The Hindu Cosmopolitanism of Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble): An Irish Self in Imperial Currents

Ankur Barua
University of Cambridge; ab309@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble), a prominent disciple of the Hindu guru Swami Vivekananda, creatively reconfigured some traditional Vedantic vocabularies to present the "cosmo-national" individual as one who is not antithetical to but is deeply immersed in the densities of national locations. As we situate Nivedita's "vernacular cosmopolitanism" in post-Saidian academic cultures, one of the most striking features of her reiteration of the theme that Indians should seek the universal in and through the particularities of their national histories, cultural norms, and religious systems is that it is grounded in an East-West binary, where specific values, sensibilities, and themes are attributed to each pole—primarily material to the Western and spiritual to the Eastern. The locations of her life and thought within this binary generate a complex combination of certain highly perceptive readings of Eastern styles of living; spiritual idealizations and ahistorical romanticizations of some traditional Hindu beliefs, traditions, and customs; global visions of internationalist exchanges across humanity; and pointed critiques of the operations of empire—while, occasionally, she can herself challenge the binary as an inexact classification.

Keywords

Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Vedanta, cosmopolitanism, Indo-Irish Relations.

HTR 113:1 (2020) 1–23

Introduction

Recent debates on the theme of cosmopolitanism have revolved around the questions of whether, and how, individuals who inhabit specific locations across the world—with each location shaped by its concrete particularities—can also imagine and practice visions of belonging to global horizons. The perspective of "one world" looms large in these debates, as scholars from a variety of academic perspectives, such as political theory, moral philosophy, and others, argue whether the cultivation of a sense of translocal belonging is compatible with an affective identification with one's localized roots. Some of these arguments have important precursors in the socioreligious contexts of Bengal around the turn of the twentieth century, as various intellectuals, writers, and social reformers sought to universalize forms of traditional Hinduism, and to project Hindus, and people of the world more generally, as members of a global family. One of the best known of these figures was the poet-thinker Rabindranath Tagore, who attempted, through some of his novels, poems, and writings on political themes, to configure forms of universal humanism that were yet grounded in the milieus of Indic cultures, sensibilities, and spiritualities. Tagore's contemporary, the Irishwoman Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867–1911), who was given the name Sister Nivedita ("the dedicated") by her guru, Swami Vivekananda, also utilized some traditional Vedantic Hindu themes to develop a form of cosmopolitanism that was both firmly entrenched in Indian socioreligious idioms and directed toward ever-widening circles of global consciousness. As we will see, Nivedita's complex set of cultural affiliations and affective identifications—she was perceived as a member of the ruling race in India and also as a female disciple of a Hindu guru—shaped her distinctive understandings of the cosmopolitan or, to use her own term, "cosmo-national" individual as one who is not antithetical to but is deeply immersed in the densities of national locations.

The Cosmopolitan Contours of Nivedita's Life

The construction of universalist perspectives was a key aspect of such socioreligious movements as the Brahmo Samaj, founded by Rammohun Roy in 1828 and revived by Debendranath Tagore in 1842, and, later, the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. These universalisms sought to rework conceptual materials from classical Hindu texts such as the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, even as they actively engaged with a range of Western thinkers, writers, and social reformers and forged modernist forms of Hinduisms that would not be bound to categories such as caste, nationality, and ethnicity.[1] Some of the characteristic moves undertaken by these Hindu forms of self-understanding, which were forged against the backdrop of empire, can illuminate an ongoing debate on whether outlooks that are characterized as "cosmopolitan" are compatible with

[1] Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000324 Published online by Cambridge University Press

affirmations of localized belongings.[2] The literature on cosmopolitanism bristles with diverse formulations of the term, ranging from moral cosmopolitanism, which states that all human beings are of equal concern, to political cosmopolitanism, which seeks to promote global spaces of cosmopolitan governance within which people's moral worth can be recognized. A recurring theme in these discussions is whether the invocation of transnational styles of belonging or ethical universals involves featureless generalizations that are disconnected from the specificities of cultural contexts.[3] Responding to this critique that "cosmopolitanism" can flatten local differences in universalist projections, Ulrich Beck argues for a cosmopolitan "recognition of otherness," which rejects both the totalitarian impulses of universalism and the absolutization of difference. Such a cosmopolitanism, which affirms universal norms without erasing particularities, would be a "contextual universalism," where the terms "contextual" and "universal" mutually complement each other.[4] Some other theorists of cosmopolitanism have argued in this vein that the "universal" and the "local" should not be set as diametrically opposed poles but should be brought together in concepts such as "vernacular cosmopolitanism," "cosmopolitan patriotism," "rooted cosmopolitanism," and others, which highlight the simultaneous intertwining of, on the one hand, the local, the parochial, and the demotic, and, on the other hand, the translocal, the transnational, and the universalist.[5] According to these understandings, cosmopolitan individuals would remain rooted in local moral communities—the family, the town, and so on—while seeking to transcend a narrowly circumscribed sense of self and to cultivate moral responsibility for others.[6]

During her decades in Bengal, Nivedita sought to forge such a "rooted cosmopolitanism," where individuals would remain bound to their distinctive cultural forms of living, while also moving beyond their indigenous horizons through the enlargement of their conceptual outlooks and their affective sensibilities. Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born in Dungannon, Ireland, to a Protestant family that was moderately supportive of Home Rule. After meeting Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895, she followed his subsequent lectures in England during 1895–1896, and arrived in India in January 1898. She was initiated by Swami Vivekananda in March 1898 and received the name "Nivedita." To live in accordance with the social mores of an orthodox Hindu woman, she observed zenana restrictions in

[2] Introduction to *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (ed. Gillian Brock and Harry Brighouse; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 1–9, at 2–3.

[3] Angela Taraborrelli, *Contemporary Cosmopolitanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 89.

[4] Ulrich Beck, "The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach," *Common Knowledge* 10 (2004) 430–49, at 438–40.

[5] Pnina Werbner, "Paradoxes of Postcolonial Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in South Asia and the Diaspora," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism* (ed. Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka; Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) 107–23, at 109.

[6] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 91–114, at 97.

her home in the Hindu quarters of Calcutta. On the day of the feast of the goddess Kālī in November 1898, she opened her school for girls, and she was involved in disinfection programs during the 1899 plague epidemic.

In a lecture in October 1902 at the Hindu Ladies' Social Club, Bombay, Nivedita herself was to provide a good summary of the first part of her life in England and the years immediately after she arrived in Bengal. She writes that until the age of eighteen she was "trained and educated as English girls are." Christian religious teachings were instilled in her from an early age, and she devotedly worshipped and loved Jesus for his sacrificial offering of himself on the cross for the salvation of humanity. However, from the age of eighteen, she began to harbor doubts about the truths of Christian doctrines and remained in a "wavering state of mind" for seven years, even though she was seeking the truth. She stopped going to church on a regular basis, and yet she would at times rush there in the hope of finding some peace. Around this time, she read a life of the Buddha and found that a child had lived in India several centuries before Christ, whose "sacrifices were no less self-abnegating than those of the other." She undertook a deep study of Buddhism, and became convinced that the "salvation [the Buddha] preached was decidedly more consistent with the truth than the preachings of the Christian religion." Around this time, at a crucial moment, a cousin of the British viceroy Lord Ripon invited her to have tea with him and a swami from India, who he said might be able to help her in her spiritual quest. From the teachings of this Swami Vivekananda, her "doubting spirit" received the peace that it had been seeking for a long time. After several discussions with him, and pondering on his teachings for more than a year, her doubts began to be dispelled (*CW* 2:470–71).[7]

Her life and activities during her final decade have been a subject of scholarly debate, especially with respect to her "Irish" influence on the development of Bengal revolutionary movements.[8] According to Maina Singh, political activism was Nivedita's central concern from the years 1902 to 1911. While she is usually viewed simply as a spiritual follower of Swami Vivekananda, Singh seeks to "complicate this sanitised image of *sanyāsini* [female ascetic] and suggest a different Nivedita: a woman with a strong public and political profile in contemporary Bengal." Her life was not governed merely by some form of a passive renunciation, for she was "driven by fiery anticolonial sentiments and advocated an aggressive brand of Hinduism."[9] She was associated with some prominent men of her times, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Jagdish Chandra Bose—both of whom were intellectuals associated with the Brahmo Samaj—and the "moderate" political

[7] Sister Nivedita, *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita* (5 vols.; Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1967). Henceforth, *CW* (page references appear in parentheses within the text).

