

Vivekānanda and Nivedita as *Ardhanārīśvara*:

Why an Indian Svami Chose an Irishwoman as His Lioness

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation.

-Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹

In 1893, Svami Vivekānanda (Narendranath Datta, 1863-1902) left India to broadcast the message of Vedānta (Hindu-Yogic) philosophy in the West. The svami, then a relatively unknown mendicant monk, hoped to restore the past glory of “Mother India” through the renewal of Indian spiritual consciousness, an enormous undertaking that he believed could release India from the shackles of British Imperialism.² By 1895, however, Vivekānanda’s health was declining, and his ambitious mission began to stall while lecturing in London. It was at this time that the svami met a young Irishwoman, Margaret Noble (1867-1911), with whom he forged a unique, and sometimes controversial working partnership. Over a period of two years after their meeting, Vivekānanda became “convinced that [Noble had] a great future in the work for India” based on what he described as the five critical qualities she possessed, and he desperately needed.³ These five qualities—centered on gender, sexuality, nationality, and social activism—directly impacted their combined efforts for social and political reform through a Hindu-based spiritual reawakening in India. This paper will argue that the Hindu concepts of *Ardhanārīśvara* (“Lord Who is Half-Woman”), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and Kālī worship further shaped the parameters of their working partnership and, their personal guru-disciple relationship.

Near the end of his short life, Vivekānanda’s personal correspondences indicated a growing desire to find a suitable working partner, a disciple, to help conduct his primary mission

of reinterpreting traditional spiritual concepts as tools for India's reformation. Socially constructed limitations based on his gender, and caste, as well as the external influences of negative colonial stereotypes, strongly shaped Vivekānanda's concept for the necessity of a female partner-disciple. Thus, given the dictates of his plan together with the complexities of social and gender-based colonial issues of the day, the svami believed that the ideal partner would possess the five "qualities" of being a 1) Western female devotee 2) experienced in activism, 3) comfortable with celibacy, and 4) able to communicate with and understand a Western audience, yet 5) remain sympathetic to the Indian people and their cause. These five critical qualities, along with the fervent desire to serve in India, made Margaret Noble the ideal partner the svami had been looking for.

Research

Vivekānanda remains a national hero in India; while much has been written of the enigmatic svami in the Bengali and Hindi languages, the contributions of both Vivekānanda and Margaret Noble (Nivedita) occupy a comparatively small, highly specialized area of English language historical research. Western historians and biographers concentrate primarily on the extent of Vivekānanda and Nivedita's sphere of influence in nineteenth-century America and England, or to the alternate, concurrent roles the svami and the sister played in reformist practices in India. Increasingly, researchers such as Rini Bhattacharya Mehta, Kumari Jayawardena, Indira Chowdhury, and Richard Hughes Seager have placed the influence of the svami's and the sister's work within the broader themes of the twentieth century Indian Independence Movement, the feminist movement, the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, and the modern Indian renaissance.⁴

Overall, researchers tend to examine Vivekānanda and Nivedita separately, with little to no critical analysis of the parameters of their relationship or of the factors contributing to their working partnership. Most of the research on their personal guru-disciple relationship is hagiographical in nature, being dominated by the writings of religious devotees and admirers, such as Sister Gargi (Marie Louise Burke), Svami Nikhilananda, and Lizelle Reymond.⁵ Bengali-born scholar, Narasingha P. Sil, however, stands alone in his in-depth analysis of the svami's personal relationship with Nivedita and other female devotees.⁶ Sil is also one of the only historians to consistently portray Vivekānanda in a negative light as “an ambitious, idealistic, impulsive, and imaginative militant monk who envisioned, rather naively, a global spiritual conquest in the manner of Napoleonic Imperialism.”⁷

Because of the current lack of in-depth analysis of Vivekānanda and Nivedita's relationship, and partly due to certain assertions made by Sil, alternate related secondary sources must be employed to balance out the present body of scholarship. Noticeably absent from the discussion are the differences or similarities in cultural and religious sexual practices in Ireland, England, and India. To this end, the research of Joseph Alter on the practice of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) in Northern India, and that of Tom Inglis on “Irish Prudery,” have been consulted.⁸ Similarly, Joy Dixon's relevant work on England's chapter of the Theosophical Society—another contemporaneous Indian religious campaign—demonstrates the changing sexual, social, and political atmosphere in England when Vivekānanda and Margaret Noble first met in London, 1895.⁹

Two other important aspects of this research topic are the role Ireland played in Indian nationalist development and the view of male-female roles in world religions and myths. Howard Brasted's research on the influence of Irish Home Rule on India's *Swaraj* (Home Rule)

movement is invaluable, and helps to identify Vivekānanda's pragmatic choice of an Irish female partner, as well as the political atmosphere in which Margaret Noble/Nivedita was raised.¹⁰ The work of respected mythologist, Joseph Campbell, provides context that helps identify the familiar mythic symbolism of Vivekānanda as the "hero" and Nivedita as the "goddess" through the lens of *Ardhanārīśvara*.¹¹

Given the highly specialized nature of the topic, methods from post-colonial, gender, and religious studies have necessarily been employed. When appropriate, the personal meaning and interpretation of events and persons were examined, along with corresponding social and cultural structures of the late nineteenth century, such as colonialism, feminism, and caste systems. Additionally, strategies gleaned from cultural anthropology and cultural sociology were used to analyze and interpret the way Vivekānanda and Nivedita thought, spoke, acted and reacted to one another and to their changing environment.

