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CROSSING BORDERS OF THE SELF: TRAUMA AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION OF SISTER NIVEDITA IN INDIA

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Abstract

The shift of Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble) from England to India was not merely geographic but involved a profound reorientation of the self, catalyzed by the trauma of cultural dislocation and the moral tensions of serving a colonized society as a Westerner. The trauma she experienced was not caused by physical violence, but by the deep existential strain of crossing cultural boundaries. Some moments in her life in India functioned as cultural trauma, prompting a redefinition of self through service, sacrifice, and spiritual uniqueness of India. Nivedita is a figure of transcultural transformation, whose personal trauma became the ground for a radical renegotiation of identity and a deeper ethical commitment to a colonized nation. Her educational work and writingsserve both as expressions of healing and tools for cultural mediation. Through these, she translated Indian thought for Western readers while advocating for Indian empowerment from within.

The paper argues that Nivedita's life exemplifies transcultural identity formation rooted in ethical engagement and emotional resilience. Her self-reinvention challenges personal binaries and highlights the potential for solidarity and transformation across cultural boundaries.

Keywords: *Trauma, Culture, Crisis, Nivedita, Identity, India*

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A dominant claim in contemporary literary trauma theory is that trauma creates a speechless fright that destroys or divides identity. Identity is formed by the inter-generational transmission of trauma in which the effects of trauma forms in turn a geographic place of traumatic experience. Remembrance at the psychological interplay of identities situates the individual in relation to the cultural context which divides the self to a certain level when there is a gap between the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self. Margaret Noble's passage to India was fundamentally inspired by Swami Vivekananda for the education of women in India. Her initiation into Sister Nivedita marked a significant breakthrough from her earlier objectives as it widened her mission in an all-round way. Gradually, she was trying to assert her personal self in the spheres of her activities. But, in the process of unmaking and remaking herself, Margaret/Nivedita had to move through phases of trauma and transcultural crisis. Swami Vivekananda wanted her to imbibe the Vedantic impersonal selfhood in her vision and activities. The Swami's indifference towards Nivedita, his mild hostility in the form of expression of aversion to her words and deeds created an unbridgeable gap in her mind in the guru-shishya relationship only to be melted into a deeper realization of the self and awakening of impersonality on the part of Nivedita.

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Sister Nivedita's life reflects a powerful model of cultural negotiation under colonial trauma. Her commitment to India's political and spiritual regeneration, despite the personal costs of alienation from her British origins, illustrates how transcultural identities are forged through lived experience, spiritual resolve, and emotional resilience. Her legacy invites a rethinking of nationalism and cross-cultural solidarity in a postcolonial world. Through a short and very simple ceremony in the house of Nilambar Mukherjee, Margaret was first initiated on 29th March 1898. Margaret was given the name of 'Nivedita', 'She who had been dedicated'. Then Sister Nivedita was waiting for the day on which she would be offered the charge to open a school for women. Swami Vivekananda sensed the anguish of Nivedita as she was feeling a great void. But he wanted her to be completely sure of herself so that she might be ready to undertake the journey. Swami Vivekananda was aware of Nivedita's English mindset, her current associations with the English. He was making her, along with his other disciples, aware of his message, his Vedantic philosophy, his vision of making India. He tried to impress the point that religion is practical experience, a personal element that has to be realized. Nivedita was feeling rather impatient as time was slipping away, but she did not receive any instructions from the Swami to start her work. But the Swami was working with intention to gradually change Nivedita under the influence of India's symbolic thought. He wanted her to become a real educator of Hindu woman. He wanted her to become a Hindu woman first and then it would be plausible for her to do her work for Hindu women. He required some kind of transformation in her to equip herself with the capability to become a Hindu woman. He wanted her to go through a passage which

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would make a voluntary transformation in herself. He had never doubted her intellectual acumen and that is why he had given her full liberty. She saw herself in a jungle of conflicting emotions and felt impatient with her position. He felt how different the Swami had been as she met him in London. But here she had to deal with quite a different person, an authoritative instructor "whose background escaped her and do possessed a suppleness which made him almost incomprehensible" (Reymond 81). Sensing her anxiety, the Swami did all he could to help her. His first advice to her was not to ask difficult and embarrassing questions but to apply herself with dedication to the sole task that was required of her at that moment, i.e., the learning of Bengali. She was definitely aware that she had to become one with the monks but she was feeling at a loss as she did not know how to achieve that and the Swami did not help her find out the passage.

