CHAPTER - 1

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India as a land of Desire formed an essential element in general history. From the most ancient times downwards, all nations have directed their wishes and longings to gaining access to the treasures of this land of marvels, the most costly which the earth presents, treasures of nature - pearls, diamonds, perfumes, rose essences, lions, elephants, etc. – as also treasures of wisdom. The way by which these treasures have passed to the West has at all times been a matter of world historical importance bound up with the fate of nations. (Hegel 142)

As the above remark of one of the greatest of Western philosophers shows, India has had, from time immemorial, two types of treasures to offer – the treasures of nature and the treasures of wisdom. Both these types of treasures have been sought by mankind and the efforts to acquire these treasures are as old as their availability. In the making of the process of passing the treasures of the East to the West, several factors have worked: the impulse for discovery and exploration, the desire to dominate economically and politically, the spirit of carrying “the Good News” to ‘the heathens’ on the one hand and, on the other, the desire to understand a different civilization that claims to know the paths that lead to the spiritual destiny of humanity. While Westerners’ discovery of India and the East in general led to conquest or attempts at conquest, the Far East showed more interest in the treasures of wisdom that India had to offer. Fa Hien, followed by Hiuan Tsuang, learned travellers from the ancient Eastern civilisation of the land of the Yellow River, had travelled extensively in India, observed the people and collected the sacred texts of Buddhism and left their impression of this land for posterity.
In the vast and complex historical processes of the exchange between the East and the West, the leadership passed from one European nation to another, finally resting with Britain, as far as India is concerned. Dominated by men though these processes were, women were not out of the picture. Religious missions and spiritual quest called many a European woman who responded to the call and devoted their lives to the fulfillment of this destiny. And each one of them had her own discovery to make. The present study seeks to analyse the features of the discovery and defence of India by one such Western woman – Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867-1911).

As the general historical background to Margaret Noble’s discovery and defence of India, the historical evolution of European mercantilism into imperialism and the implications of the imperial presence of Britain in India may be considered briefly.

India had been known to Europe long before Alexander reached the frontiers; friendly relations between Hellas and India had existed before the Christian era. A flourishing trade had developed in the first century AD between the Roman Empire and the states of South India. In the dark ages of Europe India continued to excite the imagination of the West. After the early crusades Europe’s interest in Asia increased greatly. In the thirteenth century European travellers like Marco Polo visited India. In the march of times the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the mercantile peoples of the Mediterranean sharing the dream of appropriating the domination of the spice trade with the East, which was one of the great motivating factors in history. The discovery of an all-sea route to India as a reply to Islam’s power was behind this dream of Europe, in which European merchants and mariners were heartily supported by the ruling powers at home; and the blessings of the Pope Nicholas V gave an additional impetus to the efforts. Outwitting Islam,
monopolising the trade, extending political supremacy and evangelisation - it was a powerful combination of tremendous motivating forces that drove the restless Europeans to South Asia, especially India. The arrival of Vasco da Gama at Kozhikode in the west coast of India in 1498 marks, in the words of K.M. Panikkar, the beginning of “a clearly marked epoch of history,” which ended with the withdrawal of British forces from India in 1947 (13). The distinctive characteristics of this historical epoch are the entrenchment of European imperialism, the imposition of a commercial economy over agrarian communities that were originally based on internal and not international trade and the attempt “to civilize” Asia through Christianisation (19).

With the formation of the East India Company in the sixteenth century, British merchants entered the spice trade in competition with the Dutch in India and, in the course of 250 years through various political and military maneuvers, had gradually established unchallenged authority in India “from the Indus to the Brahmaputra, from the Himalayas to Cape Comerin” (Panikkar 82). After the great rebellion of 1857, the British government took over the direct administration of India and ventured upon a course of aggressive empire building in East Asia at the expense of the Indian taxpayer. But even before the British government took over the administration of India from the company “a new state based on a merciless exploitation of the people had come into existence in India” (79).

The assumption of power over India by the government in Britain meant that colonialism, marked by economic exploitation of the colonized, had been succeeded by imperialism “that was bureaucratically controlled from the centre for ideological as well as financial reasons … as a policy of state driven by the grandiose projects of power” (Young 16). Anti-colonial and anti-imperial sentiments were expressed in
England itself but to no purpose: for instance, in 1857 Cobden reacted to the great rebellion, dubbed as the Sepoy Mutiny, as follows:

Hindoostan(sic) must be ruled by those who live on that side of the globe. Its people will prefer to be ruled badly – according to our notions – by its own color, kith and kin, than to submit to the humiliation of being better governed by a succession of transient intruders from the antipodes... it is impossible that a people can permanently be used for their own obvious and conscious degradation. The entire scheme of our Indian rule is based upon the assumption that the natives will be the willing instruments of their own humiliation. (qtd. in Young 96)

But there were no takers for such a view and Britain pursued its policy of domination over India, cultural as well as political.

For Britain's political domination over India was also evolving an "intellectual and moral leadership" as an effective means adopted to establish and confirm political supremacy. For instance, educating the Indian people for the empire was taken up "as a major institutional support system" (Viswanathan 4). The British were very clear about "the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways" (2). The British in India constantly engaged in a discourse in which those who were to be educated were represented again and again as morally and intellectually deficient and at the same time it was shown that the English literature they were studying had all the attributes of moral and intellectual values that their own culture lacked (4). Macaulay’s Minute of 1832 is a document representative of this cultural hegemony. But even when experience taught him that the Indian civilization was not devoid of moral values as was imagined by the British, to say the least, Macaulay clung on to his programme of deIndianising Indians through a system of education
calculated to make "Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own" (Extract from Lord Macaulay's speech in the British Parliament on 2 Feb. 1835). This was the fundamental design behind the scheme of producing a generation of Indians who would be brown in skin but fully Westernized at heart. In short Macaulay wanted a body of "mimic men" with brown skins and white masks (McLeod 54). A longer portion from the above-mentioned speech will make his intentions clearer:

I have travelled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such calibre, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage and therefore I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture; for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native self-culture and they will become what we want them to be, a truly dominated nation.

In order to justify its hegemony, Britain had to prove to itself and to the Indians ruled by them that the latter were culturally inferior. This was the planting of an inferiority complex in the soul of a nation that Frantz Fanon demonstrates so well in his book Black Skins, White Masks (97).

Apart from Britain's political necessity for a belief in the inferiority of Indians for maintaining its hegemony over India, even during the earlier times, when travellers' accounts of India started figuring in English literature and slowly taking a place in popular imagination, an inability to comprehend alien cultures (except in terms of certain sharp contrasts or stereotypes) can be observed. Peter Childs shows how the two earliest references to India in English writing are illustrative of the attempts by the British visitor to India to take note of the externalities or, when he
tries to understand the psyche, to elevate them or denigrate them as a spiritual and at the same time hypocritical and lazy people.³

While travellers’ tales were at this level of understanding only, genuine efforts to lessen the distance between the English and the ‘other’ were made by people who were in direct contact with Indians like, for instance, Warren Hastings, the governor-general of India from 1773 to 1785. However, these were not held in favour by influential Englishmen like Edmund Burke. Hastings was an Indianist and favoured the study and continuation of indigenous art, languages and religion (Childs 9). But Burke felt that Hastings had misunderstood the basics of government and that, against the spirit of the time, was trying to govern Indians as though they were Englishmen. This was considered part of his misgovernment and Hastings had to undergo in England a seven-year-long state trial for misgovernment. In other words treating Indians as fellow human beings, with feelings and abilities like the English, seemed dishonourable to Englishmen’s pride and belief in their superiority.⁴