The Proposal

In July 1897, Vivekānanda wrote the young Miss Noble and offered his assessment of her qualifications for his proposed mission in India. "What was needed," he wrote, "was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness;" one who was sympathetic to Indians, generally, and could work to uplift Indian women in particular.¹² In the svami's estimation, India needed not just any woman, but a "great" woman that his beloved country, he reluctantly admitted, could not so far produce and needed to "borrow... from other nations."¹³ Above all other attributes, however, and above all of Miss Noble's obvious and abundant qualifications, Vivekānanda believed that her "Celtic Blood [made Noble] just the woman wanted."¹⁴ Again, for him it was not just any "great" Western woman that he needed, but an *Irish* woman familiar with the colonial oppression of the British Crown, because she would be especially sympathetic to Indians fighting for the shared

cause of “Home Rule,” the growing call for local self-governance of colonial states within the British Empire.¹⁵ Naturally, the svami balanced all of these flattering remarks with dire warnings of the hostile conditions awaiting his potential companion in India: the inhospitable climate, the cultural and political turmoil, the lack of European luxury, and the country’s staggering racism.¹⁶ All these trials Noble would need to face and still be able “to stand on her own two feet.”¹⁷

Yet, all these seemingly grim warnings appeared to be more a test of her “great” character—a baiting of the lioness to action—rather than a true deterrent. In this single letter, it can be seen how Vivekānanda frankly outlined the five critical qualities Noble possessed that made her the ideal spiritual partner for his mission. After the svami respectfully asked her consent in the matter, as an equal, Noble accepted wholeheartedly. Nivedita’s biographer, Lizelle Reymond, asserted that Vivekānanda’s letter “acted on Margaret like a whip;” that her decision to join the svami in India was immediate and final.¹⁸ As for Noble herself, she claimed that she “had recognized the heroic fibre of the man and desired to make [herself] the servant of his love for his own people.”¹⁹

Ardhanārīśvara

The Hindu concept of *Ardhanārīśvara* (“Lord Who is Half-Woman”) seemed to have shaped Vivekānanda’s understanding and need for the five critical qualities necessary in a spiritual partner in a unique way. In orthodox Hinduism, self-realization or liberation (*mokṣa*) of the soul is the ultimate goal. Within this system, the concept of *Ardhanārīśvara* represents the combination of Lord Śiva—the divine male aspect—with the divine female aspect of Śāktī. This balanced combination of energies ensures the complete formation of a fully self-realized being. Śāktī embodies three distinct forms, or aspects: Durga (the protective mother), Pārvati (the gentle, devoted wife), and Kālī (the fierce goddess of death, time, and change). Hindus, and

indeed Vivekānanda himself, believed that Śiva remained inert without the creative power and energy of Śāktī.²⁰ Thus, from a spiritual perspective, both Śiva and Śāktī were necessary to make sustainable changes in the world. If Vivekānanda was the Śiva force for his country, then he needed the Śāktī to fulfill his mission.

Intriguingly, Vivekānanda self-identified as Lord Śiva (the ascetic Destroyer-Transformer)—an idea cultivated by his Bengali-born guru, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836-1886)—yet he was an ardent devotee of the goddess Kālī, the fierce aspect of Śāktī.²¹ This bold assertion of “manly” strength and spiritual power appeared as a direct response to what researcher Indira Chowdhury described as the “naturalized” colonial view of “effete, unmilitary, and cowardly Bengalis” at the end of the nineteenth century.²² Vivekānanda effectively reinterpreted a native Hindu icon, and redefined “masculinity within the image of the *sannyasi*” (ascetic), an image later taken up into the Swadeshi movement.²³ This newly projected image of masculine strength countered negative colonial beliefs, yet remained “compatible with heroic ‘feminine’ identities...being framed at that time.”²⁴ Chowdhury further explained that “Vivekānanda’s alternate maleness took it’s meaning from the worship of Śāktī, embodied by a Mother Goddess”—notably the veneration of the fierce goddess, Kālī in Bengal—and his deliberate choices spoke to the “centrality of gender in the formation of a nationalist identity.”²⁵

Furthering this narrative, after a period of meditation in Kanyakumari, the devout svami believed that the goddess sent him on a mission to the West in 1893 to bring about the renewal and restoration of India’s glorious spiritual past.²⁶ Through this now divine mission as a “devoted nationalist *sannyasi* [ascetic]... dedicated to liberating the Mother Country,” Vivekānanda attempted to tear down old, worn-out structures.²⁷ The greater challenge—to replace them with new paradigms based on the glory of a forgotten Aryan past—he eventually

understood that he could not accomplish alone; he needed help.²⁸ With a focus on Vedānta (transcendental) philosophy, “muscular” Hinduism that boasted both spiritual and physical strength, and the familiar symbolism of Kālī worship, Vivekānanda hoped to ignite his fellow Indians.²⁹ As Indian researcher Kumari Jayawardena claimed, Vivekānanda’s “message compounded with the blood of Kālī, of aggressive confrontation and opposition to stagnations at all levels, and a strong belief in the emergence of a free Indian nation,” and promoted uniquely Hindu conceptions of both masculine and feminine strength.³⁰ Yet, as his noted devotee-historian Marie Louise Burke (Sister Gargi) asserted, after two years spent touring in the West in 1895, the svami came to understand the parameters of his personal limitations and those of his closest companions.³¹

