

## Sister Nivedita and Her *Kali The Mother*, *The Web of Indian Life*, and Art Criticism: New Insights into Okakura Kakuzō's Indian Writings and the Function of Art in the Shaping of Nationality

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Cet article a pour but de jeter une lumière sur les influences mutuelles exercées entre Okakura Kakuzo, dit Tenshin (1862-1913), et Sister Nivedita (1866-1911), qui édita les manuscrits du premier lors du séjour indien d'Okakura (1901-02). La confrontation textuelle des passages pertinents des *Idéaux de l'Orient* (publié en 1904) ou de *l'Éveil de l'Orient* (manuscrit rédigé en 1902) d'avec les écrits contemporains de Sister Nivedita nous permet de comprendre et la manière et la portée de leur collaboration spirituelle et élaboration idéologique. La tentative systématique d'une lecture croisée des ouvrages de ces deux auteurs n'a cependant été accomplie jusqu'ici, ni en Inde ni au Japon. En analysant en détail le processus par lequel le discours sur "La Fonction de l'Art dans la formation de la conscience nationale" a été mis en forme, le présent article propose de restituer un des aspects jusqu'ici négligés de l'environnement intellectuel en Asie au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

**Keywords:** SISTER NIVEDITA, ELIZABETH MARGARET NOBLE, OKAKURA KAKUZŌ (TENSHIN), INDIAN ART HISTORY, SWADESH MOVEMENT, ASIAN NATIONALISM, ERNEST B. HAVELL, ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY

“It is rarely that the chivalrous pen of a Lafcadio Hearn or that of the author of *The Web of Indian Life* enlivens the Oriental darkness with the torch of our own sentiments.” —Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (1906), p. 4.

Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (1862-1913), author of the highly successful and influential treatise on Eastern aesthetics known as *The Book of Tea*, singled out Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), born as Elisabeth Margaret Noble, and Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) as two of the most eminent English-speaking writers on Asia of his era.<sup>1</sup> To Okakura scholars in Japan, Sister Nivedita is well known for her preface to his *The Ideals of the East* (1903). But few efforts have been made to examine Okakura's Indian writings in the light of Sister Nivedita's own work on contemporary India. How and to what extent can Okakura's high esteem of her be justified? What was the motive that led him to such an appraisal? What was the relationship between Okakura and Sister Nivedita? Are there any signs of mutual inspiration that may have enriched these two authors in their promotion of Asian art in connection with the shaping of the national ideals of the East? These are the questions I try to answer in this essay.

## 1. SISTER NIVEDITA IN MEMORIAM

Shortly after the untimely death of Sister Nivedita, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy edited her manuscripts and published them under the title *Myths of The Hindus and Buddhists*. Coomaraswamy began his preface to the book by saying that “Sister Nivedita ... needs no introduction to Western or to Indian readers”—thereby suggesting the high status Sister Nivedita enjoyed among the reading public of the day—and went on to write, “A most sincere disciple of Swami Vivekananda [1863-1902], who was himself a follower of the great Ramakrishna [1836-1886], she brought to the study of Indian life and literature a sound knowledge of Western educational and social science, and an unsurpassed enthusiasm of devotion to the peoples and the ideals of her adopted country.” (Figs. 1, 2)

Among her main books, *The Web of Indian Life*, Okakura's favorite, is characterized by Coomaraswamy as “almost the only fair account of Hindu society written in English.” *Kali the Mother*, the editor says, represents “the first time the profound tenderness and terror of the Indian Mother-cult are presented to Western readers in such a manner as to reveal its true religious and social significance.” Coomaraswamy concludes with these words of praise: “Through these books Nivedita became not merely an interpreter of India to Europe, but even more, the inspiration of a new race of Indian students, no longer anxious to be Anglicized, but convinced that all real progress, as distinct from mere political controversy, must be based on national ideals, upon intentions already clearly expressed in religion and art.”<sup>2</sup>

A new edition of *The Web of Indian Life* appeared in 1918 with a new introduction by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). (Fig. 3) The following excerpt expresses the poet's



Fig. 1 Sister Nivedita (1867-1911) [photograph from C.W.S.N.]

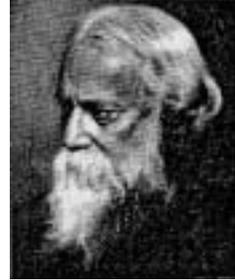


Fig. 3 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)



Fig. 2 A. K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1943) at 52 years of age [photograph from *Selected Letters of A. K. Coomaraswamy*]

confidence in Sister Nivedita:

The Upsetting of truth in the relationship of the ruler and the ruled can never be compensated by the power that lies in the grip of the mailed fist. /And this was the reason which made us deeply grateful to Sister Nivedita, that great-hearted Western woman, when she gave utterance to her criticism of Indian life. She had won her access to the innermost heart of our society by her supreme gift of sympathy. She did not come to us with the impertinent curiosity of a visitor, nor did she elevate herself on a special high perch with the idea that a bird's eye view is truer than the human view because of its superior aloofness. She lived our life and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves. She became so intimately familiar with our people that she had the rare opportunity of observing us unawares. As a race we have our special limitations and imperfections, and for a foreigner it does not require a high degree of keen-sightedness to detect them. We know for certain that these defects did not escape Nivedita's observation, but she did not stop there to generalize, as most other foreigners do. And because she had a comprehensive mind

and extraordinary insight of love she could see the creative ideals at work behind our social forms and discover our soul that has living connexion with its past and its marching towards its fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. CONTEMPORARY REACTIONS TO *THE WEB OF INDIAN LIFE*