The interest in Indian civilisation and Sanskrit literature shown by William Jones (who was a close friend of Hastings and was encouraged by the latter to study Indian literature) and other Orientalists who followed him had no practical effect when the question of the type of education to be introduced in India came up for discussion. It was the view of men like Macaulay (who closely resembles Burke in his racial pride) that carried the day. Thus throughout the history of colonial and imperial India, Englishmen’s efforts to arrive at a true understanding of India was coloured by imperial policies and notions of cultural and moral superiority of the English race and religion. It is at this juncture in the nineteenth century that several forces worked towards a fresh movement from the West towards the East. Though official policy did not change, public interest in India was growing.
During the nineteenth century, Europe was witnessing several intellectual, religious, political and social movements that were revolutionizing thought in the West. The rejection of orthodox Christianity was central to all these movements. Darwin’s theory and the impact of science in general led thoughtful men and women to skepticism, rationalism and atheism (CW 2: 397-8). The social effects of industrial revolution were depressing to those who cared for the welfare of the many and believed in their Christian duty (Jayawardena 109). While there was a general compliance with imperialism, spoken or silent, among Europeans, voices were heard in far off colonies as well as at home that spoke strongly on the inhumanity of imperial practices. And in Europe women were asking for more and more of rights, freedom and opportunity. Higher education for women was becoming common in England in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

One of the significant results of all these changes brewing in the cauldron of Western social consciousness was the birth of the social phenomenon of the New Women. These women in England and in Europe were educated, highly independent and socially active and outspoken, dissatisfied with existing conditions in Europe and eager in their search for truth. If the white men went out to discover the East as travellers, journalists, scholars, missionaries and administrators, European women were not to be left behind. Either as the wives of these men or on their own individual right, European women were going to India and other Asian countries in search of God and humanity. And many of them found the object of their search. They not only observed the societies that gave them welcome but also recorded their impressions. In the words of Kumari Jayawardena, “Western women ... came out of anti-systemic and heterodox movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, which questioned the social and ideological orthodoxies of the day and rejected the notion of Christianity as the only true religion”(107). An interest in the East had
already been created in the West by scholars and travellers whose accounts about the East prepared daring individuals for this discovery.

In the meanwhile the East was also moving westward, and Westerners found amidst them great thinkers and spiritual masters as well as reformers and nationalists from India and a veritable cultural exchange was taking place. Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy\(^5\) and Keshab Chandra Sen\(^6\) visited England in the early part of the nineteenth century and the former is even said to have influenced a few socially active English women to show interest in work for Indian women\(^7\). A few decades later spiritual masters like Swami Vivekananda visited America and Europe to spread the message of Vedanta in the West and make his countrymen learn the Western ideals of organization and science. There was much of the so-called ‘mystery’ in the discovery of the East by some of the European men and women, especially those who associated themselves with occultism and spiritualism. Ancient Asian religions like Hinduism in its philosophical form of Vedanta, and Buddhism as practised in Tibet and Sri Lanka attracted many Western seekers, among whom many came to stay in the Asian countries that had called them. They found these new countries, philosophies and social systems deeply satisfying to them as alternative systems that answered their psychological and spiritual needs. As Kumari Jayawardena shows in her brilliant analysis of “the white woman’s other burden”, several types of European women came to India and led active lives of social service and intellectual activity during the era of colonialism in India and Sri Lanka.

As the historical necessity demanded and in obedience to their own inner promptings, these women did their work in India in different capacities. There were several types of missionaries working in India during the early twentieth century: the educational missionaries, the medical missionaries and the missionaries proper, that is the religious missionaries. Western women worked in all three capacities, of
whom the first two types of missionaries were held in respect by Indians. Women among the first type of missionaries ran schools for girls from Indian families; the medical missionaries or the lady doctors were the ones to whom Indian women became particularly close as persons to whom they could relate freely; this could not be the case if the doctor was a man. Dr. Ida Scudder at Vellore in South India and Dr. Pechey in Bombay were two well-known doctors in India who not only established hospitals but helped Indian women to get trained as professional physicians (Jayawardena 78-82). Then there were missionaries proper, like the Protestant Ms Amy Wilson Carmichael in South India, whose sole purpose was to convert Indians, especially women, to Christianity in order to free them from traditions and customs of their land and religion, which, in the missionaries' eyes, were keeping them in subordination and moral depravity (Jayawardena 94-95); or the catholic nuns who brought “Christianity, Western education and values, social reform...and modernization” to the South Asians; both these types of religious missionaries were conformist in their attitude to imperialism and directly or indirectly collaborated with the British Government to help the Union Jack fly over India (Jayawardena 8).

Of a special category is Alexandra David Neel, who made adventurous journeys into Tibet and even went to the forbidden city of Lhasa and studied Buddhism (Jayawardena 162-63).

There were also a few versatile women who gave their energy, intelligence and time, in short, their hearts and lives, to the Indian people, working in the fields of education, social reform, and religion; in addition - this is the most distinctive feature - they identified themselves with the national cause of the people in their struggle for political freedom and their demand for the nation’s right to self-determination. They led a life of simplicity and renunciation while engaging
themselves tirelessly in establishing educational institutions, working for the social advancement of the women and the masses, and actively participating in the nationalist struggle of the country and inspiring Indians to do the same. In this category of Western women working for India we find Mrs. Annie Besant, Sr. Nivedita, Mira Behn and Mirrah Richards, the Mother of the Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry in South India. Here a distinction must be made in the type of involvement in the national struggle for freedom. Mrs. Besant and Mira Behn directly participated in the political struggles, while the Mother of Pondichery did not participate in politics but was sympathetic to the national cause. Sr. Nivedita took no direct participation in the political movements, but being intensely political in her consciousness, she spoke and wrote so as to rouse a similar consciousness in the people. But all of them were fully identified with the people in their national aspirations. And all four of them recorded their experiences and views in writing and have thus left a body of documents that enables posterity to reassess their value to Indian thought and life in the light of contemporary historical contexts.

All these women in their encounter with the East had their own experiences in understanding and articulating about the meaning of the Orient and were thus explorers and discoverers of the East in their own right, as distinct from the customary expectation that only man could venture out while woman had to be confined to her home. In this they had broken away from the customs and mores of their own places of birth and found recognition, harmony and a place of their own in South Asia.

It is necessary here to touch upon the theme of defence as bound up with that of discovery. The world was not merely showing interest in Asia; it was also exercising hegemony over her. As Jayawardena points out,
“the expansion of imperialism in the nineteenth century had led to the era of great male explorers ‘discovering’ Asia and Africa. The travel writings of Burton, Baker and Livingstone were, as Kabbani notes, ‘an aggressive racist exploration of the colonized … a frenzied attempt to know the world … it was the conquering … serving to forge the imperial representation of the world.’ ” (162)

Meanwhile Asia, more particularly India, was not ‘passive.’ India resisted the Western dominance. For various historical reasons, that resistance could bear fruit in breaking away from the geopolitical domination of the West only in 1947. All through the period of resistance, it was not only materially plundered and drained; but verbal attacks were poured over it in various ‘discourses’ by different types of representatives of the West. All these ‘discourses’ had the common distinction of powerfully talking India down. Administrators like Charles Trevelyan and Richard Temple published books, circulated tracts and gave speeches, on the basis of their service in India, on the degradations and depravity of the Indian society; missionaries, in their street corner speeches as well as in the books they published, constantly denigrated the Hindu gods as vile and immoral and the people equally so and painted the society as rampant with horrifying evils like child marriage, enforced seclusion of widows and ever so many other ills (Jayawardena 94); and the educational missionaries engaged in the same type of attack through open persuasion or subtle insinuation in the institutions they ran (Viswanathan 58). Scholars created theories of Indian Aryans as not the sons of the soil but outsiders, like them, invading or migrating and settling in India; administrators like Macaulay told the authorities in London that Indians had no literature that could come anywhere near Shakespeare and other Western masters, and that they could be civilized as Russians were, only by English language and education in place of native education and vernaculars; a civilization several thousand years old was simply denounced and reviled and made to look as if it was nothing; as if India had
nothing in its civilization that it could be proud of. In the face of such shameless inveighing, not even the most docile of babies could have remained silent. India retaliated; it spoke in defence of itself. One strong voice that was heard in the West told everyone who cared to know that the West owed its material wealth, scientific advance and its religion to Asia; that India, (or the people of any country for that matter) ought not to be judged by its weaknesses but by its ideals and its strengths, that in India yet lies the power to rise up again and unite the world with the philosophy of Vedanta and that an era of international and universal brotherhood is at hand and man has only to realize and appropriate this idea. The message of the East was the innate divinity of man and the universal brotherhood of humanity (CW-SV 1:24). The voice was that of Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu monk who represented the oriental religion of Hinduism in the Parliament of Religions held at Chicago as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Many thinking minds in the West heard a message of hope in the voice of Vedanta that spoke through Vivekananda; and, to many minds that were moving away from orthodox Christianity in search of a philosophy that would not stand discredited by the discoveries of science, an answer seemed to lie in Vedanta. Among those who heard the message, a few decided to dedicate their lives to practical Vedanta.