Seeking Śāktī: The Female Counterpart

Arguably, Vivekānanda’s self-identification with Śiva, in combination with his failing health caused by the complications of diabetes and asthma, led the svami to seek out the physical embodiment of his female counterpart—the Śāktī—to sustain and support what he believed to be the fire (*agni*) of his soul’s purpose.³² Vivekānanda consistently stressed the importance of working with a female partner rather than a male partner, which he believed was critical not only to his concrete plans for India, but as this paper will argue, for the more esoteric fulfillment of *Ardhanārīśvara*. The idea of finding a living “lioness” was something, as his Western devotee Sister Christine related, that Vivekānanda considered during his early years of wandering India as a mendicant monk, but which increasingly preoccupied his thoughts in the last years of his life:

The new power, the new life that came with this influx of spirituality was not meant for men alone, but how could it be brought to the women of India? How could they be set on fire and become torches from which millions of others might catch the flame? This was one of his greatest concerns. “For this work a woman is needed,” he cried. “No man can do it. But where is the woman?”³³

Though Sister Christine did not turn out to be that longed-for lioness, it was clear that Vivekānanda actively searched for a modern woman to serve as an ideal for India and for Indian women.³⁴ Vivekānanda’s repeated use of the imagery of the lioness, in particular, indicated a symbolic connection to the vehicle, or animal, associated with Kālī as the fierce goddess aspect of *Ardhanārīśvara*.³⁵ Clearly, the svami wanted a female counterpart that was a manifestation of Kālī, both as destroyer and creator—at once a terrifying warrior and a nurturing mother—in order to manifest the changes necessary to inspire the Indian people. This was an image, too, that Hindus, and Bengali-Hindus in particular, could safely identify with and comfortably support. Vivekānanda’s deliberate cultivation of existing Hindu icons attempted to solidify a Hindu-based nationalist identity not only to counterbalance the prevailing British ridicule of the “glaring dissimilarities between the martial female goddess [Kālī] and her cowardly male worshipper,” but to inspire self-confidence and the removal of “the Bengali’s identity as a timid slave.”³⁶

Noble’s personal interactions with the svami, as well as numerous complimentary recommendations from trusted mutual friends, such as Mr. Edward Sturdy (1860-1957), Vivekānanda’s primary English financier, firmly established the young Irishwoman as the svami’s long desired “lioness.” Similarly, over time, Noble came to strongly relate to Kālī, the fierce goddess of time and change, as evidenced by her essay collection *Kālī, the Mother* and other personal writings on Mother Worship.³⁷ Possibly drawn to the worship of the divine feminine out of strong resistance to the distinctly patriarchal pan-Christian representation of God, or the Irish Catholic veneration of the Blessed Mother and Saint Brigid, Noble soon became an ardent *Kālī* devotee. This ardent veneration of the goddess served to strengthen her

ties with devout Hindus, and reformist leaders, in India. Kumari Jayawardena's research indicated that Noble frequently used the forceful vision of the goddess to "fire Indians into action, and to arouse them out of their political stupor and lethargy."³⁸

*Seva: The Self-less Service of "Ascetic Activism"*³⁹

Not only did Vivekānanda need a "lioness" to help India, the svami needed her to be an experienced and dedicated activist to guide and to assist in his plans for social reformation, particularly regarding women and education. During the late-nineteenth century, social activism among native Indians was a novel concept. Holy Indian women, such as Śrī Sarada Devi (1853-1920)—the spiritual consort of Vivekānanda's guru, Rāmākṛṣṇa (1836-1886)—although influential within their own immediate sphere, could offer only limited assistance in this regard as they were confined by the traditional rules of their religion and caste. Sister Devamata (1867-1942), a Western devotee of Sarada Devi, noted the "less numerous Sisterhood" of the Rāmākṛṣṇa order underlining the obvious lack of Indian female spiritual leaders at that time.⁴⁰ Due to these limitations, Vivekānanda needed to search elsewhere for his "lioness." As researcher Indira Chowdhury pointed out, Indian women during this period were used "only figuratively, usually as inspirational symbols rather than actual persons," and that Śrī Sarada Devi, and later Nivedita, were exceptional in that "both women were visible public figures, and generally perceived to have transcended the limitations of their sex."⁴¹

It was only after his tours in America and England in the early 1890s that Vivekānanda came to admire the social work of Western women he called "Living Vedantins." In a letter to his disciple Alasinga Perumal during his Western tour, the svami noted that in America "women are the life of every movement, and represent all the culture of the nation, for men are too busy to educate themselves."⁴² What made these numerous Western women exceptional, he later

expressed to his close devotee Josephine MacLeod (1858-1949), was that “when [they] believe a thing is true, [they] do it, [they] do not dream about it. That is [their] power.”⁴³ The svami meant to harness that Śāktī power and organizational experience for his native homeland.