*The Web of Indian Life* was first published in 1904. The “supreme gift of sympathy” and the “extraordinary insight of love” that Tagore identified in her work were the triggers of positive as well as negative reviews. *The Queen* (24 August 1904) appraised the book with rhetoric similar to Okakura’s: “It is seldom that a Western-born author succeeds as absolutely as Miss Noble in her *The Web of Indian Life* in penetrating the Eastern mind and heart. . . . If love is the first qualification towards understanding the character of a people, Miss Noble was thoroughly qualified, for she writes of the East as a lover might write of his beloved; each intimacy, each familiarity adds to the mystery and fascination exercised by this wonderful alluring East over her spirit.” And the reviewer contrasted this sympathetic vision of India to the missionary documents or scholarly works: “It would be well if those who gather their impressions of our Indian Empire solely from missionaries of preconceived ideas and little sympathy, or from the abstruse works of scholars, or the chatter of the Anglo-Indians, were to revise the impressions they gathered from these sources by the light of this poetically written and scholarly work.”

*The Detroit Free Press* (24 July 1904) similarly welcomed the publication as a “revelation” in contrast to the “testimony of missionaries”:

The Western world, speaking generally, knows the Indian woman only through the testimony of missionaries. For this reason a book published in London a few days ago, *The Web of Indian Life* by the Sister Nivedita comes as a revelation; it is attracting immediate attention; it is being regarded as an epoch-making book. For in it the inner life of the Indian woman, the life below the surface, the ideals, the mainsprings of action, the aspirations, hopes and all the mysticism of the East, and the reality of the Unseen, are set forth, as has never been done before, by a Western woman imbued with a spirit of reverent sympathy.

These favorable commentaries were countered by harsh criticism and expressions of emotional distrust from those missionaries whose interests were menaced. The sarcastic attack by the London-based literary magazine *The Athenaeum* (1904) is a typical example of conventional reactions: “If Sister Nivedita is an unsafe guide in social questions she is still less to be trusted when she undertakes to deal with matters of Indian History or literature, and it is much to be regretted that no scholarly friend was at hand to prevent the publication of such chapters as those on ‘The Indian Sagas’ and ‘The Synthesis of Indian Thought.’ It would be as easy as it would be distasteful to multiply instances of misun-

derstanding and misstatement.” (We shall examine later the (ir)relevance of these statements as well as the reasons for these irritated reactions.) *The Church Times* of 19 August 1904 could not, no doubt due to its ideological position, be less outspoken:

In *The Web of Indian Life* the authoress lets herself go, so to say, with entire abandon, to give us a *couleur de rose* picture of Indian life and thought. . . . It is all pure undiluted optimism. . . . It is the suppression of the other side of the picture that we deprecate in the interest, not only of the truth but of the cause of Indian women themselves, whose lot will never be improved if this sort of sentimental idealism about them is allowed to obtain credence. Potentially, we are fully prepared to believe the Indian woman is what she is here described as being. Actually, the ideas, the sanctions, the customs of the men of India must undergo radical transformation before the ideal can be realised. And only Christianity can effect that transformation.

This criticism may merit minute analysis from the viewpoint of post-colonial and gender critical theory. To be brief, British rule of the Indian subcontinent is implicitly justified here in the name of the emancipation of Indian women, and the Christian authority believes in the cause of missionary activities so long as those help Indian women’s empowerment and their Westernized “enlightenment” out of the yoke of medieval submission to masculine domination, with which Hinduism is regarded almost as synonymous. In this program, Indian women should not be regarded as victims of British rule but must be depicted as suffering from the misery of Indian society, which should be transformed through Christianization. Thus only the British and Christian dominations paradoxically ensure the liberation of Indian womanhood. But once liberated, are they still Indian women?<sup>4</sup>

### 3. KALI THE MOTHER

Okakura Tenshin 天心 (to use the sobriquet by which Kakuzō is better known) spent time in India in 1901-02, and the book he wrote during his stay contains an incantation to Kālī. Talking of “the sword,” he wrote, “Om to the Steel of honor! Om to the Strong! Om to the Invincible! True child of Siva art thou—icy because born of fire! Thou art silent like the forest that awaits the tempest!” He continued: “India worships thee in Kālī,—dread mother of relentless mercy; Japan worships thee in Fudō,—grand vision of unflinching pity. . . . Sleep on, for the hand of Kālī shall awaken thee to gleam as gleam the teeth of lightening when the storm laughs on the clouds. Om to the Strong! Om to the Invincible!”<sup>5</sup>

This invocation of Kālī clearly reflects Tenshin’s Indian experience, and Sister Nivedita must have been one of the most important sources of inspiration for him. She

had published a book entitled *Kālī the Mother* in 1900. Her defense of the Indian Kālī worship, developed in this work, helps us understand the ideal of the Oriental motherhood she proposed as an alternative to the European missionary's view of Indian society. In her public lecture "Kālī, and her worship" delivered on 13 February 1899 at the Albert Hall in Calcutta, Sister Nivedita already made clear her difference of opinion with the missionaries: "I see nothing in Calcutta today, which is more calculated, if we accept it thankfully, to strengthen and purify our thought of God as the Mother than the presence of a section who deny and distrust our worship."<sup>6</sup> Instead of counter-attacking this "section," however, Sister Nivedita advised her audience to listen to the message of the Mother through their enemy's utterances. "Let us not forget that they seek truth as we do—and let us weigh carefully all that they urge, knowing that the Mother Herself speaks to us through their lips, for the perfecting of their love and ours."<sup>7</sup> This attitude itself is a typical exercise of the Kālī worship, which she had certainly imbibed from the preaching of her Guru, Vivekananda.