[8] Gwilym Beckerlegge, "The 'Irishness' of Margaret Noble/Sister Nivedita," *Prabuddha Bharati* 122 (2017) 118–36, at 133.

[9] Maina Singh, "Political Activism and the Politics of Spirituality: The Layered Identities of Sister Nivedita/Margaret Noble (1867–1911)," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire* (ed. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor; Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 39–57, at 40.

leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale, with whose political standpoints she did not always agree. She published articles, sometimes using pseudonyms, in nationalist papers such as Aurobindo Ghose's *Bande Mataram* and *Yugantar* and the periodical *New India*, established by another Irishwoman in India, Annie Besant. Singh concludes, however, that while the politics of the Irish nationalist struggle could have resurfaced in her campaigns for Indian self-rule, the "biographical sources are sharply divided regarding Nivedita's involvement with the revolutionaries of the day," and Nivedita herself does not mention any links with these revolutionary associations in her writings.[10]

Thus, as Kumari Jayawardena has noted, there are multiple images of Nivedita: a disciple of Swami Vivekananda; an Irish revolutionary; a promoter of Indian cultural values; and, for some, even "the defender of the indefensible—Kali worship, and traditional Hindu practices."[11] Against the backdrop of these biographical vignettes into Nivedita's Bengal years, we will see how she attempted, in her voluminous writings on matters ranging widely from ancient Indian history to social reform to Vedanta to movements in European thought to the Bengal *swadeshi* ("home rule") movement to the Hindu goddess Kālī, to forge modes of Indian identity that were simultaneously cosmopolitan. Nivedita writes that the "modern mind" is characterized by a comprehensive understanding of different parts of the globe. The exploration of the surface of the earth, made possible by railways and steamboats, has led to a "clash of faiths and cultures," so that people can try to understand any matter not merely in terms of its local contexts but as part of a global scheme of knowledge (*CW* 3:513). The chief characteristic of the "modern period" is that sharp divergences in religious beliefs, local customs, aesthetic sensitivities, social organizations, and political outlooks are losing their parochial specificities, in the direction of consolidation and internationalism (*CW* 4:259). However, even as people are becoming parts of interconnected systems, the truly "cosmo-national," Nivedita argues, can only emerge in and through the sites of the local. While provincialism is a great error, the consciousness of belonging to one world does not develop easily. Just as only that tree which is firmly rooted in its own soil can blossom perfectly, only those individuals who are situated in a local environment and who fulfill their civic duty can rise to the status of the cosmopolitan: "Only the fully national can possibly contribute to the cosmo-national" (*CW* 3:514). As a "cosmo-national" Irishwoman herself, located on Hindu Bengali soil, Nivedita often highlighted her new status as a daughter of the adoptive land of India. She declares, in an October 1902 lecture in Bombay, that Indian women should not abandon the "simplicity and sobriety" of their domestic spaces or the great literatures of the East, which will uplift them, and she appeals to them in the following effusive terms: "You, my sisters, each of whom I dearly love for being the daughter of this

[10] Ibid., 47–49.

[11] Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial rule* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 183.

lovely land of India, each of you I urge [you] to study the grand literatures of your East in preference to the literatures of the West." They are the daughters of her "land of adoption," where she seeks to continue the work of her guru Vivekananda (*CW* 2:471–72). She has gone to India for the education of Indian girls, knowing that she would have to live with them and understand their points of view, while developing a system of education that was organically connected with materials taken from their own lives. She has received, she tells her audience, not hostility but a warm welcome, and she was greeted not with suspicion but with friendship (*CW* 2:453–54).

Vernacular Cosmopolitanisms at the Intersections of East and West

The cosmopolitan strands running through Nivedita's works are shaped by the Orientalist projection of the world as structured by an East-West binary, with the caveat that the two units should be viewed not as mutually opposed but as complementary poles, where the West would provide models of institutional self-organization and the East would contribute its deep spiritual wisdom. The Eastern countries are going through a period of "constructive adjustment," where their deep religious consciousness has to be placed side by side with Western secular notions of industrial organization, civic spirit, and social welfare (*CW* 5:35). While the doctrine that the world is an illusion has led to an indifference to material conditions, the enthusiasm with which Western nations have worked with these conditions has led them down the path of materialism and self-interest. What we therefore need, Nivedita argues, is a "movement towards equilibrium" from the sides of both East and West (*CW* 2:426–27). Again, Christianity is based on social forms of organized worship, even though it has produced only a handful of saints, whereas Hinduism, which urges all individuals to rise up to the spiritual summit, has not produced socially robust systems. Therefore, while in religious matters "a Hindu peasant seems like a cultivated man of the world beside what is often the childishness of a European man of letters," in civic matters "the humblest European will often regard as obvious and inevitable what is hidden from the Hindu leader and statesman" (*CW* 3:413). Even if the religious thought of Christianity seems "poor, or even childish" in comparison to the rich intellectual heritage of Hinduism, the organized structures of Christianity, which are based on congregational forms of liturgical and ceremonial rituals, can provide templates for the social institutions of collective Hindu life (*CW* 3:411 – 412).

Nivedita's writings, therefore, present a complex interweaving of, on the one hand, certain stock Western Orientalist images, such as the great antiquity of the land, the pervasion of Hindu social existence by religious ideals, and so on, and, on the other hand, an emphasis on the redemptive capacities of the Eastern lands toward the formation of universalist alliances across humanity. Thus, reflecting certain Orientalist aspects of the zeitgeist in her representations of the land, she writes that, for the English, the distinguishing mark of Hindu life is its vast