Indeed, several Western female devotees worked closely with him in India—Miss Josephine MacLeod, Sister Christine (Christina Greenstidel), Mrs. Sara Bull (Dhiramata), Miss Henrietta Müller, and Mrs. Charlotte Sevier—and all fulfilled specific and significant roles in his mission. Although Vivekānanda gratefully accepted the help offered by this devoted group, he noted their individual and collective flaws. Evidence of these frank complaints and critiques are found in his correspondences to Noble: of Miss Müller’s “violent temper and overbearing conduct, and her awfully vacillating mind,” and the admission that Mrs. Sevier and her husband were “the only English people who do not hate the natives.”⁴⁴

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s editorial work in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, detailed varied Indian women’s issues during this period, particularly in Vivekānanda’s native state of Bengal.⁴⁵ In a larger sense, the issue of women’s rights was not taken up solely because of a desire for modernization or due to Western feminist influences, but from a deep yearning for the cultural reclamation of the Indian feminine ideal that was, in many ways, in direct opposition to colonial rule and served to further a more unified, positive vision of all Indians generally. The feminine ideal—projected by Vivekānanda, and later embodied by Nivedita—needed to lead by example through the dedicated, selfless service of either motherhood or the *brahmacariṇī* (celibate female) to further the upliftment of all Indians. Vivekānanda expressed this focus on the importance of selfless service, or *seva*, in an 1894 letter to his disciple Perumal: “Do not try to lead your brethren, but serve them. The brutal mania for leading has sunk many a great ship in the waters of life.”⁴⁶ This shift in focus “added a

dimension of social service to Hinduism that had not previously existed under British rule.”⁴⁷

Essentially, with his newly formed “ascetic activism,” Vivekānanda “broke new political ground” when he enabled “celibate monks and nuns to partake in organized efforts for eradication of poverty, disease, and literacy.”⁴⁸

Vivekānanda—much like Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), another prominent Bengali religious reformer, before him—opposed the practice of *sati* (widow immolation), advocated for the rights of widows and child brides, and strongly supported the need for Indian women’s education.⁴⁹ “Like a bird that needs two wings to fly,” the svami told Nivedita, “India must have both educated men and educated women.”⁵⁰ It must be noted that addressing women’s issues served to affect change in India as part of a unified whole, not expressly for the benefit of individual women at this time. The svami’s concern centered on India’s role in change, he said: “If India cannot escape the change, which is taking place all over the world, especially in Asia, she must control the situation.”⁵¹

In the late-nineteenth century, the plight of Indian women, chiefly widows and child brides, evoked sympathy from Western feminists. The svami confessed to Margaret Noble early on that India needed to temporarily rely on the virtues, experiences, and education of exceptional Western women to lead Indian women toward self-empowerment and, in a larger sense, all of India toward a shared national consciousness.⁵² Vivekānanda often wrote to his hard-working disciple, Alasinga Perumal, of his admiration for Western women, extolling their virtues and dedication to self-improvement through spirituality and education.⁵³ Western women, and especially American women, created the idea of “civic maternalism” by attempting to bring their traditionally accepted household duties out into the public sphere, expanding their roles to encompass public tasks, such as child education, nursing, and public sanitation.⁵⁴ Noble was one

of these “modern” women who could teach the “heroic” mothers of India how to expand their traditional roles for the unified benefit of all sons and daughters.

Noble’s experience in women’s education, combined with her previous connections with activists and anarchists, made her an important contributor to Vivekānanda’s mission. As her biographer, Lizelle Reymond, detailed, the young Margaret grew up within a family of “austere preachers, ardent patriots, and strong-charactered women,” and received a strict Protestant-Congregationalist Christian education at Halifax College.⁵⁵ Thereafter, Noble taught history and literature in a private boarding school for girls and an orphanage for girls. Eventually she served as a headmistress for a secondary school in a mining center, and then helped found a new school in London, England. Prior to meeting the svami in 1895, Margaret undertook grueling welfare work on behalf of the religious and non-religious poor. When she met with religious discrimination and financial obstacles to that work, she turned to more influential labors as an anonymous and passionate pamphleteer.⁵⁶ In London, she took a central role in political and literary groups. Noble joined the “Free Ireland” group, which worked towards Irish Home Rule and brought her into close contact with the revolutionary exile Prince Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). In the Sesame Club, Noble served as secretary and lectured on education and women’s rights, where she met George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), and befriended the Irish-born Unionist, Ronald McNeil (1861-1934).⁵⁷ Additionally, Noble contributed “several articles on the Boer war, from the pro-Boer point of view” to the *Wimbledon News*, to “the Daily News on political questions,” and “occasionally to the scientific periodical *Research*, and to the *Review of Reviews*, whose famous editor, William T. Stead, became a personal friend.”⁵⁸ All of these experiences and relationships served as an impressive resume that prepared her for the even more challenging work in India.