At this stage Sister Nivedita, who had been in India only a year since her arrival in Calcutta on 28 January 1898, confessed her own limitations as lecturer, being "not qualified by a knowledge of Sanskrit or of Indian history." Yet she maintained that she had "the right of an Englishwoman to express public regret for the part which countrymen and women of my own have played in vilifying a religious idea" and "to utter a public hope that such vilification may soon end by the growth amongst us all of sheer good-will and sympathy." She also justifies her position by saying that "*I have the right of all the first impressions to be heard*" [italics in the original], for

*A religious idea ought to be judged by all the states which it produces. . . . We must not ignore either the lowest or the highest apprehension of the symbol. Certainly, we remember that a common acknowledgement of that symbol binds the man, who now appreciates it in a very rudimentary way, to the Yogi who finds in it the higher manifestation of God. So that we should be careful how we meddle with, or pass judgment on, that lower form of worship, save to open out to it the natural path of development, by which the saint has gone to his far-reaching vision.<sup>8</sup>*

This being said, she offered a commonly shared description of the Goddess Kālī. "The most prominent feature about her is her horridness. She is naked and dances on the bosom of her husband. She has a garland of decapitated heads round her neck and her tongue is outstretched to drink the warm blood of her victims. Weapons and terrible agents of Death adorn and surround her. She is dark like an ominous rain-cloud and her dishevelled flowing masses of hair fall down to her feet. Her laugh beats the thunder-clap all hollow. She is all terror."<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of thunder as her laugh reminds us of Okakura's description of "the storm laughs on the cloud." And Sister Nivedita called the public's attention to the contrast between this image of Kālī and ordinary Hindu women. "Is that the picture of a young Hindu woman? She that has no individual exis-

tence apart from her husband, she that is so graceful, unobtrusive, retiring, always covered from head to foot, always the gentle, the soft, the loving mother! If anything, Kālī is the exact reverse of the Hindu woman.”<sup>10</sup>

Then what can Kālī be the metaphor of? “Unless we are prepared to blind and cheat ourselves deliberately we can no longer ignore the *one law* of life and progress which runs through all states of matter and mind. This is *struggle for existence*. And not one feature of Kālī will be found overdrawn or exaggerated if she is looked upon as the concretised image of this fundamental law of relative life.”<sup>11</sup> Still, this explanation leads to another question: “If Kālī is such, why worship her? She should be the last thing to adore!”<sup>12</sup> To this, Sister Nivedita answers by explaining what worship means for Hindus. “Worship, as we Hindus understand it, is *constant remembrance*, always keeping before the mind’s eye.”<sup>13</sup> “And what is there, what can be there in the universe more important and vital for Moksha than to constantly live in the ideas that the universe of phenomena which frightens us with its innumerable terrific faces is in reality but a *show*, a false appearance, the one truth being Satchidananda which is back of it all?”<sup>14</sup> If few of her commentaries are of her own original invention, the reader still cannot help being impressed by the swiftness and assuredness with which she develops her argument convincingly.

Sister Nivedita’s conclusion may be regarded as rudimentary, but it nonetheless gives a clear and rational insight into the seemingly superstitious and savage practice of sacrifice to the Mother-goddess.

Maya is false, Kālī is its symbol. If Kālī were painted as the ideal Hindu woman, she would have been real. To convey her unreality—as she shows herself, she is painted as the ideal *non-woman*./ She hides Shiva under her feet, she dances over his bosom and successfully draws and rivets all attention to herself, as the mirage which shines over the desert cheats, and holds back the vision of the onlooker from the true state of affairs./ She has to be seen through, she has to be crossed over. What else should be thought of or worshipped—if not she? Does one pore over a blank sheet, if one has to commit to memory a book?<sup>15</sup>

Thus the paradox of the pitiful, compassionate Mother, “refuge of All” and simultaneously destroyer of all the phenomenal world. “[W]hat is the meaning of death—of destruction of the visible—of all these forms of horror and fear? Is it not the manifestation of that Divine Energy that carries through fire and slaughter and blind cruelty the message of love and deliverance home to us?”<sup>16</sup> For the Divine Mother always cries to the world: “Humanity, Humanity, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and ye would not!”<sup>17</sup> By applying the metaphor of the hen, Sister Nivedita hints at the Christian metaphor of the Good Shepherd protecting the sheep. But the trope also evokes the image of the *Madonna misericordia* protecting humanity under her garment. Sister Nivedita’s formulation is so audacious (seen

in Christian perspective) as to reduce even Christ to just one divine messenger amongst others sent by the Mother-Goddess from the East to the Mediterranean (and to the Western) world.

Indeed it was Sister Nivedita's conviction that "the East is eternally the mother of religions, for the reason that she has assimilated as ordinary social functions what the West holds to be only the duty of officialism or the message of the Church," and "that Christianity in Europe is neither more nor less than the mission of the Asiatic Life."<sup>18</sup> We now understand the reason why Sister Nivedita was so furiously attacked by the missionaries. Her conception—largely shared with Vivekananda—of the Indian religiosity of the "all pervasive and syncretic power" of the Mother-Goddess could easily undermine the core of Christianity.