antiquity, for every minor detail is stamped with age. We read in the *Rāmāyaṇa* about Sītā wearing the sari and following her husband, and Nivedita writes that she can still see such women (*CW* 2:304). The Indian village, too, located far from the artefacts of city life, is a "perfect picture of primitive society" with implements such as potter's wheels, weaver's looms, and spinning wheels (*CW* 4:411–12). In Nivedita's evocative description of the fortress of Chittor, we are transported to a timeless present: "And the newly-arrived traveller watching it may see it tonight, as the returning escort may have seen it when [Queen] Padmini's marriage procession halted for the last time on the homeward way, more than seven centuries ago" (*CW* 2:362). Again, Hindu life, Nivedita writes, is an ongoing spiritualization of the everyday, so that it would be a mistake to think that the Vaiṣṇava festival of the *rāsa* dance comes but once a year. The world is truly the forest on the banks of the river Yamunā where Lord Kṛṣṇa dwells, calling out to human beings to reach their goal of spiritual joy (*CW* 2:339). Therefore, she writes, Swami Vivekananda believed in the great strength of the Indian people and claimed that the East should go out to the West not in the manner of a servant or a sycophant but as a guru (*CW* 1:376). Europeans need the discipleship of the Eastern peoples because Europeans are, in fact, "extremely childish" in religious and philosophical matters, and, because they find it difficult to generalize; truths that are obvious to Indians would greatly puzzle them (*CW* 5:175). During a lecture delivered in Calcutta in March 1898, she clearly articulates this need for collaboration by indicating the Western hunger for an Eastern gospel of truth, peace, and harmony. The educated people of Europe have been going through a period of deep despair in the age of scientific thought, especially after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which washed away biblical notions of God as love and instead installed the view that the natural world is "red in tooth and claw." Even though the Western atmosphere is largely one of doubt and agnosticism, of which the most prominent exponents are figures such as Thomas Huxley and John Tyndall, some intellectuals have recently begun to move toward conceptions of divinity beyond the personal God of orthodoxy. Just as they were struggling on the oceans of truth, declares Nivedita, the Hindu gospel—the divine reality is one without a second—has brought "infinite enlightenment" to the human soul (*CW* 2:407–8).

Developing the theme of a mutual alliance, Nivedita at times configures, from within these East-West conjunctures, patterns of a "positive Orientalism," where she traces resonant parallels between a Western figure and an Eastern analogue and proceeds to highlight the equivalence of the latter with the former, if not, in fact, the superiority of the latter over the former. For instance, she writes that the notes of the poetry of William Blake are the nearest to the songs of Ram Prasad, the eighteenth-century Bengali devotee of the goddess Kālī, and that Robert Burns and Walt Whitman have certain "points of kinship" with Ram Prasad. However, "to such a radiant white heat of child-likeness [as seen in Ram Prasad], it would be impossible to find a perfect [European] counterpart" (*CW* 1:483). Again, Ramakrishna, the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000324 Published online by Cambridge University Press

illiterate ascetic who upheld certain forms of Hindu traditionalism, who was gentle and full of humor, and who had no deep understanding of the English and their ways, was yet perhaps "the only really universal mind of modern times" (*CW* 1:489). After placing her own guru, Swami Vivekananda, in the group of such Western monastics as Benedict, Bernard, and Loyola, Nivedita writes that "[i]t may be said that just as in Francis of Assisi, the yellow robe of the Indian Sannyasin [ascetic] gleams for a moment in the history of the Catholic Church, so in Vivekananda, the great saint, abbots of Western monasticism are born anew in the East" (*CW* 1:375). Christ himself was an Asiatic renouncer (*sannyāsin*) who "desired to see Love triumph over Justice, Renunciation over Proprietorship, the unity of man over ties of birth" (*CW* 2:425). Yet, Christian missionaries, who know that the disciples of Christ were commanded not to seek riches, not only enjoy European comforts in the land but also despise the Indians around them for their "simplicity and primitiveness." Christ, a religious beggar of the type we regularly see on Indian roads, would himself have felt more at home in the company of Indians than that of the European missionaries, whose existence is based on subscriptions and endowments: "We send our religious teachers to the East to spend days and nights of worldly ease and comfort in the midst of a people who actually do these things, and the preachers have not the wit to recognise the fact, much less the devotion to emulate it" (*CW* 4:517). Repeating the same reversal in a contemporary key, Nivedita writes that the young English boy who is new to India, and yet sincerely wishes to do the right thing, as he looks at people who live in utter simplicity, sit on bare floors, and do not use knives or forks when eating, will find it difficult to understand that he is really looking at people "of a deeper and more developed civilisation than his own" (*CW* 2:452–53).

These "cosmo-national" attempts of Nivedita to situate Bengali Hindu—and, more broadly, Indian—individuals, saints, and thinkers across wider European landscapes are concretized, as we will see, in her reflective engagements with three key themes: the defense of the worship of Kālī, the valorization of the status of Hindu women, and the revitalization of vigorous forms of Hindu belonging.

The Mother Goddess Kālī

When Nivedita is defending the worship of the goddess Kālī before sections of the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia during a lecture in February 1899, she is aware that the figure of Kālī had often been held up as symbolic of the idolatrous and degraded perversions of Hindu religious forms.[12] She says that she has been in India for a year, and she is often reminded that what seems incontrovertible to her at the moment might seem unsupportable to her after a year. However, she has been hearing some unflattering things about the worship of Kālī since her childhood, and now that she has encountered the worship at hand, she wishes to

[12] *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (ed. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal; New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000324 Published online by Cambridge University Press

speak her mind on whether what she had heard is completely true. Moreover, she wishes publicly to express her regret that the people of her own country have been vilifying the religious ideas associated with Kālī, and also to express the hope that such condemnation will give way to goodwill and sympathy (*CW* 2:429). One style of responding to this denunciation in Nivedita's speeches and writings is to point to certain Western religious templates that are presented as equally condemnable, or at least as problematic. Thus, she seeks to counter the claim that the worship of images such as Kālī has led to the weakness of the country, through the occasional practice of human sacrifice, by arguing that the perversions of a noble religious idea at the hands of certain individuals cannot be attributed to the idea itself. More human beings have been burnt in the name of Christianity than in that of any other religion, and yet we would not, Nivedita argues, blame Jesus for these human transgressions (*CW* 2:447–48). Again, for the devotees of Kālī, her image is not "ugly," which is an evaluation offered by the outsider, just as for those who could not share the deep feelings that resided in the Christian devotees, the early Byzantine icons "seem as lifeless and ugly, perhaps, as the Kālī image to the Europeanised critic" (*CW* 2:445). Thus, though various corruptions have become regretfully associated with the worship of Kālī, one should not reject it in "the wholesale manner as is often done by some sisters and brothers. Destroy the weeds, but save the garden!" (*CW* 2:443).

Properly understood, Nivedita argues, Kālī, the terrifying one who is surrounded by death and destruction, is the mother to the devotees whom she protects, and to whom she says: "My little child—you need not know much in order to please me. Only love me dearly" (*CW* 2:434–35). We truly become devotees of Kālī when we realize that even as her right hand blesses us, her left hand has the power of destruction, and that the divine reality that gives us life also takes life away, so that we should not seek God only in what is pleasant and soft but also discern God in what is ugly and terrible (*CW* 2:435–38). Such a devotee was the Bengali poet Ram Prasad, whose songs strike the notes of dependence, despair, and impatience, as the poet views the divine mother as his playmate (*CW* 1:486–87). While the Christian conception of God as a child in the arms of his mother, whose heart is full of love and who kneels at the cross, is one of the Catholic Church's richest gifts to humanity, it is in the image of Kālī, the divine mother, that this conception of the divinity as maternal love has been perfected, according to Nivedita. Those who find the image horrific—two hands blessing devotees and two hands holding a knife and a bleeding head; wearing a garland of skulls; and with a protruding tongue—have not yet reached the inner sanctorum of the worship of the mother (*CW* 1:470–71). We should not think that the Christian teaching that "God is Love" is demonstrated by moments of our individual happiness, for we truly understand the love of God in moments of agony as the divine love, beauty, and bliss are unveiled to us. Such is the paradox built into the image of Kālī: that Kālī who is "surrounded by all that is terrible to Humanity is nevertheless the Mother and we

are all Her babes" (*CW* 2:448). Her devotees feel that they belong to her, and they regard themselves as her children who are playing around her feet, in a game of hide-and-seek over the course of their lives (*CW* 1:471). The great mother Kālī is present everywhere, and even when human mothers disappear, she remains present to play with her children by assuming various forms (*CW* 1:510–11).