Shared Sympathies: Ireland and India

By the late 1890s, numerous Western women made their mark in India, but many of them did not appear sympathetic to Indians or to the ideas promoted by the early, but growing Indian Independence Movement. *Memsahibs* and Christian missionaries, such as the inflammatory American Katherine Mayo (1867-1940), and seemingly seditious Indian women, such as the well-intentioned Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), caused a native backlash against Indian women's education and rights that was counterproductive to the svami's ambitious plans.⁵⁹ Mayo epitomized the stereotypical "white American racist" and, like many before and after her, was viewed as "an agent of British Imperialism" based on her public criticisms of Indian traditions and her belief in the overall incapacity of Indians for self-rule.⁶⁰ These types of public criticisms sent Indian men into a rage and put them on the defensive against any Western methodologies that might address the myriad problems facing India. On the other hand, prominent Indian women who visibly embraced women's rights, Western educational systems, and the Christian religion—as did Pandita Ramabai—angered even liberal Indians and created a protective backlash against any further perceived betrayal from Indian women.⁶¹ Even the influential Indian nationalist and reformer, Bāl Gangādhār Tilak (1856-1920), railed against Christian women who tried "to infiltrate [Indian] society under the cloak of women's education" and declared that they were "enemies of the people, of Hinduism, and also of the cause of women's education."⁶² Therefore, in order for his ambitious spiritual mission to flourish, Vivekānanda needed a strong female leader to navigate the treacherous political landscape of the period and to engage Indians for their own collective benefit.

Much to Vivekānanda's advantage, Margaret Noble, by virtue of her Irish heritage alone, immediately seemed sympathetic to Indians and their plight primarily because of the shared

status of India and Ireland as colonies of the British Empire. Noble appeared neither as a white racist condemning Indian traditions nor as an Indian traitor embracing the religion of the oppressor. Moreover, her long family association with the Irish Home Rule movement and her public affiliation with the “Free Ireland” group, as well as her personal relationships with known political agitators and anarchists—including her own grandfathers, John Noble and Richard Hamilton, and Prince Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921)⁶³—identified her as a trustworthy friend, especially to reformist Bengalis and influential members of the Brāhmo Samāj.

As an Indian admirer indicated, India embraced Margaret Noble as a “White Goddess” because she “worked from within outwards” and her “outlook [was] noble like her birthname,” which was contrary to that of her “ignoble, warped” and abusive Western contemporaries.⁶⁴ This admiration and friendship grew as devout Hindus watched Noble observe strict Hindu traditions and passionately lecture on Mā Kālī.⁶⁵ On March 25th 1899, monks, devotees, and Indian householders alike observed as Vivekānanda formally ordained Noble as a *naiṣṭhika brahmacariṇī* (a lifelong celibate female renunciate) and gave her the name of Nivedita (“the Dedicated.”)⁶⁶ Thus, supported and blessed by Vivekānanda and Śrī Sarada Devi (Holy Mother), Noble’s efforts for education and the opening of her school for girls were more easily accepted.⁶⁷ It could be seen and believed that Nivedita became, for all intents and purposes, not only a friend, but also a daughter of India.

Similarly, time and again, the svami pointed to Nivedita’s “Celtic blood” as a blessing that often smoothed relationships with local Indians. As Howard Brasted’s research revealed, the “Irish struggle ran parallel with India’s nationalist awakening,” serving “as a model as much to avoid as to emulate.”⁶⁸ Liberal, reformist minded Indians intently monitored relevant Irish affairs and learned from Irish Home Rule propaganda, which “presented an agenda for debate and

supplied a frame of reference that permitted India to define its own attitudes to British rule.”⁶⁹

Moreover, practically speaking, during the 1890s Indians could not ignore or distance themselves from the Irish crisis as the British response directly “impinged on Indian politics and affected Indian policy for more than half a century.”⁷⁰ Nor was there yet a singular, cohesive concept of how Home Rule would be achieved or what, exactly, it encompassed—from land use, to taxation, from political representation to trade—in either in Ireland or in India.

Although Vivekānanda outwardly embraced a distinctly apolitical, nonviolent, and ascetic view of an Indian renaissance through selfless service (*seva*)—and encouraged Nivedita to do the same—more militant Indian nationalists eventually found common ground with Noble’s Irish heritage and prior radical political affiliations.⁷¹ After Vivekānanda’s unexpected death in 1902, this affiliation strengthened to the point where Bengali revolutionary groups idealistically regarded Nivedita as “The Mother of the Revolution.”⁷² This radical approach was noticed by the British, as was Nivedita’s association with Kālī worship, which Jayawardena described as “the symbol of the awakening of Hindu-based nationalism.”⁷³ After all, the combined intentions of Ireland and India presented a credible threat to the British Empire as “rebellious colonies,” an outward sign of what Brasted described as the “seeds of imperial decay.”⁷⁴ So, while Vivekānanda was essentially correct that Nivedita’s ethnic heritage would strengthen his mission, it eventually manifested in a way he had not originally intended or desired.