II

Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867-1911) was one such soul that responded to the divine call that sounded through Swami Vivekananda. She became the disciple of a man who believed that what the world most needs are men and women of character, for it was for her purity, sincerity, education, love and above all for her Celtic blood that Swami Vivekananda accepted her as his disciple to work for the women of India. Margaret was born on 28 October 1867 of parents of Scottish origin in Dungannon, County Tyrone. Her father was a clergyman. He was a man of
integrity who thought that caring for the poor would please Christ. Margaret loved her father very much and used to accompany him on his visits to the slums. Unfortunately he died when Margaret was only ten. As a child she had lived with her grandparents who were enthusiastic supporters of Irish Home Rule and "the fiery Irish nature which she had inherited was already well-nourished by their stories of the heroism of Irish patriots fighting for Home Rule" (Foxe 13). Like many daughters of the clergy at that time, Margaret received an education of a high standard combined with a genteel poverty. After her education in Halifax College, Margaret began her career as a teacher. She offered free service for two years in a school for poor girls and was happy to discover the new educational methods propagated by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the Swiss educator, and Friedrich Wilhelm August Froebel, the German educator. Pestalozzi had "developed teaching methods adapted to children's natural development [which form] the basis of modern primary education" (Encarta 1410). Froebel was a disciple of Pestalozzi; he established the first kindergarten and advocated the system of education through kindergarten (Encarta 749). Margaret started a school of her own with the financial help of a rich lady and put into practice there the new methods of Pestalozzi and Froebel she had learnt recently. At this period she also came to know the miserable conditions of the poor coalminers of Wrexham and wrote articles in journals to bring their conditions to the public notice and rouse their conscience to active help for the poor.

The daughter of an orthodox clergyman, Margaret had had enormous religious influences early in her life but the brilliant girl that she was, she started asking questions, to which neither her mother nor her schoolmistresses had an answer. As she grew up into a young woman, it was inevitable that the current thought of Darwinism and free thinking should profoundly influence her. Margaret moved in the circles of free thinkers like G B Shaw, Huxley and Yeats. In politics
she was attracted towards the Socialists. And in religion she found herself turning away from orthodox Christianity. For three years she studied Buddhism and the life and message of the Buddha was a great consolation to her. But yet peace of mind eluded her. She described her mentality at this time in the following words to an audience of Indian ladies who wanted to know how and why she adopted the Hindu religion: “I began to harbour doubts as to the truth of the Christian doctrines ... my faith in Christianity tottered ... For seven years I was in this wavering state of mind, very unhappy, and yet very, very eager to seek the truth” (CW 2: 460). Writing about Margaret when she first met Swami Vivekananda, Pravrajika Gayatriprana (a nun of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, San Francisco) says:

She had courageously channelled her ancestral Celtic flair for political rhetoric into the Irish struggle for justice and freedom ... She had sublimated her intensely loving feminine nature into untiring work to make of herself an independent, self-sufficient and extremely successful woman commanding respect from such intellectual luminaries as Thomas Huxley and George Bernard Shaw. Her sincerity and purity, nurtured by a very living and idealistic brand of Protestant Christianity, had irrevocably embraced the ideal of the sanctity of human conscience that reigns over any external system of institutionalized religion. As an educator she had committed to the ideas, newly emerging in Europe, of drawing out innate knowledge from her pupils by means of direct contact and experience of all modalities of learning – body, emotions, intellect and intuition. Her unwavering determination in whatever she did was supported by her remarkable breadth of vision. Yes, Margaret Noble was Western to the core, firmly grounded in empirical facts and mastery of action in the world and at the same time completely committed to the noblest principles and ideals. Perhaps because she had developed herself so fully she was ready and felt a hunger for something more completely integrative of her diverse accomplishments and ideals. (CS 67)
When Margaret first heard Swami Vivekananda’s lecture she could not understand all that he said about Indian philosophy, nor could she accept immediately what she did understand. She reserved to herself the right to weigh up things. And after listening to a series of lectures and as she came to know his extraordinary love for his motherland, Margaret felt called to offer her life in service of India. Two things in Swami Vivekananda drew her to his mission, as she records in The Master As I Saw Him:

I had recognized the heroic fibre of the man, and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people. But it was to his character to which I had thus done obeisance. As a religious teacher, I saw that although he had a system of thought to offer, nothing in that system would claim him for a moment, if he found that truth led elsewhere. And to the extent that this recognition implies, I became his disciple.

(CW 1: 22)

Greatness of character and devotion to truth – it was these that attracted Margaret to Swami Vivekananda and it was these that she herself strove for and succeeded in achieving. When Margaret Noble came to India, she was, in the words of her friend Eric Hammond, “alive from head to foot, vibrant with intellectual energy... alert in every muscle and movement; eager, enterprising, dauntless. She derived from, and was proud of, Irish ancestry.... She revelled in argument and disputation” (555-58). To these one may add an eager spirit of service and spiritual enquiry.

During her first days in India Margaret had great difficulty in tuning her mind to the thought frequency of her master. It was not unknown or unexpected that as a foreigner - more specifically, someone from the very nation that was in the superior position of ruling India - she would have to face difficulties in achieving a smooth transition to her new environment. But Margaret’s own nature did not make
things easy. Like every other Britisher of her time, she was not free from “notions about bringing civilisation to primitive or barbaric peoples” (Said Culture 11-12).

Three months after her arrival in India, Margaret was initiated into the vows of brahmacharya\textsuperscript{12}, when Swami Vivekananda gave her the new name Nivedita.\textsuperscript{13} After the brief ceremony, Vivekananda asked his disciple to what country she now belonged. He was startled to hear her reply, uttered with a deep passion of loyalty, that it was to England she belonged. The newly-initiated disciple was entirely unaware of the contradictions in her reply as Swamiji perceived it.