#### 4. THE ORIENTAL NOTION OF FREEDOM AND SELF-ABNEGATION

Sister Nivedita published "Lambs among Wolves" in 1901 in *The Westminster Review*. In it she developed a systematic counter-attack to missionaries' prejudices against Hindu society and especially to women's position in India. With a title borrowed with ironic intent from the Bible, she obviously equated missionaries with "Wolves" and designated them as enemies of "Lambs," i.e., innocent Indian people. She emphasized the differences in the notion of "freedom" in the East and the West. The question raised here is still relevant today especially in the context of feminist debate about the position of woman in so-called Third World and non-Western countries. As she put it in "Lambs among Wolves":

It is obviously absurd to constitute one's own national customs an ideal standard, against which every other country is to be measured. Hindu and Mohammedan women are not seen much in public, either shopping or visiting. We are: we enjoy our custom, and call it Freedom. Does it follow that the Eastern woman's restrictions constitute a grievance? Would it not be wise, in attempting to demonstrate this, to share as completely as possible the physical and emotional environment which has conditioned her habit? It is conceivable that, having done this, we should conclude that even in the climate of India or Persia more muscular activity and greater social liberty would be of benefit to women; but unless our judgment were fatally warped by prejudice, we should at the same time reach the counter-conviction that a corresponding power of stillness and meditative peace would be a vast gain in the West.<sup>19</sup>

Curiously enough, a similar argument about the meaning of Oriental Freedom can be detected in Okakura's Indian writings:

The West has often accused the East of a lack of Freedom. Truly we have not that crude notion of personal rights guarded by mutual assertions—that perpetual elbowing through the crowd—that constant snarling over the bones, which seems to be the glory of the Occident. Our conception of liberty is far higher than these. With us it lies in the power to complete the individual idea within itself. The true infinity is the circle, not the extended line. Every organism implies a subordination of parts to a whole. Real equality lies in the due fulfillment of the respective function. Oriental womanhood finds its freest scope in the Mother, the Wife, and the Daughter rather than in the doubtful privileges of an unnatural masculinity. The fish is not to be emancipated in the air.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of “Oriental womanhood” that suddenly appears in Okakura’s discussion follows in good tune with Sister Nivedita’s view of Indian womanhood. In “How and why I adopted the Hindu religion,” a lecture delivered at the Hindu Ladies’ Social Club in Bombay on 2 October 1902—that is, right around the time when Tenshin was leaving Calcutta to return to Japan—Nivedita said, “I love India as the birth-place of the highest and best of all religions; as the country. . . where domestic happiness is most to be found; where the woman unselfishly, unobtrusively, ungrudgingly, serves the dear ones from early morn to dewy eve; where the mother and the grandmother studies, foresees and contributes to the comfort of her belongings, regardless of her own happiness, and in the unselfishness raises womanhood to its highest eminence.”<sup>21</sup>

In *The Web of Indian Life*, also, she stressed the contrast between Oriental altruistic sacrifice and Western individualism:

Unselfishness and the thirst for service stand out in the Western personality against a background of individualistic conventions, and convey an impression of the eagerness and struggle of pity, without which the world would certainly be the poorer. But the Eastern woman is unaware of any defiance of institutions. She is the product of an ethical civilisation. Her charities are required of her. Her vows and penances are unknown even to her husband; but were they told they would scarcely excite remark in a community where all make similar sacrifices. / This is only to say that she is more deeply self-effacing and more effectively altruistic than any Western. The duty of tending the sick is so much a matter of course to her that she does not dream of it as a special function, for which one might erect hospitals or learn nursing. . . . Throughout the world women are the guardians of humanity’s ethical ideals.<sup>22</sup>

Further, Sister Nivedita found in Oriental self-renunciation not subordination but a personal realization of freedom, and she construed this as constituting a woman’s “career”:

These women who may not be able to read and write are deeply, and even passionately, possessed of the spirit of the ancient culture. The philosophy of Maya, not seldom bewildering to the Western *savant*, has no difficulty for them. They understand to a hair the meaning of the word Nirvana. It is no one special command to deny oneself and take up a cross and follow, that has weight with them; but the bearing of the great law of renunciation on the personal realisation of freedom. Add to all this the inbred habit of life in community, and it will appear that under the old scheme women found not only a training and a discipline, but also a career.<sup>23</sup>

The idea of “subordination of parts to the whole,” which Sister Nivedita recommends as Oriental virtue, was closely connected with Tenshin’s understanding of the Indian castes. “Vedic Allegory concerning the origin of the Castes tells of the different occupations of Humanity as coming out of different parts of the same Brahmā, serving the necessary functions of society, and all equally acceptable to the Gods. The music of sympathy vibrates throughout the common brotherhood, the high and low beating in the rhythm of similar joys and sorrows.”<sup>24</sup>

