the sake of working with Vivekananda in India, and was given to understand that her responsibilities would lie in social work and women's education. Yet she was discouraged by her aus-



Sister Nivedita
(1867-1911)

tere and meagre abode and her work teaching English to a handful of poor children in her ramshackle school in north Calcutta, for which the Swami provided virtually nothing but his approval, at best, and, at worst, benignly neglected. Eventually she despaired of her educational project and admitted to her guru that her 'school was a waste of time'.

Even when she accompanied the Swami to the West in the summer of 1899 for collecting funds for her school, Nivedita met with abject failure. Thus, between 1899 and 1901, she decided on her future course of action in India. She would no longer waste her time and energy trying to teach English to children but pay attention to adult India, more particularly to adult males, to make them 'manly'. Meanwhile, she had overcome her 'womanism' and, following Swamiji's death in July 1902, severed her connection with the Ramakrishna Order, and plunged headlong into nationalist politics.

Her fascination with intellectuals had always been acute. In 1899-1900, while in the West, Nivedita was temporarily attracted to the famous sociologist Patrick Geddes. She was also quite fond of the brilliant Bengali scientist Jagadishchandra Bose, whom she regarded as her 'bairn' ('child' in Scottish), though her letters referring to Bose are full of erotic rhetoric. She had elicited Rabindranath Tagore's attention, was even offered a portion of his residence for her school, and was the poet's guest in his houseboat at Shilaidaha in eastern Bengal. Though she admired Tagore for his learning and culture, she found he was not 'manly' enough for her ideals. During the last months of Vivekananda's life, she remained, in her own words, under the 'thrall' of the visiting Japanese art critic Kakuzo Okakura, who reportedly propositioned her, though without success.

A cultivated and idealistic individual, Nivedita had an abiding love for the Hindus, primarily because of her admiration for Vivekananda. She would have been most happy and fulfilled had she been able to remain his lifelong companion. However, when she tried to become closer to her guru, he rebuffed her. The Swami, on the other hand, remained trapped in his self-made image of an ultramundane renouncer (*lokattara sannyasi*), suspended helplessly between the Scylla of unrealized manhood and the Charybdis of idealized manliness. This situation was further aggravated by his multiple illnesses and physical pain and discomfort. The upshot of this psychosomatic condition was his enigmatic ambivalence in his dealings with his Western disciple. He would be contemptuous of marriage and personal love, yet confess to her that the relationship between husband and wife is more meaningful than that between mother and child; that he would have married, at least for the sake of his mother's happiness, but he was past marriageable age, and that he wanted the freedom which was achieved by breaking all laws. He even told her that he particularly enjoyed reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. At times he would project his self-image of a sacrificed hero, some sort of a crucified god, or a pained Prometheus, intended by the Divine Mother to be the sacrifice for the welfare of mankind. At the same time, he was so possessive of Nivedita that he disapproved of her paying attention to men such as Tagore, Geddes, Okakura, or Bose.

Both the Swami and the Sister were tormented by the explosion of spontaneous eros, resulting from a natural attraction between two young adults, and both failed to overcome this normal human emotion. They thus remained prisoners of their chosen vocation. As a result, the *vira sannyasi* was reduced to the state of a helpless child of Kali, the Divine Mother, while the Sister became increasingly aware of her failing femininity. She came to realize that her femininity was being replaced by manliness, as she confided to Josephine. Her odyssey in India was thus truly tragic, much like her guru's troubled and diseased short life of immense possibilities. <

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This article is based on my *Prophet Disarmed: Vivekananda and Nivedita*. Working Paper No. 2, Clayton: Monash Asia Institute (1997), which contains all the primary and secondary sources in Bengali and English.