Like “most professional humanists,” who, in the words of Edward Said, “are unable to make the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of such practices as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjection on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, and philosophy of the society that engages in these practices on the other” (Culture 14), Margaret could not suspect, much less free herself from, the common consensus to imperialism in the contemporary British society. Like all other decent men and women around her, she was simply unaware of the moral iniquity involved in imperialism. Margaret’s fervent patriotism towards England, except in the question of Ireland, was such that she held that whatever England did was right and noble. In fact, her decision to go to India for service was not free from the average Westerner’s attitude that in going to a colony one was doing something for the empire also. Thus we find her writing to a friend of hers on 10 Feb.1898 about her unsuspecting conviction that “this Movement [the Ramakrishna Movement which she had joined] is no less than the consolidation of the Empire along spiritual lines” (Letters 1: 7). And five months after her arrival in India one finds her “the most loyal English woman that ever breathed in this country” (11). Evidently it had never yet occurred to her to ask herself why her guru
had asked her on the day of initiation to what nation she now belonged. And one
finds her voicing her opinion earnestly in the following letter:

in the course of centuries the Hindu may be equal to the peaceful government of
himself and the Moslem. At present, the only possible chance of that political peace
which is essential to India's social development lies in the presence of the strong
third power, coming from a sufficient distance to be without local prejudice. (14)
(emphasis added)

This was the mentality of Nivedita until Almora.14

Nivedita herself attests to the fact that Swamiji’s discovery of the superficial
way in which the disciple had joined herself with his people did not in any degree
affect his confidence in her or the courtesy shown to her. It speaks volumes for the
faith the master had in his disciple and the patience he was ready to show in this
matter (CW 1:287). He must also be deciding the course that the training this
disciple needed had to take. He must have realised that opportunities must be created
for her to understand India in the right perspective. When two of his American
women disciples, Mrs. Sara C. Bull and Ms Josephine MacLeod, came on a few
months’ visit to India, Swamiji arranged for Margaret’s stay with them before a
permanent arrangement could be made for her. The trio formed a happy group, with
the same fervent admiration for their great master and a readiness to work for his
cause, which was of course India’s. The only difference was that Nivedita would
stay on in India whereas the other two would return to America. First during their
stay in the riverside cottage, and then during their wanderings in Northern India,
Nivedita and the American disciples were drenched in the endless flow of stories
about India that came from Swamiji, revealing the customs of the simple folk and
the glories of the great. They were enchanted by India.
But this was not enough. For, while Swamiji talked, Nivedita was not a passive listener. “As in London and elsewhere, Nivedita argued and fought for her own point of view; and her point of view, as regards England and British imperialism in India, was totally prejudiced” (Foxe 50). There was a strong bias in Nivedita’s reading of India; she idealised the English race and all their deeds in history. Swamiji saw that her “mind must be brought to change its centre of gravity” (CW 1: 287). Once during a conversation, exasperated by the impossibility of getting an unclouded judgement from her, Swamiji exclaimed, “Really, patriotism like yours is sin! All that I want you to see is that most people’s actions are the expression of self-interest, and you constantly oppose to this the idea that a certain race are all angels. Ignorance so determined is wickedness!” (CW 1: 288) And another point where Nivedita showed an equally bitter obstinacy was about woman. As Barbara Foxe, the English biographer of Sr. Nivedita, writes, “woman and the British flag were not subjects that she was prepared to discuss calmly” (50). The same writer offers illuminating comments both on the character of Nivedita and on Swamiji’s wonderful judgement of the situation:

This was at once her great weakness and her great strength; her total loyalty and dedication, wherever she was committed (and he had aptly named her ‘Nivedita’ ‘the dedicated’), always cast its own shadow of prejudice against the other side, of what she calls ‘the blindness of a half-view’ (CW 1: 287). This could make or break her life in India; it could, when she was left alone, leave her vulnerable and totally exposed. For her own sake he gave no quarter, and attacked mercilessly. He had always encouraged the fighter in her, and, still she fought back. (50-51)

Whatever that may be, it must be said to Nivedita’s credit that, amidst all this clash and conflict, it never occurred to her “to retract her own proffered service” (CW 1: 80). But she now realized that there would be no personal sweetness in it. This painful experience came to an end when one of the elderly ladies kindly and
gravely interceded with the Swami, pointing out that the pain inflicted could easily become unbearable. Swamiji agreed and said that he would go away into the forest to bring peace. Before he left, he lifted his hands and blessed his most rebellious disciple, who by this time was kneeling before him. It was a moment of peaceful reconciliation. And the disciple realized the true significance of the blessing that evening: “alone in meditation I found myself gazing deep into an Infinite Good, to the recognition of which no egoistic reasoning had led me” (CW 1: 81). During his own discipleship as Narendra, Swamiji had been as difficult to convince as Nivedita now was.

To Nivedita herself the significance of the blessing lay in the fact that her Master once again proved the truth of Sri Ramakrishna’s prophecy that ‘Noren’ would manifest his own great gift of bestowing knowledge with a touch (CW 1: 80). But in this apparently personal experience of the submission of a proud disciple to a taskmaster of a guru, the former an English lady and the latter an Indian monk, there seems to be an importance beyond their personalities and their individual circumstances. As K.S. Kshirsagar has noted, “this genuine revolution in the mind of the Western disciple of the Swami, was... an event of national significance for India – and perhaps also for Britain. For this daughter of England was destined to fulfil the singular role of explaining ‘the Web of Indian Life’” (NCV 171). And by thus ridding his disciple of pride and prejudice, Swami Vivekananda made it possible for her to enter into the real ethos of the Indian nation and identify herself with the Indian people. Nivedita frankly acknowledges that she understood that “the greatest teachers may destroy in us a personal relation only in order to bestow the Impersonal Vision in its place” (CW 1: 81). We may only add that the impersonal vision vouchsafed to her was not only a personal spiritual experience (which was her immediate experience), but a preparation for the vision of “Bharata Mata” – a true
understanding of Mother India to be attained by her, not so much in any single temporal experience as in an accumulated consciousness.

This could very well be the forerunner of the mutual understanding that should characterise international relationships and foster understanding when all nations will realize that personal pride and racial prejudice should be given up.

Or to adapt the idiom of post-colonial criticism, Swami Vivekananda enabled Nivedita to ‘deimperialise’ her mind so that she would later help Indians to ‘decolonise’ theirs. As Pravrajika Gayatriprana remarks aptly, “in submitting to the guru – disciple relationship Margaret received from Swami Vivekananda several of his new insights into Vedanta that prepared her for her engagement with India and ultimately made of her Nivedita – the dedicated – transcending any cultural limitation” (CS 68).

When Margaret came to India no ~att’~ for women had yet been established. Therefore Swami Vivekananda had to exert the full force of his influence as a spiritual master to make the orthodox Hindu society accept her. But what was most astonishing to Nivedita was the Swamiji’s genius in making her accept the orthodox Hindu society. “He knew how to substitute for the walls of a convent, the Indian people and their customs” (CW 1: 206). For, Swamiji felt it imperative that as a European determined to work among the Indians, Nivedita must needs acquire the Indian consciousness. And the means of arriving at that consciousness was adopting the Hindu customs. “You have to set yourself,” said Swamiji to Nivedita, “to Hinduise your thoughts, your needs, your conceptions, and your habits. Your life, internal and external, has to become all that an orthodox Brahmin Brahmacharini’s ought to be” (CW 1: 206). However, he insisted that she should learn these new ways without confusing the essentials and the non-essentials (CW 1: 203).
The great care with which Swami Vivekananda trained Margaret Noble to make her Nivedita, the one dedicated to India, has often been described as the Indianisation of a Western disciple.\textsuperscript{17} There is truth in this claim because as a result of this training Nivedita came to know intimately both the India of the past centuries from a historical perspective, and her contemporary India and the significance of many of the customs followed daily by the Indians amidst whom she lived. Reminiscing about this painful but salutary experience at Almora, Nivedita wrote two years later to her friend Josephine MacLeod in her letter of 18 January 1900: “how curious this mystery of pain! I see now as clear as daylight – how that awful suffering at Almora made India be born in my heart with all this passion of love” (\textit{Letters 1}: 305) (emphasis added). Fired by this love, Nivedita discovered the greatness of India.