The Almora episode in 1898 was very crucial in the making and unmaking of Mrgaret into Sister Nivedita. What Raymond observes on the Almora episode is very important to note:

> The real significance of the name he had given her–'Nivedita, she who had been dedicated'–had not yet penetrated to the depths of her being. But the passionate surrender of a nature which still listened to the echoes of Christianity had led her to the feet of Sri Ramakrishna whose whole law of love, like that of Jesus Christ, was contained in the word service. (Reymond 103)

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During their stay at Almora, Nivedita was feeling very sad because she felt that her guru had withdrawn from her. She was feeling annoyed and she reacted then with obstinacy:

> She was annoyed because Swami Vivekananda seemed unaware of everything she did for him, because he paid no attention to anything she said to him, because he snubbed her. ('A daughter must not at any time act as if there were too few servants in her father's house', he said.) She felt an increasing bitterness welling up within her. She was surprised by this but she could not master it and her reproaches only aggravated the tension between her guru and herself. (Reymond 104)

Nivedita's repressed emotions warred with one another: "Feelings would vanish, only to return a few minutes later in some unexpected form. Demons played within her, rebellious, exacting, prattling and persuasive too, with a kind of beguiling, hypocrisy. Deprived of her work, prevented from loving, she did not know how to express herself. She felt herself abandoned. For Margaret–for Sister Nivedita–the gift of herself implied the word action–action through love, through love for her guru" (Reymond 104). The reorientation of consciousness caused by traumatic events might "include an ambiguous referentiality as well as determinate meaning. Allowing for trauma's variability in terms of its causes, effects, and representative potential demonstrates the diverse values accorded to a traumatic event and its remembrance" (Balaev 366). In her efforts to analyse herself Nivedita was constantly brought back to more subtle forms of attachment. She felt a gnawing agony that the Sawmi was ruthlessly eradicating every sacrifice she made in his name. When those forms of

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attachment disappeared, a void enveloped her and led her to fear solitude. In the face of these violent personal feelings through which Nivedita was struggling, Swami Vivekananda's attitude remained impersonal. He was calm and quiet, but absolutely firm. He rebuked her, she felt irritated.

This time meditation helped Nivedita to cure her emotion. She wrote to Nell Hammond in letters which described the period of effort:

> I cannot tell you how real this idea of meditation has grown to me now. One can't talk about it, I suppose, but one can see it and feel it here and the very air of these mountains especially in the starlight is heavy with a mystery of peace that I cannot describe to you...meditation simply means concentration, absolute concentration of the mind of the given point ... and the minute you succeed in concentrating all your powers for a second, you have done it, the rest will speak for itself. But long before that, great things come to one and if it is only the perfect stillness, it is something wonderful–don't you think so? What Maeterlinck calls the 'great active silence'. (Quoted in Reymond 104)

But we know her grief was purification. The distance between the Swami and Nivedita became so wide that even Mrs. Bull, the oldest in the group, took it upon herself the charge to intervene. Nivedita was to write to a friend, several years later, looking back on this experience: “Slowly,the power of rest, the sense of largeness and space, came. Such letting go is really, capacity for renunciation. In such moments, the divine is growing to perfection within us and we found our own greatness only when the best comes.” She needed to unburden herself. In fact, change was downing in Nivedita. She was

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moulding and reorienting the cultural orientation of her English self rooted and ingrained in herself.

During the days which spanned around four weeks at Almorah, the Swami's collective instruction sessions in the morning were actually no less for the fundamental transformation of Margaret Noble into Sister Nivedita. Nivedita who was still "imbued with all the predispositions and preconceived ideas of her English background" (Reymond 108) needed to be gone through the Swami's practical trainings. The Swami kept her under constant observation as he knew very well that her English background, her transcultural crisis formed the principal obstacle in her efforts to cultivate true affection for India. He knew as well that even though she would have forcefully denied any accusation of harbouring any such prejudices, "She was entirely unconscious of them. He made it his task now, therefore, to bring to the surface all those preconceived ideas that lay at the root of her most delicate problems. Systematically, he pressed her to set aside her present criteria in social, literary and artistic fields without any anxiety for the inevitable but temporary affect which this would have upon her intellect..." (Reymond 108). Nivedita still looked upon India as an outsider and she could not yet dissociate her new impressions from all that she had heard and seen earlier. The Swami pointed out that if this attitude was ideal for growing the perceptions of the citizens of a free country, each and every nation had almost the same right to develop as per its own particular propensities. The Swami thought that an entirely novel problem of development had arisen in India where "the civilisation of the West had superimposed itself upon– or had taken over without assimilating– an ancient national heritage and offered