Sister Nivedita, in her turn, touched upon the problem of the castes in “The Immediate Problems of The Oriental Woman,” written in June 1903 in Darjeeling, which was to become chapter 6 of *The Web of Indian Life*. While not idealizing the castes and not overlooking the serious social problems the caste system caused, she nonetheless observed that “Caste equalises the dignity of beggar and king, and the form of work is merely a question of wealth.”<sup>25</sup> The passage reminds us of Tenshin’s observation: “Kings prostrate themselves to the mighty beggar who bows not to the gods.”<sup>26</sup> The contexts are different—Tenshin was trying to identify Japanese retirement (*inkyō* 隠居) or Buddhist “Vanaprasthya” with the dream Chinese literati cherished of retreating to “the bamboo groves” or the “pine-clad hills,” while Sister Nivedita was contrasting the position of the English manorial household of “the good mother-in-law” (which is similar to “Japan, Rajputana, Turkey Scandinavia, and Spain”) with that of India, where “the girls gathered round its head are the wives of her sons, instead of her husband’s vassals.” And yet, as we reread these lines, we find it easy to suppose that intensive exchanges of opinions might have occurred between Tenshin and Sister Nivedita during his stay in India.

One example suggestive of such an exchange—about the terms of the notion of self-sacrifice—may be worth mentioning. Not only in *The Ideals of the Orient* but also in *The Awakening of the East*, Tenshin cites famous anecdotes illustrative of Oriental *noblesse oblige*. “The word pity is the whole of Buddhism, as humanity is that of Confucianism. It is expressed in the self-sacrifice of the Ādi-Buddha and Bodhisattvas who refuse Nirvāṇa until the rest of mankind is saved. it is exemplified in the lives of Princes who fasted while famine was on the land or discarded warm garments when the frost nipped the peasant’s health.”<sup>27</sup> In these anecdotes Tenshin grasps “that harmony that brings together Emperor and peasant; that sublime intuition of oneness which commands all sympathy, all courtesy, to be its fruit.”<sup>28</sup> The idea of “one-ness” almost certainly shows

the direct impact of Tenshin's encounter with Vivekananda on 6 January 1902, in Belur, where they exchanged ideas about the notion of Advaita—the idea of ultimate “oneness”—and Mahayana Buddhism.

One may presume that it was during her proofreading of these passages in Tenshin's manuscripts that Sister Nivedita noted, “N. [Okakura] almost persuades me that sovereigns have not always and everywhere been vulgar and rich and self indulgent and grasping at the show of power.”<sup>29</sup> And certainly this experience led her to include the following passage in her “Gospel of the Blessed One,” written in 1903 at Wimbledon and Darjeeling: “It is told of a certain Bodhisattva that. . . he was about to pass over into Nirvana. But as his feet touched the threshold of supreme blessedness there rose to his ears the sound of the sorrowful crying of humanity. Then turned that great soul back from Nirvana and entered again into life, declaring that till the last grain of dust in the universe had passed in before him, he would by no means go into salvation.”<sup>30</sup> The last part is almost a paraphrase of Okakura's passage: “[T]ill the last atom of dust in the universe shall have passed in before to bliss.”<sup>31</sup> The ideal of self-abnegation seems to be at the heart of the mutual communication between Sister Nivedita's ideal of Oriental Motherhood and Okakura Tenshin's ideal of *noblesse oblige*.

## 5. ASIA AS A LIVING ORGANISM

In a fragment of a letter that is supposed to have been written in 1904 and probably addressed to Josephine MacLeod, Sister Nivedita reveals the sources of inspiration of her publications: “Do you know, it seems to me that Swamiji [Vivekananda] was the real author of this little Kali-book [*Kālī the Mother*], and that then I had to help the Bairn, then the ‘Ideals of the East’ [by Okakura] and that only after *three* servings we were allowed, you and I, to produce this book [that is, *The Web of the Indian Life*]? I love to think that it is the flower of long service and help. Above all, I like to think that I did something for Him [Swami Vivekananda] first. That consecrates everything. Though indeed the very thought of service is itself as a veil of consecration as I think—and even the least sacred is as sacred as the most.”<sup>32</sup>

We have so far examined some aspects of the inter-connectedness between Okakura Tenshin's writings in India and those of Sister Nivedita around the same period, extending from *Kālī the Mother* to *The Web of Indian Life*. As the letter testifies, Sister Nivedita herself recognized the “web” which connected, through her “service” as proofreader, her own writings with Tenshin's English writings. What does the word “web” account for? Apart from the image of the network composing the textile, one may remember the Veda tradition in which the spider's net represents the Maya, the illusion, which nests in the circle of the universe incarnated by the Naga snake. The web means also a “tram,” or even a conspiracy. Sister Nivedita also reminds us that “[t]he Sanskrit Sutras lend themselves to critical writing, and even demand it, in a special degree: for the word Sutra

means *thread* and is applied to works which are only the main line of a given argument, and require expansion at the end of every sentence.”<sup>33</sup> “Web” therefore is also a metaphor of the art of composing the phrases in written texts.

