

Sister Nivedita : A Cultural Ambassador of Feminism

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Abstract : Of all the ideal alien ladies who had been inspired by the Aurobindo Ashram trust, Pondicherry, Sister Nivedita was perhaps at the top from the eyes of the researchers. Even her books were published and she (Margaret Elizabeth Noble) served humanity by establishing an Ashram in Kolkata. Mother Tressa dedicated herself to the cause of suffering rich cultural heritage of India during the twentieth century. She made a major role in the upliftment of humanity in general and Indians in particular. Much has been said on the Mother who bagged the Nobel Prize. But Sister Nivedita is still in oblivion. Their political, social, religious and spiritual concern served as undercurrent to revive the rich tradition of India. The works have been published in seventeen volumes by Sri captioned *The Complete Works Of Sister Nivedita* by Ramakrishn Sharda Mission during the birth centenary year of Sister Nivedita (1967-1968), as a homage to her hallowed memory in four volumes. In 1975 another volume entitled *Sister Nivedita's Lectures and Writings* comprising her contribution to various journalism, newspapers, and other manuscripts were published by the same authority. It was only in 1982 that the adwait ashram of Ramakrishna Mission, Kolkata became popular. Much has been said about Nivedita's biography and her social services but full length study of her literary contribution is yet to be made. She came in contact with Swami Vivekananda in November, 1895. Swamiji's teachings aroused Margaret's dormant religious aspirations and her earnest desire was to serve humanity unselfishly. Combined with her comprehensive mind was a remarkable largeness of heart and deep insight of love which prompted Nivedita to interpret Indian religion and thought, art and literature, custom and tradition. About sixteen books of Nivedita have so far been published which are the reservoir of her vision. Here an attempt will be made to analyse her works in the light of feminism with a view to showing path to the modern Indian womenfolk to come ahead to lead humanity to absolute peace, pleasure and spintualism which is the dire need of the hour.

Keywords : Feminism; humanity; spiritualism; nationalism; salvation; absolute peace.

During the visit of Swami Vivekanand in 1893 at Chicago in the "Parliament of World Religions" there came an upsurge in the occidental countries to be attracted towards Indian culture. Many Europeans came in contact of Vivekanand and accepted Hindu way of life. This was followed by the visits of Swami Yoganand, Swami Prabhupad, Swami Chinmayanand and a host of Ramakrishna Mission monks which prompted many intellectuals to move to Indianness. Of all the ladies who became literary icons there are three erminent ladies – Sister Nivedita, The Mother and Mother Teresa. The latter two dedicated themselves to the services of

humanity, one at Pondicherry (now Pudducherry) and other at Kolkata. Only Sister Nivedita became a true disciple of Vivekanand . The Advait Ashram of Ramakrishna Mission captivated the attention of the publishers and they tried their best to publish *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* in five volumes which have recorded the writings of Sister Nivedita. By dedicating herself to the cause of women upliftment she started an institution and served as a teacher. Her keen interest in Indian culture metamorphosed her inner self. She also visited historical places and knew about the rich culture and contemporary precarious conditions.

Born and brought up in celtic culture like W.B. Yeats she had deep rooted culture of her own upbringing but indian culture propelled her to emancipate India from the shackles of superstition. Still attempts have been made to assess or evaluate her literary excellences which place her as a cultural ambassador of feminism. A number of studies have been undertaken on feminism at the global level in general and in India in particular. In the last few decades women empowerment has been one of the prime concepts of discussion in the overall development of a nation. The empowerment has been defined in different contest by various thinkers such as ability to make a choice, as a power to achieve desired goals but not a power over others, capacity for leading a fulfilling human life, a way of bringing gender equality and a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation in decision making and control over one's own life and so on. It is this patience of woman that makes civilizations. It is the patience of woman that makes the nationality of a country. Sister Nivedita believes that every woman is possessed with an inner potential. Since ages this potential of many women was suppressed due to the typical beliefs followed by the society which created a hindrance in their freedom of thought and expression. Owing to this eventually we tend to believe that women are incapable to contribute in social, political and economic development of a nation. According to Sister Nivedita, rekindling the hidden inner potential of every disempowered women and transforming them with highest ideals, thoughts and action are the real empowerment of women. This can be achieved through education which is a powerful tool and will act as a facilitator in empowering women. But some special attention had been made on methodological issues, on empirical analysis and on the measures and tools of empowerment during feminist movement. Being the foremost personalities in the galaxy of twentieth century revivalists in India. Sister Nivedita stressed upon cultural and cognitive empowerment of women because her spiritual mentor Swami Vivekananda believed that the quest of women for liberation would not begin without their rational and intellectual advancement. Obviously enough, cognitive empowerment can be achieved through proper education. Hence, fulfilling the dream of her Guru and guided and influenced by Froebel's concept of 'kindergarten' she inaugurated a school for girls in Big Bazar area of Kolkata on 13th November, 1898 with an aspiration in mind to provide education to the girl children especially. Her commitment was so much for this cause that she did not hesitate to

visit the houses to encourage and inspire the girls to join her school. Sister Nivedita effortlessly toiled to educate her students with the spirit of nationalism as well . Hence, she introduced 'Vande Mataram' in her school as prayer. Her school suffered from financial crunch. Hence, Nivedita with the help of her friends in England and America formed 'Ramakrishna Guild of help in America' in 1900 to provide financial support to her school. She wrote, published and sent her 'project of 'Ramkrishna School for Girls' to Mr. And Mrs. Legget who abundantly helped Nivedita run her school.