But it will be seen that there was a more basic dimension to this psychological process of inner transformation than just an orientation to India. Nivedita herself perceived it to be so. The basic dimension was the freeing of her mind from preconceived notions about the East in general and India in particular. The psychological process that Fanon mentions by which the Westerner has successfully driven to the unconscious his notions about his superiority or authority complex and the alleged ‘inferiority’ of the colonized (\textit{Black Skins} 147) has also formed Margaret’s mind and she was, for all her intelligence and independence and eagerness to know the truth, a product of her times and was not free from such complexes as characterised the typical Westerner of the nineteenth century. Swami Vivekananda, who, Nivedita describes “was nothing if not a breaker of bondage” (\textit{CW 1}: 67), freed her from these complexes and prejudices. In Nivedita’s own words, “A mind must be brought to change its centre of gravity. It was never more than this; never the dictating of opinion or creed; never more than emancipation from partiality” (287). A mind thus purged of partiality will become capable of
seeing the vital truths about an alien nation, which would no longer continue to be
alien, once a true understanding is arrived at. In this instance that nation happened to
be India. Were it to be Africa Nivedita would have been as capable of understanding
the Negro as she now was of the Indian. A year or two later, Nivedita wanted to
know Swamiji’s opinion about fetishism. In fact, she says she wanted him “to
condemn the fetichism [sic] of the Hottentot.” Swamiji said he did not know what
fetishism was. Then Nivedita presented a lurid picture of the object alternately
worshipped, beaten, thanked. To quote Nivedita for Swamiji’s response:

‘I do that!’ he exclaimed. ‘Don’t you see,’ he went on, a moment later, in hot
resentment of injustice done to the lowly and absent. ‘Don’t you see that there is no
fetichism? Oh, your hearts are sealed, that you cannot see that the child is right! The
child sees person everywhere. Knowledge robs us of the child’s vision. But at last,
through higher knowledge, we win back to it. He connects a living power with
rocks, sticks, trees, and the rest. And is there not a living Power behind them? It is
symbolism, not fetishism! Can you not see?’ (145)

A complex-free, open mind is capable of understanding others, rather the
truth that there are no ‘others’ but only fellow beings, maybe distant, but never the
‘other.’ The schooling she received in Almora was an enabling experience which
prepared Nivedita to understand all fellow-human beings.

Nivedita started her school in a Hindu locality of Calcutta called Bagh Bazar,
in a house close to the house of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. The latter was the
consort of Sri Ramakrishna and the spiritual leader and guide of Sri Ramakrishna
Order after his passing away. She welcomed Nivedita as her daughter and ate with
her; it was revolutionary in those days for a Brahmin widow to eat in the company
of a foreigner and indicated the fact that Nivedita had been completely accepted
(Atmaprana 66). Nivedita considered the Holy Mother to be not only the
embodiment of the old order of Indian women that was passing but also of the new women who were to arise in India (CW 1: 105).

Nivedita lived in India, not as a member of the supercilious ruling community, spurning the company of the natives as if they were a contaminating influence, nor as one of the many missionaries who believed that the great burden of civilizing the ‘barbarous’ natives had devolved upon them, but as a student whose aim was to make “a close and sympathetic study” (CW 2: 381) of an ancient culture. Living as one among the people, she secured their complete trust. They too lived naturally, without any disturbing consciousness of a foreign intruder amidst them. And in accordance with her guru’s advice she learnt to Hinduise her thoughts and habits (CW 1: 206), while retaining an inner objectivity that was born of the best that Western culture had instilled in her from her childhood.

Nivedita had difficulties in making girls from the orthodox neighbourhood attend her school. But her loving and patient nature as well as the fact that she did not try to alienate the students from their culture and religion finally convinced the people. Young girls were sent to her school; in fact it became so popular in the neighbourhood that orthodox people did not hesitate to send even young widows to the school. Thus a separate section called “Purastree Vibhag” was started unostentatiously in the school itself. It had none of the fanfare of Pandita Ramabai’s Home for the Widows. Nivedita taught painting, clay work and sewing in addition to a little reading and writing. When plague broke out in Calcutta the Ramakrishna Order undertook relief work, in which Nivedita had a vital role in sick-nursing, sanitation, mobilizing the students and the youth for the work and fund-raising. The work earned the appreciation of even the Government.21 Nivedita went to the West for lecturing and fund-raising. It was during this tour that she met with great opposition from the missionaries in America and England and defended India with
great force and clarity. But when she returned to India after two years a radical change had occurred in her conception of what she had to do for India.

During her tour of England, the realization slowly dawned on Nivedita that her task was not to influence a few girls but to make the Indians see themselves in the true perspective (Letters 1: 482). From defence of India, then, Nivedita was moving on to a redefining of India, of inspiring India. She set herself the task of inspiring India with the ideals of the old reset for the needs of the modern epoch.

The inner psychological process that slowly drove her to take up this immense task was a complex one, to which we have several clues in her letters. Working in England for India she realized that Swami Vivekananda’s dreams about the spiritual regeneration of India could not be achieved with her work for Indian women and children alone; many other kinds of work were needed. She saw the political need for independence clearly. The conviction was growing upon her greater than ever that she had something to do for grown-up India and for Indian men. Reading Swamiji on Hinduism, she was staggered at the vastness of it and felt that it was too big for any one generation and that it needed a point where she could break his message into easily understandable and appealing ideas. The true programme for India was, in Nivedita’s eyes, to make her turn the British out and work for her own regeneration in her own way. No doubt, Nivedita was thinking ahead of her times; Balagangadhar Tilak had not yet started talking about Swaraj as the Indians’ birthright. Gokale and his followers had not yet had the remotest idea about absolute freedom. When this was the scene at home in India, here was a soul dreaming grand dreams of freedom for her in Norway!22 (This fact will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.) And in this great task of national awakening, Indian women were not to be left out. “Is it not rather by taking the national consciousness of the women like that of the men, and getting it towards greater problems and
responsibilities that one can help? ... I think my task is to awake a nation, not to influence a few women.” (Letters 1: 482-83) But what made this clear vision a matter of great inner strife was the fact that as a monastic member of a spiritual organization, she had no freedom to engage in politics of any kind. Her guru did not approve of any direct involvement in politics. There was a formidable choice before her – obedience to the rules of her monastic life as chalked out by her revered guru or work for the freedom of her beloved India. As long as her master was alive the dilemma continued. When Swami Vivekananda passed away in July 1902, the new authorities of the Ramakrishna Matt wanted her to let them know her position. The conflict in her mind before a final resolution could be thought of is expressed in touching words in the cry of a letter to her friend Ms. MacLeod:

[can] one ... pass onwards to the Altar while one child stands begging for bread with tears in the way? And have you realized how that looks like turning from GOD when you are really only turning from your own salvation and holiness? And have you thought how the world only imagined that it cried for daily bread, and only the great soul of the Buddha knew that it was the bread of life? Oh I see that child always in the way – and his need is dearer to me than any realization. I will not go onwards till he goes before me… (Letters 1: 448)

The child is, of course, India. And Nivedita made the choice. She decided to sacrifice the safety and sense of spiritual companionship of the brother monks of the Order in order to work out the vision that was granted to her (Atmaprana 143). Once having made the choice, Nivedita never looked back. She stormed the cities of India in north, south, east and west with her lecture tours. India was ringing with her message. And the message was the message of Nationality; of immediate termination of British rule in India and Indians' taking upon themselves the rebuilding of the nation, with pride in their nation's past, hope for the future and understanding and work in the present.
Speaking about the radical change in Nivedita's attitude - initially from serving India as a condescending if genuine member of the ruling nation, through establishing a school for girls in a quiet quarter of North Calcutta along national lines, to that of rousing the entire nation to an ideal of national rebuilding, whose first step was to wrest freedom from the colonizing nation - Lizelle Reymond, Nivedita's French biographer, says, “This was a long distance from that early point of view which had heralded Swami Vivekananda's work as an aid to Britain's peaceful domination of India! But it was characteristic of Margaret Noble's mind that she was never afraid of growth or change” (232). Mother India had become her Ishta, the supreme object of her devotion, in which she perceived the aim of her life. Henceforth Nivedita was accorded by the people of India the same love and honour as was accorded to a national leader, for it came to be known through out the country that she had a vision for India's future that even the most daring among the Indian patriots did not have. In her lectures and writings Nivedita spoke the one message of the freedom and regeneration of Mother India, towards the achievement of which Indians had to assimilate the ideals of nationality, civic responsibility, national education, elevation of women and the people. Indian politicians discussed national problems with her, artists were inspired by her ideas about the new art in India; the youth revered her as their guru and there was even a group of fair-minded Europeans who were her friends and of course sympathizers in India's cause. As A.J.F. Blair, a European contemporary of Nivedita wrote, “her influence over Young Bengal was greater than most people have ever suspected, [so] that she probably did more to create an atmosphere of unrest than all the newspapers in the world” (Grover and Arora 391). As the Government grew oppressive the people became more militant. Nivedita helped all who worked for India: Swadeshi, Bodh Gaya, Indian science, Indian art – all received the invaluable contribution of this dynamic daughter of India. All through these activities Nivedita had been recording her
thoughts in writing. Personal loss caused by death of friends in India and abroad on
the one hand and the increased repression of the Government at home made Nivedita
withdraw inward. As the soul was slowly and surely being absorbed in peace and
meditation the overworked body dropped down in death quietly in the silent hills of
Darjeeling on 13 October 1911, uttering a prayer for the peacefulness of all creatures
of the earth and for the deliverance of the spirit into the undying Reality.