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Indians the prospect of a modern life that was completely dissociated from the foundations of their religion" (Reymond 108). But Nivedita still considered the British Raj necessary for the improvement or development of material conditions of India. That is why at Nainital she felt very surprised as she heard the Swami raising objections for people to be educated in England for doing work in India. The Swami had observed her in her relations with Hindus and at Almorah and Amarnath the process of utter transformation of Margaret Noble into Sister Nivedita reached its culmination through traumatic feelings of her life. The Swami wanted from Nivedita the love which Avatars and saints have experienced– that self-effacing love for the divine and a feeling of compassion for humanity in the Vedantic concept of the mind in which Manomaya kosha comprises both the faculty of intellect and that of emotions. The Swami sought from Nivedita the Vedantic "transcendental, universal as well as spontaneous and sufficient- unto-itself quality about this love– it is not conditioned by anything." (Mitra 259).

Sister Nivedita was not in a position to accept the contradictions in the Indians. Actually, she was here with a charitable mission. She felt pity for the lot of all the wretched people and talked about her desire for funds to be raised. But the Swami objected to her charitable mission, "All I want you to see is that, with the majority of people, charity is nothing but the expression of an egoistic interest" (Reymond 109). In fact, Nivedita was still incapable of appreciating the Hindu nuances. Sometimes he found her thoughts in line with those of the Hindus but those moments were just fleeting and the spell was easily broken: "She had felt it during their journey and sometimes a

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sleeping anger had come to life within her - that forgotten anger of the Irish woman on her guard" (Reymond 110).

Nivedita's work in education was central to her negotiation of identity. In founding a girls' school in Calcutta, she integrated traditional Indian values with progressive pedagogical methods, aiming to empower Indian women as future national agents. Her educational philosophy emphasized Swadeshi consciousness and spiritual awakening as forms of resistance to colonial hegemony. This synthesis of the East and the West reflected her attempt to heal the cultural divide not only in India but within herself. Her literary works, such as *The Web of Indian Life* (1904), are significant testimonies of her self-reflexive process. In these texts, she interprets Indian customs, religion, and social structures with both empathy and critique, presenting India not as an exotic "other" but as a living, dynamic civilization. Through writing, she sought to articulate a position that was neither entirely Indian nor entirely Western but uniquely transcultural.

Trauma "produces a double paradox in consciousness and language—the contradictory wish to know the meaning of the past but the inability to comprehend it, as well as the contradictory crises in the traumatic narrative between the threat of death and survival" (Balaev 364). As the Swami reached Amarnath on the second of August 1898 and there experienced one of the mystic supreme moments of his life, Nivedita was depressed and lost in agony. Overcome with emotion, "In ecstasy he experienced divine grace, in the unknowable he found revelation. Dizzy, half-paralyzed, almost fainting, he staggered away. Beside him, Nivedita had remained inert, bewildered, anguished. Where was this god to whom she had come to pay homage?"

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(Reymond 117). In trauma studies, memory occupies a great role in shaping the individual and cultural identity of a person. Nivedita's memory of her days in London as she first encountered the Swami there contradicted the current mien of the Swami. Her "own suffering of spirit enveloped her like a stifling shroud. She looked for her guru but he had disappeared. Lost, abandoned, she was choked by a cry of revolt" (Reymond 117). In her traumatic crisis when memory and identity posed an unsurmountable threat to her mission and personal future, Sister Nivedita was gradually proceeding towards the truth the Swami had wanted her to vision through the death of the ego— the death beyond which is life. All her feeling of trauma at the personal plain is transmuted into a transcultural insight into the philosophy of impersonality which speaks for the immersion of the self instead of the assertion of

Personality.

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