The Ideal Hindu Woman

Nivedita's depictions of worshippers of Kālī could be based on her familiarity with contemporary accounts of the spiritual experiences of Ramakrishna, who claimed that the divine mother had revealed to him that it was she who had become everything, as part of her divine sport. Nivedita's highly spiritualized evaluations of Hindu femininity are also shaped by her encounters with Sarada Devi, the spiritual consort of Ramakrishna, and Gopaler-ma, an elderly lady who was a member of Sarada Devi's household. They became for Nivedita archetypes of Indian womanhood, which she eulogized as the basis of a superior Indian culture compared to the Western form of life. These archetypes inform Nivedita's portraits of the Hindu mother and the Hindu widow as individuals who are characterized by self-abnegating love, care, and discipline. Eastern societies are based on the centrality of the family, and the Western ideal of *civitas* has never been the predominant concern of women. While in Western countries we meet unmarried women who are more engaged in civic pursuits than in domestic life, "[t]he East . . . continues to regard the Family as woman's proper and characteristic sphere" (*CW* 4:243–44).

Against a backdrop of numerous critiques of the position of Hindu women—whether from Western observers, Christian missionaries, or Hindu socioreligious reformers—Nivedita speaks of the special greatness of Hindu life, which depends on a woman's role in the social system as a mother who is selfless, self-giving, and truly loving (*CW* 2:457–58). Even if we sometimes encounter devotion to a woman in medieval Europe, there a woman is yet regarded as a queen and not as a mother. However, in India we still find women living lives of simplicity and beauty, whether in palaces or mud huts: "Exquisite cleanliness and simplicity, infinite purification, and always the same intimate motherhood" (*CW* 2:432). The mother makes the home a place of sanctity, and thus, in India God is most tenderly invoked as "mother" (*CW* 2:431). For Indian souls, the mother is the great refuge, and indeed, "[a]s mother, an Indian woman is supreme" (*CW* 2:458). Therefore, to understand the structures of "Oriental domesticity," one has to realize that a "passionate self-abnegation" lies at the foundation of familial systems. Nivedita notes that once she had been invited to dinner at the home of a Hindu family, and she had remarked playfully to the daughter about the hardship of women who have to wait until the others have eaten. The daughter hurriedly proceeded to reply—as if she had been "touched on a tender point"—that they liked this way the best (*CW* 2:308). For Nivedita, such self-sacrificing simplicity is accentuated even more strongly in the life of a widow, whose bereavement is received as a call to enter

into the religious life. Given her total dedication to God, she acquires a position of great influence in the household, where she is deeply revered. Even though the widow has not freely chosen her vocation, she throws herself wholeheartedly into the disciplined cultivation of a new life, to which she is as deeply devoted as she had been to her husband. Nivedita concludes: "The most ideal woman I have ever known is the orthodox Brahmin widow" (*CW* 2:306).

Notwithstanding this elevation of the status of the Hindu mother and the widow by situating them on traditional spiritual landscapes, Nivedita had to respond to the contemporary critiques that Hindu women were lacking in modernized forms of education. She writes that she is aware that Hindu women have to constantly struggle with poverty, and that they are not completely adapted to the pressures of the modern world (*CW* 2:456). Yet, they are trained in some traditional styles of learning, and they should not allow fashions adopted from the West and English education to spoil the "reverential humility" that shapes their domestic life (*CW* 2:472). Through a lot of learning from childhood, the Hindu woman develops "[t]hat calm dignity in meeting strangers, that perfect poise in embarrassing situations, that gentle depth of eternity, that quiet skill in cooking and caring. . . ." Their happiness has a stillness and a depth not found in Western women, and they possess a "[g]ravity, recollectedness, withdrawnness and a stern self-mastery" that are the deep religious qualities which have made India the "mother of religion" (*CW* 2:473–74). Shifting to a more combative register, Nivedita argues that even though they are ignorant in the "modern form" of education, for not many can read or write, they are far more educated than those who can read European novels and *The Strand Magazine*, for they are steeped in the narratives of the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Purāṇas* (*CW* 2:462). Therefore, while the motherland must be surrounded by her educated daughters, such education would not uproot their characteristic sweetness, gentleness, piety, tolerance, and love; rather, it would harmonize the virtues of the mind with the virtues of the heart (*CW* 4:362–63).

Reflecting certain Victorian feminist motifs of the home as the domain for the cultivation of moral virtue, Nivedita envisions Hindu women as the repositories of a great spiritual strength, which they should transmit to their children toward building up a strong nation.[13] For Nivedita, India is the land of "great women" such as Rani Padmini, Chand Bibi, Rani of Jhansi, Mirabai, and others (*CW* 4:363–64). Every Hindu woman, Nivedita argues, spends some time during the day contemplating the character of Sītā, and perhaps no Hindu woman spends an entire day without taking the name of Sītā (*CW* 2:456). There is even, Nivedita argues, a "half-magical element" in the reverence Hindus show to women. Women have some measure of authority in ritual worship, even though this right is secondary to that of the Brahmin priests. The blessing of a woman is regarded as more efficacious than that of a man, women can act as spiritual directors during the minority status of an incumbent,

[13] Joyce S. Pedersen, "Love, Politics, and the Victorians: Liberal Feminism and the Politics of Social Integration," *The European Legacy* 4.6 (1999) 42–57, DOI: 10.1080/10848779908580009.

and men are taught never to strike their sisters and to love their mothers beyond anyone else (*CW* 4:252–53). Thus, Nivedita writes, in "An Open Letter to Hindu Women" in December 1902, that the future of India depends more on Indian women than on Indian men. Both in India and in other lands, it is women who, through their asceticism (*tapasyā*), preserve the treasures of holiness and strength, so that their homes become places where men renew their inspiration, faith, and strength. Through their quiet lives, in which they have cultivated faith and perfection, they have done more to preserve the moral fabric (*dharma*) than any worldly battles. At a stage when the country and its *dharma* are in a sorry condition, Hindu mothers should instill in their sons the thirst for celibacy (*brahmacarya*), which is the secret of all strength, and should cultivate in their children and in themselves a great compassion for the people of the land (*CW* 2:475–76).

The Revitalization of Vedantic India

The dialectical impetus running through Nivedita's evocative representations of the goddess Kālī and Hindu women—the vigorous retrieval of certain Indian idioms before European and Europeanised audiences—also appears in her rousing calls to Indians to recover their vital strength and actively respond to, assimilate, and incorporate Western influences without passive imitation. Partly reflecting the views of Swami Vivekananda, she claims that there is no nation that possesses the same resources for maintaining its distinctive civilizations during the "Modern Transition" as do the people of India through their Advaita Vedanta philosophy. The system of Vedanta includes all peoples and all faiths across the earth, and it "extends its hand of steadiness, and stretches out cool waters of healing" (*CW* 2:503–4). Thus, Vedanta is not merely a philosophical system, for it is an expression of the conviction that the numerous forms of religion that characterize the national life are not antagonistic to one another (*CW* 1:387). While in religious matters, Indians have nothing to learn from Western countries, and, in fact, have a lot to give, likewise in social matters too, they are fully capable of introducing, without any external interference, whatever changes are called for by the changing times. There must indeed be change in living systems, but such transformation has to be "original, self-determined, self-wrought" in a civilization that is three thousand years old. When critics charge that Indian life is barbarous, the truth is that it is, in fact, rooted in a simplicity that is of a very high order and can also provide solutions to "the abstract and universal problems of all civilisations" (*CW* 2:460–61).