III

Of the five volumes of writings of Sr. Nivedita now available, Kali the
Mother (1900), Lambs among Wolves – Missionaries in India (1901), The Web of
Indian Life (1904), An Indian Study of Love and Death (1905), Aggressive
Hinduism (1905), Cradle Tales of Hinduism (1907), Glimpses of Famine and Flood
in Bengal in 1906 (1907), The Master As I Saw Him (1910) and The Northern
Thirtha – A Pilgrim’s Diary (1911) were published in book-form in her own life
time. Many of her writings were contributed to a number of newspapers and
journals; some appeared in single issues and some were published serially. The
articles and writings published in her own life time in journals and posthumously
published as books are Civic and National Ideals (1911) Notes of Some Wanderings
with the Swami Vivekananda (1913), Studies from an Eastern Home (1913), Hints
on Indian National Education (1914), Religion and Dharma (1915) and Footfalls of
Indian History (1915). In addition, there were many articles that were lying scattered
in journals, newspapers and manuscripts, which have been collected and published
as Lectures and Articles in the fifth volume of the Complete Works of Sr.Nivedita.

A study of Nivedita’s works will impress on the reader the great love that she
bore for India, which was not mere emotionalism. The adage that to love is to
understand is fulfilled in her case. But in order to bring out the complex
achievement that lies behind this understanding, the works need to be studied in the light of postcolonial criticism, especially of Edward Said’s ground-breaking work *Orientalism*. Hence the basic premises of postcolonial theory as seen in *Orientalism* will now be traced briefly.

Twenty-five years after the first publication of his *Orientalism*, Edward Said was still convinced of the truth of the basic premises of his book:

There is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge — if that is what it is — that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. There is after all a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons ... and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion. (*Orientalism* Preface xix)

Sr.Nivedita, as this study will show, was a great humanist of the former kind — who succeeded in understanding for peaceful co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons.

But the history of Orientalism shows that such an understanding was not commonly arrived at and that what was common was rather a powerful structure of attitudes and references that fed the European ambition for rule over the Orient. Orientalism is a product of circumstances that are “fundamentally, indeed radically, fractious.” (*Orientalism* Preface xvi) It is that fractious attitude which divides humanity as ‘self’ and the ‘other’, as ‘we’ and “they”, as “center” and “margin”, with the implication that the European is always the superior ‘self’, ‘we’, ‘centre’, while the Oriental is ‘the other’, ‘they’ and the ‘margin’, who is less than human and is ever in need of the centre’s attention. This fundamental world-view of Orientalism in terms of binary divisions has a long history in Europe, which had led to
unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations; thus Orientalism is a Western fantasy resulting from "the West's dreams, fantasies, and assumptions about what this radically different, contrasting place contains" (McLeod 41).

Said takes the late eighteenth century as "a very roughly defined starting point ... for Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Orientalism 3). But this "Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient" (95) took several forms, concealing this tendency for domination. In the eighteenth century the regeneration of Europe by Asia was a very influential Romantic idea. This interest in Asia was accompanied by interest in comparative studies; there was also a tendency for sympathetic identification, though often selective. A fourth element of Romantic Orientalism is the tendency to classify nature and men into types. According to Edward Said it is on these four elements that the specific intellectual and institutional structures of modern Orientalism depend (114-20). Even here the will to dominate was never far away. The self-conception of the Westerner interested in the Orient was that of a hero rescuing the obscure, alienated and strange orient.

It is surprising to note that such an attitude is true not only of the run of ordinary human beings who people this earth but also of such acknowledged world-thinkers as Karl Marx. Said proves how Westerners' belief that a fundamentally lifeless Asia is to be regenerated by the West is "a piece of pure Romantic Orientalism" (154). Orientalism as a discipline had its roots in nineteenth century revolutionary Romanticism. It believed solemnly that the West had a redemptive project in the Orient, in which the Oriental peoples were less important as human beings than as an element in the West's project for the East. Thus Marx, in spite of his sympathy for the suffering involved in the process of social revolution to be caused in Asia, believed that it was an inevitable historical process by engaging in
which England was only fulfilling the destiny of mankind. The West is identified with “mankind” and Hindustan is less than human – a guinea pig for social revolutions to be experimented upon by the representative of mankind, namely England. Marx had no qualms in stating categorically that “England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of the Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (Said Orientalism 154).

That a man whose sympathy for the misery of people is evident in his economic analysis should also express the above view only indicates the power of Romantic Orientalism to chase away human sympathy and usurp all emotional and intellectual fervour for generalization to itself.

Hegel, the German philosopher, was no exception to the influence of Orientalism. To him “the diffusion of Indian culture is only a dumb, deedless expansion; that is, it presents no political action” (142). In his view the people of India had not achieved any foreign conquest and therefore were a negation of themselves and were obliged to submit to the fate of Western domination. From this romantic Orientalism of Hegel springs that other belief that among the Oriental people “all internal morality is absent” (Hegel 150). Hegel the philosopher avers that the unity of spirit that characterizes the Hindu spirit is a dreaming unity that results in a bewilderment at all phenomena. Hindus are “avaricious, deceitful and voluptuous” (159). They are ruled by “a despotism without a principle, without any rule of morality or religion” (161). It is amazing how a world-renowned philosopher could indulge in sweeping generalizations condemning an entire civilisation as the creation of creatures unworthy of the name of human beings. This is orientalism, pure and simple.
In this context it is to be noted that in the passage quoted in the beginning of this chapter, Hegel talks of India’s material and spiritual resources as attracting the European without any shift of emphasis in the views noted here as to the general depravity of Indians. Both the quotation in the beginning and the views summarized above are from the same chapter in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*.

An interesting exception to this kind of Orientalist misunderstanding is Richard Burton, who, in the nineteenth century reveals a rare “consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behaviour”. These details about Burton have a resemblance to Nivedita’s engagement with India. But the resemblance between the methods adopted to arrive at an understanding of the other by Burton and Nivedita, while being noteworthy, is rather a superficial one. True. Burton went to the extent of sharing the life of the Arabs, spoke their language, and, disguised as an Indian Muslim, accomplished the pilgrimage to Mecca. But even Burton, who chose to share the life of the Orient, is not free from the European ambition for rule over the Orient (Said *Orientalism* 196). Nivedita aimed at and achieved a true understanding of India, not as one with a potential for domination but as one who loved, learnt from, served and also taught India.