At the Hindu Ladies Social Club in Bombay in 1902, Nivedita was asked to reflect on "The Virtues of Indian Womanhood". She replied", ... I feel it would be presumption on my part to speak to you on the subject because Indian womanhood is better understood and practised by each and every one of you than me"(Editor's Preface to *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (Vol-2), Ramakrishana Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School, Calcutta, XVI) .

As a woman Nivedita realised and experienced the sad predicament of women in male-dominated society. She observed the subjugation of women by men; she witnessed that women in Bengal had to bear all the responsibilities inferior to those of men. While men are supposed to enjoy rights, women are confined within the four walls of the dwelling house to carry out the domestic responsibilities. She was aware of the terrible fact that the patriarchal codes of conduct have placed man in a privileged position of "Subject" and the woman in the position of an "Object". A woman exists only in relation to man. Nivedita's chief aim also was undoubtedly directed against the passivity of women who continue to accept servility as their destiny . At this point, we are reminded of Simon de Beauvoir's observation in part IV of "The Formative Years" of *The Second Sex* :

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (295)

Swamiji died in 1902. Though it was a stumbling block to Nivedita's mission for empowering women through education, nothing curbed her spirit . In 1903, with the help of Sister Christine (Christine Greenstidel, 1866 - 1930) she started a separate section for women in her school with a view to stopping the child marriage of Indians girls . Afterwards it came to be known as 'Pura Stree Bibhaga' where women were allowed for the first time in Bengal to attend the school to empower themselves through learning the art of sewing, needlework, arithmetic, whenever they were free from domestic responsibilities. All these arts , Nivedita aptly grasped, would help the women to be economically empowered, leading ultimately to their

cognitive liberation as well. Hence, Sister Nivedita was herself an institution; her selfless contribution for the cause of women in general can never be minimized. Through educating and instructing the women they have been climbing up the rungs of empowerment at their best. She would not only continue to be the explorer in depths of the treasure house called India; she would now reveal a new face – the exponent of the culture and civilization of India, its glory and wonder, its dreams and expectations, in a unique way which no other westerner had done before. Her books, *Kali*, *The Mother*, *The Web of Indian Life*, *Studies from an Eastern Home*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *Myths of Hindus and Buddhists* will be considered some of the best books revealing the glory of India. She will also be the harbinger of the current, progressive thoughts of the western world to the sons and daughters of future India. Nivedita wished young India should be well versed in the heritage of *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*.

Scientific standards, geographical conceptions, historical prepossessions, these are the three characteristics of the modern mind which women must procure. A world sense; a time sense; and a feeling for the fact in itself; these are the things that make up modern conception. In order to understand these facts, and weigh them well, it is clear that a good deal of intellectual preparation is necessary. This intellectual training is what is usually termed as education but it is the sense of responsibility of woman that constitutes the true education leading to advanced knowledge. This new knowledge will now modify every action of women. Before yielding blindly to prejudice, she will now consider the direction in which that prejudice is working.

Before women travel to foreign countries to master in science and technology she must first acquire the methods of science of her own nation. Then in the light of these methods she will learn all that her country would have taught her in its simple and primitive Swadeshi form. Once she becomes aware of the gap between the two, having read and experimented in so far as possible, now she can be sent out. Only when curiosity is already awakened, one has the energy to proceed from known to the unknown.

Westernisation and modernisation are two ideologies that are always under misconception. Modernisation consists of industrialisation; urbanisation; increasing levels of literacy, education, wealth, and social mobilisation; and more complex and diverse occupational structures. This means that in order for a country to be more modernised, one must look to upgrade one's their technology, form of communication, production levels, etc. The Industrial Revolution is the perfect example of modernity. Westernisation is more related to practices, religion and cultural changes. We must look into modernising our existing systems for the betterment of the nation rather than imitating the western practices and losing our cultural values.

The life of a woman is a poem of the soil. In all lands, holiness and strength are the treasures which the race places in the hands of women to preserve rather than in those of man. Simplicity and patience are the strength of women which determine the character of home. She is the real architect in building the home with mere culture and tradition. Thus, empowerment of women transcends her thought process into a new dimension where her service will not be restricted only to her family rather widening it beyond society and in turn nation. Noble and efficient will be the goal of real empowerment. By offering national empowerment to a handful of girls, Sister Nivedita has given new life to the entire nation. By defining empowerment through educational principles, she has produced a basic pattern of literature on empowerment that will serve the future generations of the nation. Undoubtedly any nation will stand in its true position if a single generation of its women is trained in the system of empowerment as Sister Nivedita envisioned, "When women empower the nation empowers". (*The Web of Indian Life*, 61)

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