The Swami and the Sister

Hindu ascetic tradition, much like its Christian counterpart, glorifies world weariness (vairagya) which, for all intents and purposes, stands for renunciation of woman and wealth: kamma-kanchana, however, between kamma and kanchana, the former is characterized as the root of evil, at the same time that the man is identified with the ultimate good, salvation (mukti). Such a gendered attitude to spiritual life condemns female sexuality and represses masculine sexuality. The male Hindu ascetic thus cultivates female paranoia, desiring the summum bonum, thereby rejecting his manhood. Therefore, a yogini is to achieve his ultimate goal (i.e. realization of the divine or epiphany) by the process of his systematic castigation. The drama of the struggle to accomplish self-annihilation in order to realize the self, reached a tragic denouement in the life of Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Datta) after he had come in contact with Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), a popular young sannyasi (female ascetic), in the West.

By Narainghna Sil

The relationship between Nivedita and Vivekananda has been virtually canonized in the hagiographic literature, written to glorify the Anglo-Irish disciple of a worldly ardent Rajah Bose. The image of a Western woman shaped by a princely Hindu apostle for the great task of social and spiritual regeneration of renascent India. However, a sober, critical reading of the sources reveals a different side to these two fascinating personalities: their triumphs and tragedies make them truly human, and bring them down from artificial, Olympian heights to be closer to us.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble’s (1867-1911) life as a schoolteacher was moulded by her twin religious and romantic heritage. On the one hand, her father was a minister and she went to a Congregationalist school, on the other, her grandfather had been an Irish revolutionary. According to her brother Richard, she was also a highly sentimental and romantic woman easily drawn to men of intellectual dispo- sition. Prior to meeting Vivekananda in London, she had harboured no ideal of a socio-spiritual mission in life. No doubt she was acquainted with Christian literature, had read Matthew Arnold’s poetic biography of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, and acquired a smattering of Hindu religious philoso- phy. She presumably made these readings in preparation for her visit to the Hindu monk who had created such a sensation in London high society, thanks in part to the most effective public relations work of his English host, Edward T. Studd. Noble had experienced two failed romances. Her first love and fiancé succumbed to tuberculosis before marriage. A second lover jilted her for another woman. When she first met her future guru in October 1891, she was immediately charmed by the attractive, elegantly dressed young monk mut- tering ‘Shiva Shiva’ in a rich baritone voice. Thus she easily overcame her disappointment with his sermons, which she had initially considered unoriginal, and continued to culti- vate his company.

Vivekananda, too, must have been struck by the personal- ity of this energetic young woman of immense charisma and charm. Indeed, Margaret was almost a female counterpart of the handsome, eloquent, and beautifully attired young monk from a far-off land. On numerous occasions, during conver- sation, Vivekananda made numerous claims and innuendoes, encouraging Noble to think of him as a heroic figure. It was the Swami who first suggested Margaret work for the social betterment of India, promising her all the necessary help. She was so overwhelmed by this invitation and, at the same time, by his solicitude, that she offered herself to him unhesitatingly and unconditionally. Though the monk turned down her frank and sincere overture, insisting upon his celibate status as a renunciant, she still went to Calcutta, only to be disappointed again, as her mentor had scheduled no program for her. Margaret whiled away her time for nearly a year visiting people, listening to Swamiji’s sermons and con- versations, and travelling to the north and south. She must have thought, “What am I doing for so long? Why doesn’t the Swami speak to me about work?” Margaret wrote to Sara Bull, Vivekananda’s Nor- dike, “I had wished to become. Such a gendered attitude to spiritual life condemns female sexuality and represses masculine sexuality. The male Hindu ascetic thus cultivates female paranoia, desiring the summum bonum, thereby rejecting his manhood. Therefore, a yogini is to achieve his ultimate goal (i.e. realization of the divine or epiphany) by the process of his systematic castigation. The drama of the struggle to accomplish self-annihilation in order to realize the self, reached a tragic denouement in the life of Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Datta) after he had come in contact with Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), a popular young sannyasi (female ascetic), in the West.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867-1911) met in London in 1891. They became intimate friends and Margaret worked closely with Vivekananda in India. Margaret had an abiding love for the Hindus, primarily because of her admiration for the image of a sacrificed hero, some sort of a crucified god, or a saint. She was a cultivated and idealistic individual, Nivedita had an abiding love for the Hindus, primarily because of her admiration for Vivekananda. She would have been most happy and fulfilled had she been able to remain his lifelong companion. However, when she tried to become closer to her guru, he rebuffed her. The Swami, on the other hand, remained tepid in his self-styled role of an ultramundane renounc- er (lokattara sannyasi), suspended helplessly between the Syl- la of unrealized manhood and the Charybdis of idealized manliness. This situation was further aggravated by his multiple illnesses and physical pain and discomfort. The upshot of this psychosomatic condition was his enigmatic ambiva- lence in his dealings with his Western disciple. He would be contemptuous of marriage and personal love, yet confess to her that the relationship between husband and wife is more meaningful than that between mother and child; that he would have married, at least for the sake of his mother’s hap- pine; but that he was pacifically content to spend the rest of his life engaged in his vocation. Furthermore, he wanted the freedom which was achieved by breaking all laws. He even told her that he particularly enjoyed reading Shake- speare’s *Roméo et Juliette*. At times he would project his self- image of a sacrificed hero, some sort of a crucified god, or a priest who had renounced everything, became a saint. He wanted the freedom which was achieved by breaking all laws. He even told her that he particularly enjoyed reading Shake- speare’s *Roméo et Juliette*. At times he would project his self- image of a sacrificed hero, some sort of a crucified god, or a priest who had renounced everything, became a saint. He wanted the freedom which was achieved by breaking all laws. He even told her that he particularly enjoyed reading Shake- speare’s *Roméo et Juliette*. At times he would project his self- image of a sacrificed hero, some sort of a crucified god, or a priest who had renounced everything, became a saint.

Both the Swami and the Sister were troubled by the explosion of spontaneous eros, resulting from a natural attraction between two young adults, and both failed to over- come this normal human emotion. They thus remained pris- oners of their chosen vocation. As a result, the vina nayanasi was reduced to the state of a helpless child of Kali, the Divine Mother, while the Sister became increasingly aware of her failing femininity. She came to realize that her femininity was being replaced by manliness, as she confessed to Josephine. Her odyssey in India was thus truly tragic, much like that of a guru’s troubled and doomed short life of immense possibilities. (1867-1911)