At the opening of *The Web of Indian Life*, Sister Nivedita also refers to a natural metaphor:

Tropical thunderstorms are common through April and May at the day’s end, and the terrible convulsion of Nature that then rages for an hour or two gives a simple parallel to many instances of violent contrast and the logical extreme in Indian art and history. This is a land where men will naturally spend the utmost that is in them. And yet side by side with the scarlet and gold of the loom, how inimitably delicate is the blending of tints in the tapestry! It is so with Indian life. The most delicate *nuance* and remorseless heroism exist side by side, and are equally recognised and welcomed, as in the case of a child I knew—a child whose great grandmother had perhaps committed suttee—who ran to his mother with the cry, “Mother! Mother! save me from Auntie! She is beating me with her eyes!”<sup>34</sup>

Interwoven in this “web” texture is the message Sister Nivedita had delivered in her preface to Okakura’s *The Ideals of the East*. “Therefore it is of supreme value to show Asia, as Mr. Okakura does, not as the congeries of geographical fragments that we imagined, but as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life.”<sup>35</sup> And this vision of Asia as a living organism is duplicated in Sister Nivedita’s own discussion. “Asia shall find herself to be—not, as she has so long been told, ‘merely a congeries of geographical fragments,’ [she is here quoting from herself] still less a concert of rival political units, held in mechanical combination by a due admixture of mutual hopes and recriminations, but a single immense organism, filled with the tide of one strong pulsating life from end to end, firm-rooted in the soil of common origins and common modes?”<sup>36</sup> The “breathing” in the preface to Tenshin’s book is now replaced by the metaphor of “pulsation.”

These metaphors of “breathing” or “pulsation” employed by Sister Nivedita certainly have something in common with the one elaborated by Okakura in *The Ideals of the East*. He wrote:

The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals—the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand-ripple as it beat against the national consciousness. Yet I linger with dismay on the threshold of an attempt to make an intelligible summary of those art-ideals. For art, like the diamond net of Indra [i.e., the “web” in Sister Nivedita’s vocabulary], reflects the whole chain in every link. It exists at no period in any final mould. It is always a growth, defying the dissecting knife of the chronologist.<sup>37</sup>

And yet it would be misleading if we overlook the political necessities which motivated Sister Nivedita's emphasis on the "synthesis of Eastern Asia. "[I]t is certainly a mistake to read the history of India at any time as the account of a struggle between Hindu and Mohammedan thought, though it is a mistake which is perhaps inseparable from the European conception of the influence of faith on politics."<sup>38</sup> "The great task of the reconciliation of opposites would seem to devolve on the peoples within this pale" of the land of Indus.<sup>39</sup> Apparently this task of reconciliation was more a political aim to be achieved than the question of historical facts. This logic also accounts for the reason why Sister Nivedita puts emphasis on the tolerance among religions as an essential nature of Hinduism.

[T]he final differentia of Hinduism lay in the acceptance of the doctrine of the Ishta Devata, *i.e.*, the right of every man to choose his own creed, and of none to force the same choice on any other./ At last, then, Indian thought stands revealed in its entirety—no sect, but a synthesis; no church, but a university of spiritual culture—as an idea of individual freedom, amongst the most complete that the world knows.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. "DHARMA" AS "NATIONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS"

The historical figure singled out in this context is none other than Shankaracharya. "We contemplate with wonder and delight the devotion of Francis of Assisi, the intellect of Abelard, the force and freedom of Martin Luther, and the political efficiency of Ignatius Loyola; but who could imagine all these united in one person?"<sup>41</sup> Sister Nivedita regards "[t]he "period between Shankaracharya and the nineteenth century," as "the inclusion of the Mohammedan element in a completed nationality. From the nineteenth century onwards, it becomes the *realisation* of that single united nationality, amidst the vast complexity which has been the growth of ages."<sup>42</sup> These lines are found in the chapter "The Synthesis of Indian Thought," the irrelevance of which was admonished by *The Athenaeum*. Clearly it was these nationalistic interpretations and subjective rationalization of the Indian history that were harshly criticized and scornfully rejected by the Western missionaries and academic historians as revealing Sister Nivedita's "sentimental idealism," full of "misunderstanding and misstatements," as mentioned earlier.

Yet it would not be fair if we did not recognize the fact that Sister Nivedita was conscious of the possible disagreement that would be pronounced vis-à-vis these lines clearly paraphrasing The Ramakrishna Mission's ideological view. So as to overcome any useless dogmatic debate, she adds the following footnotes on the idea of "Ishta Devata": "I desire to say that in thus referring to my own gurus, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the Swami Vivekananda, I do not intend to imply that every one will or ought to be willing to assign them the same place in the evolution of Hinduism that seems to myself to

belong to them. Whether their names be accepted or not, however, I believe that all Hindus will agree regarding the *ideas* which are here stated as constituting Hinduism.<sup>43</sup>

Still it must be also pointed out that Okakura Tenshin seems to have taken seriously this part of interpretation on Shankaracarya's role in Indian history of ideas, advanced by Sister Nivedita. In *The Awakening of the East* he writes: "The trend of modern Asiatic philosophy since Śaṅkarācārya and the Neo-Confucians concentrates on the reconciliation of all apparent antagonisms in a single comprehensive scheme./ Oriental achievements are a tribute to the social system whose stability of untold centuries is itself a triumph. We have contributed [to] all the great religions of the world. And is it supposed that work of such a kind is done by individuals?"<sup>44</sup> And Tenshin concludes as follows so as to state Oriental superiority in matters of philosophy: "So that there is amongst us no woman seated spinning by her cottage-door, there is no peasant toiling in his fields, no beggar, no trader, no humblest of pilgrims, who can be said to stand outside the East's great gift of the world of faith. European notions of Divinity were only of the enlarged finite self. . . . Our philosophy in its eternal search for unity in variety has long ago scaled heights which modern Europe tries vainly to discern, since the days of Kant."<sup>45</sup>