Thus Nivedita, alongside figures such as Vivekananda, presents Advaita as a spiritual focus—within the dynamic textures of East-West exchanges—that would creatively assimilate and reconcile diverse streams of influences on landscapes of religious universalism.[14] The revitalization of national resources through a dialogical assimilation of Western influences, in the direction of restoration and development,

[14] Arvind Sharma, *The Concept of Universal Religion in Modern Hindu Thought* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1998).

is especially necessary, as India is still trying to recover from "the first shock of the modern catastrophe"—aniline dyes are replacing the brilliant Eastern colors, just as English is displacing Hindustani, and in place of the wealth of Sanskrit, Hindi, and the Dravidian languages, the land is being flooded with the "ephemeral literature" of Europe (*CW* 4:370–71). However, the land is witnessing the emergence of an "aggressive" Hinduism through the efforts of Swami Vivekananda, whose order has been sending out missionaries to Europe and America. A new religious form will emerge in the future that will combine the intellectual freedom of Protestantism, which had led to the development of natural science, with the devotional riches of Catholicism. Thus, Nivedita strikingly remarks, highlighting another East-West polarity, that "[i]t would almost seem as if it were the destiny of Imperial peoples to be conquered in turn by the religious ideas of their subjects" (*CW* 3:42). The cultivation of nationality itself is the "highest possible expression" of spirituality—just as the spiritual life is based on the one that is in the many, nation-making, too, is based on a central ideal that is implemented by different people, with self-sacrifice, through different methods (*CW* 5:134–35). To this end, the classical Hindu notions of *brahmacarya*, *tapasyā*, and *sannyāsa* are to be understood in active terms of participation, energy, and selflessness: "Strong as the thunder-bolt, austere as Brahmacharya, great-hearted and selfless, such should be that Sannyasin who has taken the service of others as his Sannyasa, and not less than this should be the son of a militant Hinduism" (*CW* 3:522–24). The concept of *karma*, too, is to be understood not as predeterminism but as an opportunity to fight against oppression: "Destiny is passive before me. I triumph over it" (*CW* 3:521). The study of the conceptual systems of Yoga is "mere pedantry," and it should be discarded in place of a reading of the *Bhagavadgītā* from a dynamic standpoint that is conducive to the consolidation of nationality (*CW* 5:340). She tells students during a lecture delivered in Patna, in January 1904, that they should become healthy boys who delight in wrestling, boxing, and fencing, rather than generating thoughts of otherworldliness and speaking the language of sages. They should learn to fight heroically and struggle for knowledge, strength, and happiness: "Schoolboys devoted to study, talk much. But I want to see them in the foot-ball field" (*CW* 5:334–35).

However, even as she employs the vocabularies of an aggressively "Hindu" revivalism, Nivedita argues that the two great periods in Indian history, when a national consciousness was predominant in the lives of the people, were, in fact, the Buddhist and the Islamic. During the Ashokan period, Buddhism counteracted the caste-based exclusivities of the Brahmins, and later, Akbar combined a Hindu ethos with the Islamic ideal of the "Brotherhood of Man," and each period generated distinctive forms of nationalities. Today, however, "the last trace of religious and social prejudice is to be swept away," so that the pure ideal of nationality will emerge triumphantly, as the culminating point of its preceding approximations in the ancient and the medieval past (*CW* 4:261–62). Notwithstanding the religious

differences between Hindus and Muslims, they are at one in their devotion to the mother and their chivalrous attitude to the elderly. Often, the most trusted officers of a Hindu ruler are Muslims, while in the princely state of Hyderabad the most loyal subjects are Hindus (*CW* 4:265–67). Therefore, the people of the land should feel that they are neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither orthodox nor reformed. They are all Indians who are working together toward their homeland (*swadesh*), which is their common motherland (*CW* 4:215). The followers of the numerous "reforming sects" of the medieval centuries—Hindus, Jains, and Muslims—all have the right to call themselves Indian, for national unity is based not on language or religious belief or tradition but on the sense of living in a common home (*CW* 4:320).

Nivedita's configurations of "aggressive Hinduism" are directed partly at the contemptuous dismissal by some Europeans of the possibility that the land would emerge as a unified nation, on the grounds that it was encumbered by a "seething variety" of languages, customs, and religions (*CW* 4:265). Her response, which appears some decades later in figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, is that the true unity of India lies not in geographical aggregation but in shared patterns of thinking, feeling, and living that run through the land.[15] Such critics do not see that India is, in fact, a great field of nationality with the civilizational inheritances of five thousand years. The dynamic energies of the Marathas, the Sikhs, the Muslims, the Rajputs, and the Bengalis have not disappeared but are to be used for the vast task of unification of the land. The people of the land should not doubt their strength, for their ancestors brought the Vedas, worked out the ideas of the Upaniṣads, generated faiths such as Buddhism and Vaiṣṇavism, produced great thinkers such as Kapila and Śaṃkara, and placed a strong India among the nations (*CW* 4:297–98). She writes that on her northern pilgrimages to places such as Kedarnath and Badrinarayan, she encountered many pilgrims from southern India, and she glimpsed the great synthetic unity of the motherland. She understood "that north and south are inextricably knit together, and that no story of its analysed fragments, racial, lingual, or political, could ever be the story of India" (*CW* 1:401). For Nivedita, a vital moment in the processes of nation-building was the *swadeshi* movement around the time of the first partition of Bengal in 1905. The Eastern people might be weaker than the Western nations in certain matters of mutual assistance and self-defense; however, they are much stronger in enduring various forms of suffering in their self-sacrificing dedication to a moral ideal, and by keeping the *swadeshi* vow of not buying foreign goods, they demonstrate their moral superiority to Western civilizations, which are based on luxury (*CW* 4:276–78). For the revitalization of this national sense, historical memories should be enacted vividly by the common people through pageants, which would showcase episodes ranging from the times

[15] Sarvepalli Gopal, "Nehru, Religion and Secularism," in *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (ed. Radha Champakalakshmi and Sarvepalli Gopal; New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) 195–215, at 205.

of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, through the medieval centuries, to their own times (*CW* 5:20–22).