Engaging the West

Since the svami acquired much of the financial support for his ambitious plans through his Western social connections during the 1890s, it was important that his spiritual partner have a keen understanding of affluent Western society. Vivekānanda first travelled to the West to speak

on Vedānta philosophy at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. This initial trip made possible only through the financial support of Indian princes, namely the Mahārāja Ajit Singh Bahadur of Khetri (1861-1901), with the hope that Vivekānanda's aspirations for India be fully realized. Surprisingly resplendent in his ochre robes and saffron turban, the svami immediately captured the Chicago audience with what some called his "forceful virile figure"⁷⁵ and his "exceptionally handsome [face] with features that would command attention anywhere."⁷⁶ John H. Barrows, the Parliament's President, noted that the svami's first few words in public—"Brothers and Sisters of America"—elicited resounding applause for three full minutes.⁷⁷ In this way, the svami, along with several other Eastern delegates, quickly became a media darling and was unexpectedly brought into immediate contact with some of the wealthiest and most influential Americans and religious leaders from around the world.⁷⁸ From this point forward, Vivekānanda travelled extensively within the United States, and eventually on to England and back to India, on lecture tours through the financial support and social connections of his new Western admirers.⁷⁹

Racial and cultural discrimination perpetuated by Christian missionaries and British Imperialists plagued Vivekānanda during this Western touring period and indeed, stymied the burgeoning Indian Independence Movement generally. Noted religious historian Richard H. Seager thoroughly addressed this issue in his monograph, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893*.⁸⁰ Seager claimed that the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and the World's Parliament of Religions outwardly projected the union of "all religion against irreligion," but clearly demonstrated the perceived cultural, political, and technological superiority of white America alongside the unquestionable anticipation of the global domination of Christianity over the "uncivilized," "savage" "heathen" in the coming

twentieth century.⁸¹ It was with this overriding and deeply held belief that Vivekānanda had to contend, and for this reason, he needed a reliable and sympathetic Western advocate.

Margaret Noble's social status in London, her published articles in London newspapers, and her prior experience in education provided a unique Western perspective on Indian culture, politics, and religion. She skillfully used these strengths during numerous speaking engagements and in her various essays geared toward Western audiences. Much of Nivedita's work, later compiled in *Select Essays of Sister Nivedita*, used a distinctly educational tone and addressed such popular and controversial topics as: "The Present Position of Women," "Aggressive Hinduism," "The Task of the National Movement in India," "The Swadeshi Movement," and "The Future Education of the Indian Woman."⁸² Nivedita's style of writing and speaking always blended an educational tone of sharing newfound knowledge with the passion of a fervent devotee. Eventually she became a popular lecturer both in India and abroad. Though her ideas were universally accepted by neither Indians nor Westerners, Nivedita satisfactorily fulfilled the task given to her by Vivekānanda and made a lasting impact on the varied approaches to Indian social and political issues with the West.

Brahmacharya: Sacred Celibacy

Although the svami attracted a number of Western female devotees in the last decade of the nineteenth century, many of them were married women or were simply not interested in dedicating themselves to a difficult life of celibate service. Indeed, Vivekānanda complained to his devoted disciple, Alasinga Perumal, that many of his admirers and devotees did not understand or share his passion for India, but that their support, such as it was, did help forward his mission after a fashion. Bengali-born historian Narasingha P. Sil briefly investigated the relationships between the svami and the small group of Western female devotees in India,

including Miss Josephine MacLeod, Miss Henrietta Muller, Mrs. Sarah Bull, Sister Christine Greenstidel, Mrs. Charlotte Sevier, and Goodwin, among others. Sil characterized these relationships primarily as varied instances of “hero worship,” and argued that the svami’s “antifeminine invectives,” his focus on “manliness,” and self-identification with Śiva served to highlight his culturally supported “misogynistic” outlook, which largely kept these women at an emotional distance.⁸³

Although Sil’s argument seems extreme when compared to the personal writings of key players, he was correct in that the ability to maintain the Hindu concept of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) was of the utmost importance to Vivekānanda for a variety of reasons. Sil argued that the svami’s focus on masculinity and muscular Hinduism revealed a misogynistic outlook; however, this observation does not consider the vehement response to the prevailing Western view of Indian males—Bengalis, in particular—as “effete, unmanly, slothful, and slack” that Vivekānanda tried to combat.⁸⁴ Historian Joseph S. Alter reported that in Northern India “the celibate body [was] regarded as supremely fit” and evoked a “divine and heroic mystique of epic proportions.”⁸⁵ Given the prevailing negative Western view of Indians and Vivekānanda’s own struggles with diabetes and asthma, it is not difficult to understand the svami’s emphasis on physical and philosophical shows of strength and “manliness.” Similarly, as Alter pointed out, since sexual activity was regarded as “distracting” and “enervating,” it was practical for svamis like Vivekānanda to require “chastity... and self-control” for the period of spiritual learning and practice, especially the study of the ancient *Vedas*.⁸⁶ Vivekānanda, and many Indian nationalist leaders, attempted to use *brahmacharya* as a “strategic concept opposed to Westernization.”⁸⁷

With a family history of dedicated religious leadership and activism, early adherence to austere Congregationalist-Protestant practices, and after two failed engagements of her own,

Margaret Noble fully accepted the celibate lifestyle for herself in 1899.⁸⁸ Noble's cultural and religious upbringing in Ireland and England seemed to support this choice, despite her noted tendency toward "romanticism," which Sil labeled as latent "sexual tension."⁸⁹ Interestingly, Ireland's pan-Christian beliefs, which shaped cultural practices, mirrored many of the cultural practices found within India's traditional Hinduism that arguably offered Noble a familiar foundation on which to build her new life in the East. Tom Inglis' work on *Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland* adds to this argument against Sil's claims.