Not only the self-indulgent statement that "[w]e have contributed [to] all the great religions of the world", but also women's contribution to the "East's great gift of the world faith" clearly correspond to Sister Nivedita's view of the Indian womanhood, when she declared in praise of Indian women's oral literacy: "When we come to the charge that Indian women are ignorant, we meet with a far deeper fallacy. They are ignorant in the modern form, that is to say, few can write, and not very many can read. Are they then illiterate? If so, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and the Puranas and stories every mother and every grand-mother tells to the babies, are not Literature."<sup>46</sup>

One of the main reasons why Sister Nivedita's interpretation of Shankaracharya provoked violent reaction (by *The Athenaeum*, for example) may be detected in the fact that she (and the Ramakrishna Order in general) recognized in this personality a decisive vindication of the Indian "national righteousness." While rereading "dharma" as the "organic law of the national genius," and "banner of the highest ideals," Sister Nivedita quotes from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "Whenever the Dharma decays, and when that which is not Dharma prevails [literally, the a-dharma], then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, *for the firm establishment of the national righteousness*, I am born again and again.' So says the *Bhagavad-Gita*—and never was any prophecy more conclusively vindicated than this, by the appearance of Shankaracharya, early in the ninth century after Christ."<sup>47</sup>

Later in the chapter "On the Loom of Time" (again the metaphor of the "web"), Sister Nivedita more explicitly declares: "[Dharma] is an ancient name for national righteousness or national good."<sup>48</sup> This apparently excessively "nationalistic" reinterpretation of "Dharma" as well as her denial of Shankaracharya as "persecutor of the Buddhists" may have been unacceptable for contemporary British scholars in Indian classics and history. But her position may have been even more intolerable, especially, for the British

rulers of the Indian subcontinent. For Sister Nivedita's rereading was no less than an incitement to Indian national independence from the Great British Empire.

## 7. DOMESTIC REVOLUTION OR "VICTORY FROM WITHIN"

We may now be able to understand why Sister Nivedita was regarded as a dangerous anti-British activist and even taken to be a revolutionary by the Government General. We may also understand why Rabindranath Tagore is said to have gone so far as to declare, in memorializing her, that "We had not seen before any embodiment of the spirit of motherhood which, passing beyond the limits of the family, can spread itself over the whole country."<sup>49</sup> Indeed Sister Nivedita's Indian nationalism is not so much organizing violent uprisings as a kind of inner revolution of mind and behavior which is closely connected with her effort to improve the educational conditions of the Indian women. In Indian womanhood, she was searching for an alternative model to Western social welfare.

India has the power of act, but the end must be familiar. A few women will organise themselves at a moment's notice to cook for hundreds or even thousands of guests, without the least waste of energy or temper such as Western women would incur in organising a soup-kitchen. But if we call the guests "the unemployed," and refer to them as "a social problem," the Oriental becomes bewildered, as would we in like manner were it proposed to us to regard them all as visitors. It is clear that the Western mode of approaching such tasks can only be acquired by India, if it be necessary, through an enlarged idea of the public life.<sup>50</sup>

By the way we can find once again a common expression shared by Sister Nivedita and Okakura in terms of the realization of the national ideal. "[W]hen the mother-heart has once awakened in them [Indian women] to beat for land and people . . . then and then alone shall the future of Indian womanhood dawn upon the race in its actual greatness; then shall a worthy education be realised, and then shall the true national ideal stand revealed." And Sister Nivedita concludes: "Such a change, however, is only possible as a direct growth out of old conceptions. The national idea cannot be imposed from without—it must develop from within. And this will be in full congruity with the national religions."<sup>51</sup>

The chapter including these passages, "The Immediate Problems of the Oriental Woman," is said to have been written at Darjeeling in June 1903, that is, precisely at the moment that Sister Nivedita was proof-reading Okakura's *The Ideals of the East*, and the last phrase reminds us of the final and impressive phrase of the book by Okakura: "Victory from within, or a mighty death without,"<sup>52</sup> which Okakura himself will paraphrase in his "Modern Problems in Painting," a lecture delivered in St. Louis in

September 1904: “true homogeneity [of civilization] must be the result of a realization from within, not an accumulation of outside matter,”<sup>53</sup> though Okakura gives this opinion as the assertion by “the conservative.”

To this reservation expressed by Okakura himself, one may also add that he had, in *The Ideals of the East*, recast the notion of “Advaita” so as to apply it to the explanation of the Japanese art history, where reconciliations of antagonistic elements were not in need: “Thus Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilisation; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phrases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old.”<sup>54</sup> Okakura’s optimism is evident if compared to Sister Nivedita’s forced effort to make up an (imaginary and politically anticipated) Indian unity: “there was no wide gap between Mussulman conquerors and Hindu conquered; no gap in taste, or moral, or style of thought and education. The newcomer settled down as a child of the land, in his own home. His children were first Indian, and only in the second place members of the Mohammedan confraternity.”<sup>55</sup>

## 8. “ORIENTAL SPIRITUALITY” AS A COUNTER-DISOURSE

This auto-genetic view of the national fulfillment was the core of the Asian nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sister Nivedita’s following passage on the Oriental virtue testifies to the (stereo-)typical statement in terms of Oriental superiority over the West in moral and ethics. Spirituality is for the East, if “mighty” physical strength is for the West.