A key aspect of the rejuvenation of the nation involves, according to Nivedita, the reawakening of modes of art that speak the common languages of the people, such as the lamp left lit on the threshold by a housewife, the light beneath the *tulasī* plant, the return of cows to the village at sundown, and so on (*CW* 3:3). While all pure knowledge and science is ultimately one, where there are no distinctions between native and foreign, art, into which the emotions of a people are infused, always has distinctively local colorations: "All form is purely local. Every man's heart has its own country" (*CW* 4:356). If she were an Indian prince, she would use her surplus revenues for promoting paintings with representations of civic figures from the national past. There would be great murals that would depict scenes of Ashoka sending out his missionaries, the coronation of Akbar, and others, so that all Indians would be familiar with the "idea of India, and the evolution of India through four thousand years" (*CW* 3:59–60). She also wishes to produce thousands of copies of Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat-Mata*, so that there would not be a single hut between Kedarnath in the north and Cape Comorin in the south that did not have this representation of the motherland on its walls. Thus, even though Indian artists will look at art from locations such as Egypt, Greece, medieval Italy and Holland, and modern France, they will not abandon conventions and cultural associations that are distinctively Indian. If an Indian painter who draws Indian temple exteriors were to attempt to represent Gothic windows, the "foreign imitator will produce only would-be Gothic, just as the English or German Manufacturer can produce only a would-be Indian pattern in his cloth" (*CW* 3:5–6). However, though the elements of Indian artistic styles are distinctively Indian, they can yet be universally appreciated. Thus, even if foreigners are not able to reproduce the stone doorways of Orissan temples, they too can enjoy their beauty: "The absolutely beautiful is understood by all humanity" (*CW* 3:5).

The Universalities in the Vernaculars

As our discussion indicates, Nivedita's writings are shaped by powerful nativist defenses of Indian sensibilities, themes, and values and by a fervent appeal to Indians themselves not to become passive imitators of Western motifs. Thus, she holds up the success of the Bengali scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose before Western audiences as the success of all Indians, and as a beacon to all Indians as they struggle to demonstrate their intellectual equality with Westerners, while ceasing to borrow "snippets and parings of Western culture . . ." (*CW* 2:468). The "Hindu mind" of Bose, which was able to discern deep continuities between animate and inanimate beings, was rearticulating a spiritual message that had been propounded several centuries ago: "They who behold but One in all the changing manifoldness of this universe, unto *them* belongs Eternal Truth; unto none else—none else" (*CW* 5:298). For a proper education into the contrasts and the affinities that exist between India

and other countries, Nivedita writes that Indians should cultivate a historical sense of the development of ancient nations, the medieval centuries, and contemporary movements. They should also study social systems, with the help of such authors as Herbert Spencer, John Lubbock, Edward Tylor, and others, and also books such as Richard Congreve's *International Policy*, even though "the extraordinary ignorance of the East which they manifest should be rather as provocation than as authority to Indian boys." However, the readings of these Western histories and sociologies should be guided by the "supreme court of appeal," which is the dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhisthira in the *Śānti-parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (*CW* 4:386–87).

Nivedita's defense of the national is thus an integral moment in her invocations of certain universal themes that she argues run through humanity—the national is to be defended, reinforced, and cultivated not in isolation from but precisely through creative exchanges with the universal. Thus, she writes that although she promotes Indian styles of art and literature, she does not thereby condemn Western ideals, for such rejection is not possible for those who wish to stand in the lineage of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda who had urged East and West to learn from each other through an interchange of ideas (*CW* 5:68). For instance, some Hindus who keep pictures of the Madonna and the child possibly know nothing more about these figures than their names, and thus their alienness is an obstacle to their cultivating a deep sympathy for them; yet, the "intimate humanity" represented in the picture immediately appeals to the Hindu owner, for "it is after all, a mother and her child, and the whole world understands" (*CW* 3:6). Again, there is an "international language of good manners" that is recognized across the world, even though the specific modes of expression vary. Thus, salutations are exchanged variously by folding hands or by clasping hands, and sympathy is conveyed either through silence or through words (*CW* 2:497–98). Therefore, while the purpose of education is to broaden the horizons of sympathy and thought, such expansion toward the universal should usually be based on materials that are rooted in native soil and clothed in historical forms. For instance, Indian children should not be raised on the poetry of Tennyson and Browning, and it would likewise be folly to supply European children with the models of Sītā and Sāvitrī instead of Beatrice and Joan of Arc. Yet, these children, when their sensitivities have been developed, refined, and broadened, will be able to test the depths of their own particular inheritances through a sympathetic engagement with those of other cultures (*CW* 4:351–52). Through an education that is rooted in the products of our native soil, we reach out beyond the bounds of our own cultural systems and arrive at the "heart of mankind." We thus learn to distinguish what is specific to our own cultural horizons from the "common impulse" of humanity. Therefore, while Indian children should be raised not on Homer but on the *Mahābhārata*, if an Indian boy "could not, when educated, appreciate the poetry of Homer, that fact would mean a limitation of his culture" (*CW* 5:69). What truly matters in such exchanges across cultural boundaries is not whether a distinctively national form has

received foreign influences but whether it has succeeded in creatively assimilating them into its own fabric. Though we must begin with the known, the familiar, and the old, we have to orient these resources consciously toward the universal. Our knowledge of geography will remain "singularly rustic" if it does not extend to the whole world, and our historical understanding of India, too, must form the center of ever-widening circles, which include the histories of the Mongolian, the European, and the African peoples (*CW* 4:352). For instance, while a "cultivated person," irrespective of nationality, cannot fail to be touched by the beauty of the Taj Mahal, the foreigner who is able to appreciate the Taj is already a mature person who has cultivated good aesthetic standards at home. Likewise, if Hindus were to experience a thrill on reading about Shakespeare's Brutus, this appreciation is grounded in their understanding of political ideals derived from texts such as the *Mahābhārata* (*CW* 4:354–55).

The Textures of Nivedita's Cosmopolitanism

As we situate Nivedita's "vernacular cosmopolitanism" in post-Saidian academic cultures, one of the most striking features of her reiteration of the theme that Indians should seek the universal in and through the particularities of their national histories, cultural norms, and religious systems is that it is grounded in an East-West binary, where specific values, sensibilities, and themes are attributed to each pole—primarily material to the Western and spiritual to the Eastern.[16] The locations of her life and thought within this binary generate a complex combination of certain highly perceptive readings of Eastern styles of living; spiritual idealizations and ahistorical romanticizations of some traditional Hindu beliefs, traditions, and customs; global visions of internationalist exchanges across humanity; and pointed critiques of the operations of empire—while, occasionally, she can herself challenge the binary as an inexact classification.

First, working through the East-West polarity, Nivedita is able to highlight certain fine-grained details of both Western and Indian cultural systems. For instance, just as the term "gloaming" has a nest of associations for the English, indicating the falling dusk, homecoming, and sleepy laughter of children, the expression "hour of cowdust" evokes for Indians another distinctive range of emotions (*CW* 1:467). If we wish to understand India, we should visit its great historical centers, walk to its sites, stand on the ground there, touch the relics, and try to reproduce as far as we can the details of the daily lives of the religious people (*CW* 4:389–90). There can also be words, such as the "tender diminutives" of Indian languages, which cannot be translated into English. When Indians address a little girl as "mother" (*mā*) or a little boy as "father" (*bāp*), the "delicate mingling of gravity and laughter which we intend to convey is a matter entirely of the colour of the voice, and will defy any attempt to render it in a foreign tongue." Likewise, while the word

[16] Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816019000324 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Gopāla" refers to Kṛṣṇa, a mother might call her little boy "Gopāla," and she "is paralleled amongst English mothers only by one who thinks of her child as the Christ-Child . . ." (*CW* 2:369).