Moving on to the late nineteenth century Europe, one finds it absorbed in theories of race, language and civilisations that divided humanity into a white European race that was born to rule and non-white inferior races to be content with being governed (Said *Orientalism* 232). The continuity in these half-views and prejudices has earned for them permanence among the Westerners so that in the twenty first century America is seen waging war on Iraq, employing the same rhetoric of Orientalism (Preface xviii).
In the following pages, an attempt is made to present a critical study of the writings of Sr.Nivedita from the point of view of “understanding the other.” Integrating this approach with the motif of discovery and defence of India already evident in Swami Vivekananda, a critical appreciation of Nivedita’s writings as demonstrating her discovery and defence of India as a process generated by the humanistic spirit of understanding the other is made. It is shown how Nivedita’s writings offer a refreshing phenomenon of a discourse that is remarkably free from the characteristic structures and attitudes of orientalism.

As one devoted to work for India in the fields of social studies, politics, art and ethics, Nivedita was not committed to major literary forms like novels or poetry or drama. Her chief claim to a permanent place among English writers lies in her prose compositions, which, in spite of their themes noted above, are not sociological works, or political writings. They are singularly literary in their merits, in that they exhibit a great variety of forms and style, and possess features like emotion, imagination, imagery and capacity for negative capability, which render them literary.

A brief survey of the literature available on Nivedita follows now, as also a justification for this study. The survey considers only those writings on Nivedita published in English, either as originally written in English or translated, known to this scholar. It does not include in its purview those in any Indian languages.

Works available in India and abroad on Nivedita, as far as this scholar has been able to trace, fall into three categories: 1) Biographies and biographical writings; 2) Appreciations of her sociological, political, artistic, religious and philosophical writings; 3) Criticism of her writings from the literary point of view.
To the first category belong the three biographies of Nivedita: 1) The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita (1953) by Lizelle Reyeom, her first biographer. This has been translated into English from the French original. 2) Sr. Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda (1967) by Pravrajika Atmaprana is “a careful and accurate account of Nivedita’s life” (Foxe Preface 9) by a member of the spiritual organization that developed out of the nucleus of the Girls’ School originally started by Nivedita herself. 3) Long Journey Home: A Biography of Margaret Noble (Nivedita) (1975) is by Barbara Foxe, an English writer of short stories and plays, who has also written on various aspects of Vedanta. Nivedita As I Saw Her is a small but valuable book of reminiscences, originally written in Bengali shortly after the death of Nivedita, translated into English and published in 1999. This book by Smt. Saralabala Sirkar, a Bengali writer of the early twentieth century, is of special value as it is by one who had close personal association with Nivedita in her school work and is thus a record of first-hand knowledge. Occidental Daughters of Mother India is a work in three volumes, narrating the significance of Nivedita’s life and work in India in comparison with those of Annie Besant, the Mother of Pondicherry and Mother Teresa. Again the emphasis is on the character and achievement of the eminent servants of humanity; but what is significant here is that the basic similarities of the circumstances of the lives of the four personalities - Western women, dedicated to God and service to humanity, adopting an Eastern land as their home – have attracted critical attention. Eminent Orientalists – Indian, European, American, a book of biographical sketches of eminent orientalists, published from Madras (now Chennai) by G.A. Natesan & Co., contains an interesting essay on Nivedita. Apart from these life-stories there are several reminiscences and memorial articles written by her friends, disciples and students, both European and Indian. Two anthologies (Sister Nivedita: Pioneer in Missionaries Works (sic) by one S.R.Bakshi and Sister Nivedita: A Biography of
Her Vision and Ideas by Verinder Grover and Ranjana Arora) have also appeared which give a brief sketch of her life and provide selections from her works without any critical appreciation. As can be expected, in all these writings, Nivedita’s importance to Indians as a woman of great dedication, renunciation and selfless service is highlighted, while her writings receive minimal attention as literary works. Nivedita is not entirely forgotten in India; and yet, the fact remains that she is not properly understood either.

The sociological ideas of Nivedita seem to have attracted the attention of some Indian scholars. How she pursued a study of the creative ideals behind the social forms of the Hindu society forms the theme of Sr.Nivedita in Search of Humanity: A Study in Social and Political Ideas by a Bengali scholar, Dr. Santana Mukherjee of the University of Kolkata.

Among the materials that the present scholar could get hold of, there seems to be no separate book on the ethical, philosophical or artistic views of the author under study. But there are several articles on the above themes included in works like Nivedita Commemoration Volume, brought out by the Nivedita Centenary Celebrations Committee in 1968 and the Centenary Souvenir 1998 released by Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls’ School, Kolkata. In these articles Indian and Western scholars assess Nivedita’s contribution in the fields of sociology, politics, art, ethics, religion and philosophy.

It is while looking for assessments of the literary significance of Nivedita’s writings that one meets with a near total eclipse. There seems to be no full-fledged critical assessment of her works. Post-colonial critics interested in feminist writings in India show scant interest in her writings. In a book of the New Critical Idiom series, Colonialism/Postcolonialism, the following is all that the author, Ania
Loomba, has to say about Nivedita, while discussing European women’s relation to colonial discourses:

[imperial women’s] writings demonstrate an enormous range of attitudes and ideologies: at one end of the spectrum, we have the outpourings of a Katherine Mayo, whose *Mother India* was a virulent attack on Indian culture, and, at the other, there were women like Annie Besant who became part of the Indian nationalist struggle. More difficult to assess is someone like the Irishwoman Margaret Noble, who became a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, adopted the name Sr. Nivedita and defended Indian culture by romanticizing some of its most patriarchal practices. (170-71)

The Sri Lankan feminist scholar Kumari Jayawardena’s book *The White Woman’s Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* devotes a chapter to Nivedita, “casting an Asian feminist gaze” on her activities (Preface x). The gaze also being Marxist, Nivedita’s views on Indian society, Hindu religion and civilization come under sharp criticism for being ‘patriarchal.’ According to Jayawardena, “she was the defender of the indefensible – Kali worship, and traditional Hindu family practices (183). The writer also notes how, “at a time of incipient nationalism … [Nivedita spoke] of her hopes for Indian unity and a national awakening” (192). Nivedita’s “devotion to India and to traditional Hindu social practice” makes her “message to the women of India a more questionable one” (194).

Jayawardena refers to an article by one Barbara Ramusack, entitled “Sister India or Mother India? Margaret Noble and Katherine Mayo as Interpreters of the Gender Roles of Indian Women” and to a book by one R. K. Shastri, *The Bombshell of Today,* both these works this scholar could not obtain. Other postcolonial writers consulted by this scholar have little or nothing to say about the author under study. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, editors of a valuable collection of two volumes of
writings by Indian women, original and translation into English, called *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present*, have literally unearthed many unknown women writers of the twentieth century. But they have not included any of the writings of Nivedita.

This takes us to another question of interest and importance: is Nivedita to be considered an English writer proper or an Indian writing in English? By birth she was British and she wrote in her mother tongue. Hence she may be considered as an English writer. But in spirit she was Indian through and through and the one constant theme of all her writings was India, so much so that one writer calls her “the India-obsessed Sister” (NCV 276). It is only proper that India claim her for her own. But the truth remains that India has not done so. In the official *History of Indian English Literature* published by the Sahitya Academi, authored by M.K. Naik, a long section is devoted to the writings of the period 1857-1920. These decades represent the winds of change blowing in the Indian political horizon and cover the period after the Great Rebellion up to the appearance of Gandhi. This is where Nivedita belongs chronologically as a literary writer on India. But not even a casual mention of her name is made there.

The cause of this omission in the Sahitya Academi book is the criterion for selection adopted by the author. Naik, while spelling out the nature and scope of Indian English Literature, writes: “Strictly speaking, Indian English literature may be defined as literature written originally in English (emphasis in the original) by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality” (emphasis added) (2). This means that it is not because her writings lack literary merit, then, but rather because she was not born in India to Indian parents that Nivedita was not included there. This is rather an unhappy criterion, for it keeps out of the picture such Occidental daughters of Mother India (who were all Indian by choice, if not by birth and have left behind
significant writing) as Mrs. Annie Besant, Sr. Nivedita, Mira Behn, and the Mother of Pondicherry. Of them all, the one most passionately devoted to India was Sr. Nivedita.