Inglis demonstrated that the feminine ideal in Ireland, much like India's ideal, resided in the dedicated motherhood of a large family, and that sexuality be strictly "confined to marriage."⁹⁰ Married Irish women, enclosed in the home similar to their Indian counterparts, represented the "moral ideal" of self-control, self-sacrifice, and moral purity to which "men could aspire."⁹¹ However, a significant and well-respected alternative to this highly regarded domestic life for Irish women, as Inglis demonstrated, was to be found in the religious orders of Christian nuns as "exemplars rather than challengers of the culture of self-denial."⁹² Therefore, Noble's acceptance of the *naiṣṭhika brahmacariṇī* initiation from Vivekānanda was not an extraordinary undertaking, but rather a familiar spiritual rite or perhaps even a natural, complementary response to her own Irish cultural and spiritual experience. Additionally, this shared cross-cultural "heroic" view of women as dedicated mother's or devoted renunciates reinforced the larger reformist narrative to elevate colonized women, and with them, their inherently sovereign, native countries as a whole.

Conclusion

The dynamic relationship between Vivekānanda and Margaret Noble impacted reform efforts in India, especially in Bengal, by redefining and repurposing cultural and spiritual

concepts as tools for change. As a united and energetic force fighting for India Vivekānanda and Nivedita vigorously challenged established social, political, and religious institutions, beliefs, and traditions with the use of what sociologist Ann Swidler defined as an ideological “toolkit” in order to “offer a unified answer to problems of social action.”⁹³ Not only did Indians directly benefit from the specific programs they helped initiate—religious education, the opening of girls’ schools, access to medical care and better sanitation—influential Indian nationalist leaders from Bāl Gangādhār Tilak to Aurobindo Ghosh to Mohāndas K. Gāndhī gained insight and inspiration from their use of broader narratives that combined powerful native icons with spiritual concepts to advance secular notions of a unified Indian identity. Lecturer Jerome Teelucksingh even posits “that without the birth of Swami Vivekananda, there might not have been an inspiration for Gandhi and other freedom fighters.”⁹⁴ Though the methods and philosophy the svami and the sister preached did not resonate with everyone, their fervor for India was respected if not directly supported. How that Hindu-based methodology and fervor isolated Muslim Indians in Bengal, negatively impacted the independence movement, and helped shape India’s Partition in 1947 is beyond the scope of this paper, but may be another avenue for further research.

The Hindu concepts of *Ardhanārīśvara* (“Lord Who is Half-Woman”), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and Kālī worship directly influenced the context and direction of this unusual svami-disciple relationship. All three aspects—*Ardhanārīśvara*, *brahmacharya*, and Kālī worship—dealt with the use and direction of the physical or energetic embodiment of their chosen Hindu spiritual practice explicitly within the context of gender and sexuality. These spiritual concepts shaped how they interacted with each other and with the world, and, in turn, influenced how others related to them as partners in India’s spiritual reawakening as the perceived embodiment

of Śiva and Śāktī energies. Additionally, these spiritual models served as necessary foils to oppressive colonial stereotypes, and provided native Hindus with an alternative positive, even heroic, self-concept. Applying the model of *Ardhanārīśvara* to the study of their guru-disciple relationship is a new focus, and further research in this specific area is necessary to understand the nuances and possible ramifications, notably in the arena of colonial gender-based politics.

The five characteristics Margaret Noble so fully embodied served to pragmatically strengthen Vivekānanda's mission in India, while simultaneously fulfilling a very personal spiritual journey for both individuals. Vivekānanda astutely identified the difficulties plaguing India, his own shortcomings, and actively sought a partner who could withstand and overcome the challenges with fervent devotion to create a greater vision for the future of India. Noble, on her part, accepted the difficult tasks presented her, and committed herself to the service of India to the best of her ability as “the Dedicated.”

Their relationship not only served as a working model for new cross-cultural religious partnerships, but also established a precedent for similar guru-disciple relationships between other prominent Hindu spiritual leaders and their Western female devotees—namely Aurobindo Bhose and Mirra Richard (the Mother), and the longstanding relationship between Mohāndas K. Gāndhī and Madeline Slade (Mira Behn). An in-depth exploration of the dynamics of these relationships, both individually and as group, has yet to be undertaken from this perspective. Further research into how, and to what extent, gender played a role “in the formation of a nationalist identity” throughout the Indian Independence Movement could be considered from this perspective.⁹⁵ Certainly, the fields of gender history, post-colonial history, and religious history would be enriched by a closer and more specific study of how Ireland and India's shared

experiences with a common oppressor shaped colonial responses to new gender norms imposed by the British during the Victorian Era.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 116.

² Rini Bhattacharya Mehta, "The Missionary Sannyāsī and the Burden of the Colonized: The Reluctant Alliance between Religion and Nation in the Writings of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)," *Comparative Studies of South Asian, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 2 (2008): 10.

³ Svami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Svami Vivekananda*, Vol. 7 (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2009), 511.

⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); Mehta, 10-25; Indira Chowdhury, "The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal" *Journal of Asian Studies* (August 2000); Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁵ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda In The West: New Discoveries, His Prophetic Mission*. vol. 1. 3rd ed. (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1983); Swami Nikhilananda, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, 1953); Lizelle Reymond, *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita*, (New York: The John Day Company, 1955).

⁶ Narasingha Prosad Sil, "Swami Vivekananda in the West: The Legend Reinterpreted," *South Asia* 18, no. 1 (1995); Narasingha Prosad Sil, *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1997).