Second, her minute delineations of Eastern cultural living often involve spiritual idealizations, where various traditional Hindu hierarchical structures are reenvisioned through organicist lenses. She overlooks the systemic oppressions built into, and historically transmitted down, these structures, which are instead imaged by her as relational wholes of spiritual egalitarianism. Thus, she writes that in Eastern countries, social reforms and the extension of privileges take place not through political agitations but through the momentum of moral impulses in a civilization which is organic and altruistic. Such an emancipatory move is "by spontaneous effort, by gracious conferring of right from the other side" (*CW* 4:368). Further, Indians are said to have an intuitive sense of the unity of humanity, and she writes that she has not encountered any Indian man who "would not shrink in horror from the suggestion that humanity was diverse in origin, or that we owed different degrees of duty to one race and another" (*CW* 5:181). Even caste-based groups, which are demarcated from one another in terms of ranks, customs, and occupations are no barrier, Nivedita claims, to the generation of solidarity in public life. Matters of caste relate to the internal organization of the family and the life of women and therefore are of no relevance at the school, the bathing *ghat*, and the town. Each caste can, in fact, act internally as a form of self-government to its own members and can be a good training ground for labor organizations and other forms of sociopolitical life (*CW* 4:268–69). From this spiritualized perspective, Nivedita presents the castes as equal from a dharmic perspective, for social virtue is measured in terms not of occupation but of devotion to caste-specific duty (*svadharma*). Within the complex unity of national life, all tasks are valuable if they are directed toward the service of the motherland (*CW* 4:292–93). At the core of these social systems is the figure of the Indian woman, with whom Nivedita claims a projected kinship and whose conditions she articulates through articles, lectures, and studies.[17] The education of an Indian woman should involve the harmonization of the heart with the intellect, so that her understanding of the facts of geography and history only leads her to develop a greater love for her people and the wisdom to understand them (*CW* 5:72–73). At the same time, Nivedita was aware that the ideals did not quite fit the social realities, and in a lecture delivered in Patna in January 1904, she declares that she is shocked to see the imperious attitude of husbands toward their wives, whom they regard as fools (*CW* 5:339). Going even further, she notes that the reason women should be educated is not because their learning is an ornament, nor yet because educated women can be intellectual equals

[17] Barbara N. Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 119–36, at 133–34.

to men, but because of the "common humanity" in both men and women, which "makes the one fit to be trusted and reverenced as the other, makes the one worthy of honour and responsibility as the other, and finally, makes the whole question of sex a subordinate consideration, like that of a blue or green garment" (*CW* 3:497).

Third, the Advaitically tinged Vedantic themes of Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda provide Nivedita with an internationalist vocabulary with which to negotiate various East-West boundaries. Nivedita writes that when empirical limitations are overcome, and our consciousness rises through sensory awareness to direct knowledge, we perceive the one, and attain the highest freedom of *mukti* or *nirvāṇa*, where we leave behind ignorance (*CW* 1:485). We should not confuse religion with spirituality, for religious systems provide the scaffolding with which human beings can ascend to the spiritual vision, and each soul, after having "reached its own height . . . may express its vision in its own way." Religion is the fuel for the fire of spirituality, and the former can never become a true substitute for the latter (*CW* 5:133). Therefore, Europeans who were fired by the ideals of service and fellowship, and who sought to establish a "mutual Brotherhood," were helped in this endeavor by the Indian ideal of nonattachment and ego-effacement, for they had not yet understood that love for self and love for one's relations and country are nothing "if that love did not simply mean love of the whole world" (*CW* 2:410). Such love we see in Ramakrishna, whose worship encompassed all the symbols, prayers, ecstasies, and visions of the diverse religious pathways of the land. He sought the salvation of everyone in the world: "A universe from which one, most insignificant, was missing could not have seemed perfect in his eyes" (*CW* 1:493). Ramakrishna's teachings exemplify the superiority of Hinduism over other religions in that Hinduism is a "comprehensive religion" that promotes religious freedom and does not claim that the truth is exclusively located in one sect (*CW* 5:244). She hopes that people will reject forms of "provincialism" that claim there is only one possible route to salvation and that a specific system of orthodoxy is the conclusive truth, and that they will begin to adopt aspects of Indian philosophy and develop respect for other systems of thought. They will choose their own religious ideal, which will lead to the development of their individualities, the expansion of religious cultures, and the "indefinite extension of the sense of Human Brotherhood" (*CW* 2:427).

Fourth, notwithstanding her frequent employment of the East-West polarity, Nivedita herself cautioned against simplistic applications of the "East" and the "West" as rigid categories. India should be understood as a continent and not as a single country, so that to aggregate the crimes of specific groups of people of the land and ascribe them to "India" or to "Hinduism" is "about as fair as to charge a Norfolk farmer with practising Corsican vendetta, on the strength of the latter's being a 'European' custom" (*CW* 4:527). Therefore, if we wish to classify human cultures, the terms "Eastern" and "Western" are "too vague," and the terms "Modern" and "Mediaeval" are "too inexact," so that we should instead study how specific ideals are realized across them (*CW* 4:238). Even the distinction between

"native" and "foreign" is largely artificial and should not be absolutized, for just as there are many things in our own land that are foreign to our experience, we may be familiar with certain foreign luxuries from our childhood (*CW* 4:361). She writes that during a discussion on June 20, 1898, a Western guest maintained that each nation had developed, in its history, certain distinctive ideals to which the people of that nation should adhere. The Hindus present on that occasion disagreed, and she reports that Vivekananda claimed that the "ultimate unit" of analysis is not geographical but psychological. Thus, he pointed out that the most "typical" Christian he had ever known was not a Westerner but a Bengali lady, and another Westerner was "a better Hindu than himself" (*CW* 1:321). Therefore, as we develop comparative studies of human institutions across the world, Nivedita argues that we should avoid the error of endowing the different ideals we encounter with "a false rigidity and distinctiveness" and concluding that entire groups of people are incapable of possessing certain types of sensibilities. We should not forget in such studies "the underlying unity and *humanness* of humanity" (*CW* 4:236). For instance, while the pursuit of the ideal of *civitas* as the domain of women's development is a characteristically Western movement, we should remember that the Eastern nations, too, can contribute to the formation of this ideal, for to deny that Eastern women are capable of civic virtues would be as mistaken as claiming that Western women are devoid of the familial virtues of fidelity and tenderness. This contrast in ideals "merely implies that in each case the mass of social institutions is more or less attuned to the dominant conception of the goal, while its fellow is present, but in a phase relatively subordinate, or perhaps even incipient" (*CW* 4:241).

Fifth, Nivedita was a sharp critic of the British imperial structures of domination, which undergirded the East-West dichotomies and had led to the financial exploitation of the land. However, the precise nature of her association with forms of militant nationalism in Bengal remains a disputed matter.[18] In the wider context of Indo-Irish collaborations, some historians have sought to decenter the metropolis-periphery asymmetry in studies of empire and to highlight the triangular nature of the relationships between the British colonizers, on the one hand, and Indians and the Irish, on the other hand. For instance, while some Indians and the Irish learned from one another in configuring strategies of anticolonial resistance, British administrators believed that anti-insurgency policies could be transplanted from one location to another.[19] At the same time, scholars have highlighted the contested positionality of Ireland within imperial circuits as both colonizer and colonized: while Ireland was joined to Great Britain through the 1801 Union, the emancipation of Irish Catholics had to wait until 1829, and Ireland was ruled directly from Westminster. Thus, while narratives of Irish history were a source of

[18] Bimanbehari Majumdar, *Militant Nationalism in India* (Calcutta: General Printers & Publishers, 1966) 57.