But Naik recognizes certain exceptions to his definition of Indian English Literature when he states that “there are exceptional cases like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala.”(3) The reasons he adduces for considering the above writers as exceptions leaves one wondering why may we not, by the same token, consider all the above four women as a special category of Indians writing in English. With regard to Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Naik justifies his acceptance of her as an Indian English writer in the following words:

As for Jhabvala, she is virtually an international phenomenon. Born of Polish parents in Germany, she received her education in English, married an Indian, lived in India for more than twenty years, and has written in English. This daughter-in-law of India (though a rebellious one, in her later work) shows such close familiarity and deep understanding of Indian social life ... that she rightly found a place in the history of Indian English literature. (3)

Naik feels that there is even a stronger case for Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who was “born of a Sri Lankan Tamil father and an English mother, [and thus] was neither an Indian citizen nor did he live in India; and yet the entire orientation of his thought is so unmistakably Indian that it is impossible not to consider him an Indian English writer” (3) (emphasis in the original).

If Naik could argue that it is impossible not to consider Coomaraswamy as an Indian English writer on the strength of the fact that “the entire orientation of his thought is so unmistakably Indian” or that Jhabvala is an Indian writer by virtue of her “close familiarity and deep understanding of Indian social life” (3), there should certainly be no objection to recognizing Sr. Nivedita as an Indian writer in English; for, not only is the entire orientation of her thought so unmistakably Indian and not
only do her writings display a close familiarity and deep understanding of Indian social life but it is well-known that she became the disciple of an Indian spiritual master, adopted an Indian name and lived the rest of her life in India, refusing even to leave the Hindu quarters of Kolkata, and of course succeeded in learning "to act and think and feel like an Indian woman (CW 2: 450)," to say the least.

It is sad that efforts have not been made in the hundred years after her death to recognise Nivedita’s invaluable contribution to India in all its ramifications. The loss is India’s. In the passage of time what remains to tell us of Nivedita’s contribution to India are her writings and, if not for any other reason than for what she has done for India, they must be considered, so that posterity will not forget one of the great women “who gave her all to India.”

But a close analysis of Nivedita’s writings will show that they possess a literary merit of their own, on the strength of which alone she may be considered as an Indian writer of consequence in English of her period. It is true that Nivedita’s writings are unknown to anybody today and forgotten for long. But this oblivion does not prove the absence of merit in the author. It is precisely because the writer who deserves critical attention for both the themes and the literary merit of her works has been forgotten that she is now taken up for study. Nivedita’s rightful place is with Indian writers like Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, with whom she belongs chronologically and more importantly in the themes and attitude adopted in her writings.

In the present study the scholar wishes to bring to light Nivedita’s relevance to the Indian mind. For it is imperative to any Indian who has concern for his country to understand that India suffers from the West and that Nivedita’s concern is exactly with this suffering. Nivedita’s writings have a force that would help Indians become conscious of how degrading the Western impact on India had been – a force that comes from her life and informs her committed writing. Nivedita’s importance
to Indians needs to be emphasized. In the heyday of imperialism, she dared to live the life of spirit in India, with a mind that had absorbed the ancient wisdom of India. Nivedita’s life is distinguished as that of a saint of values (in other words, she is what one would have called in former times a ‘rishi’) and her writings are the reflections of those values. The enormous sufferings she had undergone in understanding and adopting the way of life of the Hindus and the success she achieved in rightly interpreting it not only to the Westerners but to Indians themselves – compel one to think that one who understood and interpreted India as deeply and lucidly as Nivedita deserves our attention and appreciation.

Nivedita came to India at a time when Indians themselves were mad after Westernisation. The process of unthinking imitation of the West still continues. At a time when Indians are prepared to be Westernized, she has reminded them in strongest terms why they should know what they are losing by forgetting what is their own in preference to something they do not fully understand. There is no doubt that for India there is much to learn from the West, from the great and enduring achievements of the West. But that cannot be properly assessed if it is not understood in what relation to India the West stands. The relation between the West and India has been one of domination and subjection, politically, economically and, most seriously of all, culturally. This is what Nivedita has taken up as her subject. For the Indian mind in general has not fully apprehended all the implications of Westernisation. A study of Nivedita’s writings will make Indians aware of those aspects in the process of Western domination over India to which they are now blind. For, all discussed are historically situated, and Nivedita’s not only spring

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There is another reason for the choice of this author. In the twentieth century Indian Writing in English has established itself not only as literature attracting the attention of educated Indians as general readers but also as a subject worthy of
critical attention by scholars, both Indian and Western. This favourite literary climate has encouraged the present scholar to think on the following line: 'why not her English, which is much better than that of many Indians writing in English?' For it can be shown that she has expressed herself clearly and forcefully enough. Whether her writing will merit comparison with acknowledged masters of English prose or not, one might be excused if one's estimation of Nivedita exceeds a little her merits. For she has given powerful expression to the aspects of a great civilization like the Indian civilization in a manner that even many Indian-born writers have not done.

But what is special in the circumstances is that being a member of the ruling British nation she chose to understand the subject race from the inside and succeeded in that attempt. Thus the question of understanding the other assumes added relevance in her case.

Hence this work has been undertaken with the hope of establishing the thematic relevance of Nivedita’s writings in the special context of understanding the other, leading to a profound discovery and defence of India, as well as demonstrating their literary merit.

The main body of the thesis has a tripartite division, discussing the discovery, defence and programme for reconstruction of India by Nivedita. Two chapters are devoted to Nivedita’s discovery of India and one chapter each for her defence and inspiring message to India, followed in the sixth chapter by a discussion of the literary merits of her writings.

Chapter Two of the thesis concentrates on Nivedita’s discovery of the domestic life of the Indians, their customs, festivals and institutions. Nivedita’s understanding and assessment of the national literature of India, namely the two
epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the important philosophical tenets of India are shown in Chapter Three. It is shown that ultimately what Nivedita discovers are the Indian character and the ideals that inform Indian civilization. Her tendency for constant comparison of the Indian civilisation with the Western, as also her capability for this comparison, is pointed out. Nivedita’s discovery of India, especially her ideas on Indian women, is compared with the well-known assessment of India by Katherine Mayo and with the criticism of South Asian postcolonial critics and Nivedita’s relative position is arrived at.

Chapter Four deals with what Nivedita had to say in defence of India. Critical analysis is directed to answering questions such as whether her love of India makes her partisan, and what her attitude to Britain was. It traces the various types of attack on India and her answers to them all.

Chapter Five is related to the change of perspective in Nivedita resulting in a move from defence of India to a redefining of India to Indians themselves. Nivedita’s ideas on nationality are considered in the light of post-colonial criticism of nationalism while her views on the question of women are compared with postcolonial feministic views. A charge generally levelled at Nivedita is that she overlooks some of the very real problems of Indian women of her times and romanticizes the ones she takes note of. It is shown how Nivedita’s concept of national righteousness and dynamic orthodoxy hold the key to the answers to such charges.

Chapter Six begins with a brief treatment of the structure and style of Nivedita’s writings, giving many illustrations. The second section of the chapter analyses the concept of rishihood in ancient India and the conclusion is arrived at that the ability to perceive subtle truths and the ideals at work in any given situation,
high ethical standard and the brevity and poetry of utterances make Nivedita a modern rishi. It is pointed out that she is a discoverer of the laws that govern social life, and that the concept of National Righteousness is her significant contribution to Indian and world thought.

The brief final chapter concludes the study with a summing up of the findings of the previous chapters, followed by conclusions arrived at from them. Possible areas of further study in Nivedita are also suggested.