⁷ Sil, "The Legend Reinterpreted," 3.

⁸ Joseph S. Alter, "Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (February 1994): 45-66; Tom Inglis, "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland," *Eire-Ireland* 40, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 9-37.

⁹ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Howard Brasted, "Indian Nationalist Development and the Influence of Irish Home Rule, 1870-1886," *Modern Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1980): 37-63.

¹¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

¹² Vivekananda, vol. 7, 511.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 184-185.

¹⁶ Vivekananda, vol. 7, 512-513.

¹⁷ Ibid., 512.

¹⁸ Reymond, 62.

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- ¹⁹ Sister Nivedita, *The Master as I Saw Him*. 9th ed. (Kolkata, India: Ramakrishna Math, 1962), 10.
- ²⁰ Sister Nivedita, *Kali: The Mother*. 14th ed. (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 26.
- ²¹ Sil, *A Reassessment*, 126.
- ²² Chowdhury, Indira, "The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal," *Journal of Asian Studies* (August 2000): 84.
- ²³ Chowdhury, 120.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 131.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 5, 131
- ²⁶ Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, 140.
- ²⁷ Chowdhury, 120.
- ²⁸ Seager, 111.
- ²⁹ Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, 196-197.
- ³⁰ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 179.
- ³¹ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda In The West: New Discoveries, His Prophetic Mission*, vol. 1 3rd ed. (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 97.
- ³² Raymond, 241.
- ³³ Sister Christine, in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern & Western Admirers*, (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1961), 203.
- ³⁴ Sister Christine, in *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, 202.
- ³⁵ Campbell, 115-116.
- ³⁶ Chowdhury,
- ³⁷ Nivedita, *Kali*, ; Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, 134-143.
- ³⁸ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 191.
- ³⁹ Mehta, 13.
- ⁴⁰ Sister Devamata, *Days in an Indian Monastery*, (La Crescenta, California: Ananda Ashrama, 1927), 120.
- ⁴¹ Chowdhury, 2, 134.
- ⁴² Vivekananda, vol. 5, 28.
- ⁴³ Josephine MacLeod, in *Reminiscences*, 234.
- ⁴⁴ Vivekananda, vol. 7, 512.
- ⁴⁵ Sangari and Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
- ⁴⁶ Vivekananda, vol 5, 36.
- ⁴⁷ Jerome Teelucksingh, "Peace Profile: The Legacy of Swami Vivekananda," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 18: 411-417.
- ⁴⁸ Mehta, 13.
- ⁴⁹ Born into a wealthy Brahmin caste in Bengal, Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) was an influential Hindu reformer who passionately addressed issues of women's rights, widow remarriage, caste discrimination, education, and the practice of *sati* (widow immolation). Roy, often called "the Father of Modern India," also founded the *Brāhmo Samāj* in 1828 along with other prominent Bengalis, such as Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846) and Tarachand Chakravarti (1806-1857).
- ⁵⁰ Lizelle Raymond, *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita*, (New York: The John Day Company, 1955), 89.
- ⁵¹ Sister Christine, in *Reminiscences*, 206.
- ⁵² Vivekananda, vol. 7, 511.

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- ⁵³ Vivekananda, vol. 5, 22, 39.
- ⁵⁴ Sarah Deutsch, "Learning to Talk More Like a Man: Boston Women's Class-Bridging Organizations, 1870-1940," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1992): 380-381.
- ⁵⁵ Reymond, 14-22.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 28-30.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 28.
- ⁵⁹ Jayawardena, 1, 53-62, 95-100.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 1.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 3.
- ⁶² Bāl Gangādhār Tilak (1892) in Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 53.
- ⁶³ Reymond, 24, 33, 43.
- ⁶⁴ K.R. Shastri in Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 1.
- ⁶⁵ Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him*, 105; Reymond, 84.
- ⁶⁶ Reymond, 161.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 162.
- ⁶⁸ Brasted, 42.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 42, 46.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 42.
- ⁷¹ Mehta, 25.
- ⁷² Jayawardena, 192.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 191.
- ⁷⁴ Brasted, 43.
- ⁷⁵ Sister Christine, in *Reminiscences*, 148.
- ⁷⁶ *Chicago Times*, 12 September 1893, in Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries, His Prophetic Mission*, Volume 1, 3rd ed. (Kolkata, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 87.
- ⁷⁷ John Henry Barrows, ed. *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the World's Columbian Exposition*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 970.
- ⁷⁸ Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).
- ⁷⁹ Vivekananda, vol. 5, 11-19, 40-43, 211-213.
- ⁸⁰ Seager, 62.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 67.
- ⁸² Sister Nivedita, *Select Essays of Sister Nivedita (1911)*, 7, 74, 164, 190, 222.
- ⁸³ Sil, *A Reassessment*, 115, 116, 117-126.
- ⁸⁴ Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, 47.
- ⁸⁵ Alter, 46.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., 49.
- ⁸⁸ Reymond, 158.
- ⁸⁹ Sil, *A Reassessment*, 129-137.
- ⁹⁰ Tom Inglis, "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland," *Eire-Ireland* 40, no. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2005): 16.

⁹¹ Inglis, 14-16.

⁹² Ibid., 20.

⁹³ Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies" *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 279.

⁹⁴ Teelucksingh, 417.

⁹⁵ Chowdhury, 5.