[19] Purnima Bose, *Organizing Empire: Individualism, Collective Agency, and India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

some inspiration to Indian anticolonial nationalists, leading to the development of Indo-Irish networks, Ireland itself "played a crucial and disproportionate role in imperial expansion in India" through its soldiers, administrators, and missionaries.[20] From the mid-eighteenth century onward, Irish missionaries, scientists, surveyors, and others developed imperial networks through their involvement in the colonial enterprise in India.[21] Ireland provided two viceroys in British India, Lord Mayo (1868–1872) and the Marquess of Dufferin (1884–1888); around one-third of recruits to the Indian Civil Service at the time of the Revolt of 1857; and possibly 40 percent of the British Army in India—so much so that an Irish Catholic, Sir Anthony MacDonnell, jokingly remarked in the 1890s that "Ireland had temporarily relieved England of the task of governing India."[22]

Specifically in the case of Nivedita, however, though Swami Vivekananda had claimed that her "Celtic blood" would propel her into working for India, her work was focused on nation-making in India through self-help and not on cultivating transnational solidarities with Ireland.[23] From within the spaces of liminality—her origins in the imperial metropolis and her locations in the colonial peripheries—she developed certain penetrating critiques of the colonial extraction of resources. She writes that while the term "peace" means "security of life and property," in the so-called Pax Britannica 32.5 million Indians have died of famine and several millions of malarial fever and plague, as the "victims of peace" (*CW* 5:241). Even such figures as Nadir Shah in medieval India did not plunder as much wealth as is being silently and legally drained away from the country to enrich foreigners: "In former days plunder and killing were deliberate; now killing is not intentional and as to plunder we are willing to give the foreigner the benefit of the doubt; but we grow poor and die all the same" (*CW* 5:242). While the development of the railway system is put forward as a demonstration of the beneficence of British rule, the railways are not directly increasing productivity but are merely assisting the redistribution of the produced goods. Since peasants have to travel to specific places to sell their goods, their margin of profit is reduced by the fares they have to pay (*CW* 5:197). The imperial networks have a deleterious effect even on the lives of the people back at home. A significant proportion of the people of an imperializing country are drafted into the army and the navy, not to protect the homeland but to safeguard the business interests of the privileged classes in other parts of the world. As a result, a large number of the remaining people get drawn to

[20] Mary Conley, "Ireland, India, and the British Empire: Intraimperial Affinities and Contested Frameworks," *Radical History Review* 104 (2009) 159–72, at 160.

[21] Barry Crosbie, *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communication and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 17.

[22] Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre, *Cosmopolitan Nationalism in the Victorian Empire: Ireland, India and the Politics of Alfred Webb* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 131.

[23] Elleke Boehmer, "Friable Transnationalism: The Question of the South African Gandhi and the Irish Nivedita," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire* (ed. T. Foley and M. O'Connor; Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006) 58–67, at 63–66.

the industrial centers to produce goods that are sold in the distant lands, to further the profits not of the workers who receive a daily wage but of the owners of the factory (*CW* 5:201–2).

Conclusion

Nivedita's dynamic affiliations—as a renunciant Irishwoman moving in and through Hindu spaces structured by colonial systems—generated a complex range of cosmopolitan standpoints rooted in Indian styles of living. As she puts it: "The world must be seen through the home. Only knowledge in synthesis is true knowledge" (*CW* 5:28). These indigenous particularities of Hindu lifeworlds, however, are to be the pivot around which turns a universal humanism: "One cannot be a cosmopolitan unless one be a nationalist" (*CW* 5:244). Her stances echo Pratap Bhanu Mehta's "new cosmopolitanism," which does not reject the local ties through which individuals are embedded in specific cultural traditions but "seeks to more effectively pluralize our attachments, enhance our solidarities, especially with groups that exemplify transnational modes of belonging. . . ."[24] Thus, she writes: "All that humanity has achieved . . . in any of her branches we may make our own. What the genius of another race had led it to create can be ours. What the genius of our race has led us to create can be made theirs. The true possessions of mankind are universal" (*CW* 5:114). At the same time, Nivedita's project of the retrieval of traditional materials is a call not for a simplistic return to origins but a creative assimilation of elements of the "modern age." Even as India still remains, to an extent, in the medieval age, India cannot simply return to the past: "For good or for evil, the work of modernising has gone too far to be undone. India is now a figure in the twentieth-century mart of the world" (*CW* 4:304). The attitude toward the new and the strange, which claims that the ancestors possessed all knowledge formulated in Sanskrit texts or contained in the pronouncements of an ascetic, is "pure idleness and irreverence," for it deadens the traditional inheritance instead of using it as a set of tools on the quest for truth (*CW* 4:391–92). Rather, the traditional resources of the nation have to be reoriented toward the problems that modernity has brought in its train. Thus, the individual who is able to solve the problem of recurring famines will be renowned in the history of the land as the Kalki, the tenth *avatāra*, and the end of all politics, and even all *dharma*, is to ensure that all the people can be fed (*CW* 4:501).

Nivedita's cosmopolitanism was informed by the awareness that her world was structured in deep inequality and is, therefore, not vulnerable to the charge that it is an attitude adopted only by the elite ruling classes who possess the material resources to travel across the world and develop lifestyles based on the consumption of exotic goods from distant lands.[25] She writes that there are in the modern world

[24] Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Cosmopolitanism and the Circle of Reason," *Political Theory* 28 (2000) 619–39, at 623.

[25] Taraborrelli, *Contemporary Cosmopolitanism*, 101.

"two humanities," between which exists a vast gulf: one is composed of illiterate villagers, and the other is comprised of city-bred educational and professional people (*CW* 4:478–79). She urges the students in the cities to organize themselves into groups of ten, where each group should send out to the villages a missionary who would travel with postcards, maps of India, and a large collection of ballads. The nation-making missionary would thus generate in the villagers a clear conception of the vastness of the land, so that they would all be filled with the thought, "This and no other is our Motherland! We are Indians every one!" (*CW* 4:273–74). Through an education rooted in national culture but that draws one toward the universal, people from across the world can meet, and enjoy one another's association in a state of intellectual freedom. Such a state can only be attained by an individual whose knowledge is deeply rooted in love for the motherland, in fond memories of childhood, and in "an unshakeable assurance that the face of God shines brightest and His name sounds sweetest, in the village of his birth" (*CW* 4:352–53).

Revisiting Nivedita in the wake of Saidian critiques of Orientalism highlights the point that her "cosmo-national" imaginations operated precisely within the East-West binary that these analyses have sought to dismantle. As we have seen, Nivedita's employment of this dichotomy, as a product of her own times, on occasion promoted idealizations of various hierarchical dimensions of the Hindu social systems within which she sought to immerse herself—ranging from her eulogies of the caste system to the glorifications of the Hindu widow. At the same time, her elaborations of a universalist cosmopolitanism, grounded in the Vedantic resources of her master, Swami Vivekananda, resonate with various strands of recent theorizations of the possibilities, potentialities, and complexities of cosmopolitan belonging. For instance, anticipating contemporary theorists who speak of cosmopolitanism as emerging from and through the particularities of local moorings, she remarks that the individual who is raised from the beginning on foreign ideas, and is not grounded in ideas from native soil, is like "the waif brought up in the stranger's home" (*CW* 4:354). The theme of the negotiation of the boundaries between the "home" and the "world," which is common to various forms of modernist Hinduism that were emerging in her own lifetime, surfaces in her numerous explorations of how she could be simultaneously an Irishwoman in imperial circuits and a renunciant disciple of a Hindu guru who had announced a cosmopolitan way of being.