Today, if we adopt moral and intellectual tests as the criteria of civilisation, we can hardly refuse to admit that in such issues the East has been more successful than the West. in strength of family ties; in sweetness and decorum of family life; in widespread understanding of the place of the personal development in the scheme of religion as a whole; in power of enjoyment of leisure, without gross physical accompaniments; in dignity, frugality, continuous industry without aggressive activity; in artistic appreciation or work done and doing; and above all in the ability to concentrate the whole faculty at will, even the poorest classes in India, whatever their religion, will compare favorably with many who are far above them in the West. Such are some of the results of the Buddhist period.<sup>56</sup>

Sister Nivedita’s writing raises here an irritating dilemma (especially for feminist studies in the third world), which stems from a vicious circle: execrating Oriental society for oppressing women results in justifying the Western (masculine) reign over the Orient (represented as feminine); whereas recognizing and accepting Eastern virtue amounts to accepting Oriental masculine (or misogynous?) domination over women. This makes vir-

tually and practically impossible to establish any mutual recognition, cooperation, and even less, solidarity, between women activists in Western missionary and those women (Western or native) devoted to Hinduism. Emancipation (from Indian subordination) celebrated from one side (from missionaries) may be negatively regarded as subordination (to Western and Christian moral) from the other. Or to put it another way, if one rejects Oriental superiority in ethics, one is accused of imposing Western criteria of moral judgment on the Orient; however, if one accepts Oriental superiority in ethics, one is blamed for having a pater/mater-nalistic attitude.

## 9. "THE GENUINE INDIAN CHARACTER" VS. GRECO-ROMAN CANON

It is in the virtue of showing this dilemma that Sister Nivedita's writings retain a sense of immediacy even now. In the more restricted historical framework of the beginning of the twentieth century, this dilemma manifested itself in the re-invention of India's national character in artistic expression. On the one hand, Sister Nivedita and her intellectual and spiritual allies believed that the Indian "national character" should not be reduced and made to conform to Western, i.e. Greco-Roman, criteria; on the other hand, they thought this "national character" must be recognized *de facto* as belonging to the category of "Fine-Arts." The paradox is that the category of "Fine-Arts" itself was a Western product forged in accordance with Greco-Roman criteria, that is, the very ideal that the Indian "national character" had to reject, *de jure*. Here lies the (ideo-)logical background to the so-called controversies over the appreciation of Gandhara Buddhist sculptures, in which Sister Nivedita took a dominant role as an art critic.

At the beginning of her essay "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality," published in *The Modern Review* in January and February 1907, Sister Nivedita declared: "It is in the endeavor to take spiritual possession of its own, in struggling to carry out the tasks before it, that the national idea is shaping itself in India."<sup>57</sup> Clearly the word "nationality" is a more elaborated form of what she had called "national righteousness" in her previous writings. "Wherever we look, on the sea of struggle, we see this thought, 'That we be a nation,' shining as their pole-star above the tossing voyagers."<sup>58</sup> Once again this reminds us of Okakura, in his incantation to "The Sword" in *The Awakening of the East*, talking of "the Chinese worship thee [the sword] in the Polar Beam that marshalls into unity the seemed hosts of the skies."<sup>59</sup> "Art, then, is charged with spiritual message,—in India today, the message of the Nationality."<sup>60</sup>

The following years saw pioneering publications on the Indian Art by such authors as E. B. Havell (1864-1937), A. K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1943), and Sister Nivedita assiduously published encouraging book reviews on the latest books by these authors. Her review of E. B. Havell's *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (London: John Murray, 1908), appeared in *The Modern Review*, November 1909,<sup>61</sup> and in it she agreed with the main argument developed by the author regarding the lack of importance of the Greek aspect

in India Art.(Fig. 4)

Our author rightly feels that Indian art is only to be understood through Indian ideals. He points out that the current idea, that India derived her art from Greece, is of very little consequence so long as it is admitted that her *ideals* were not derived from Greece. “It is of course true that every nationality, when it seeks to work out its artistic ideals, makes use of any agents, native or foreign, which happen to be within reach. But the Greeks no more created Indian sculpture and painting than they created Indian philosophy and religion. Their aesthetics ideals were essentially different from those of India, and they never at any time imposed them upon Indian art, which, in its distinctive and essential character, is entirely the product of Indian thought and Indian artistic genius.<sup>62</sup>



Fig 4. Portrait of E. B. Havell (1864-1937) watercolor ca. 1905 by Ishwari Prasad [from Guha-Thakurta 1992, p. 150]

E. B. Havell’s text, quoted from by Sister Nivedita, reveals the author’s firm preconception that art is a visualized expression of the thought and philosophy of the nation in question. Sister Nivedita’s commentary also makes clear her “idealistic” tendency, as she placed more importance on ideals than on actual phenomena. Okakura’s term “The Ideal” must, of course, be taken into account in this intellectual milieu of idealistic predilections. In the following part, Sister Nivedita puts emphasis on the pan-Indian artistic sphere (which she calls “Indian Colony”) while disparaging Gandharan art.

Most of those Indians who read his pages will learn, we fear, for the first time, of the Indian Colony who wrought the great temple of Borobudur in Java. If we want to realise the immeasurable difference of spirit between the semi-Greek art of Gandhara, in the first and second century of the Christian Era, and genuine Indian sculpture, secure in conscious possession of its own sources of inspiration we cannot do better than compare the Lorian Tangai relief of Buddha Preaching with the same as treated at Borobudur.<sup>63</sup>

Sister Nivedita agrees with E. B. Havell in excluding Gandharan sculpture from the category of “genuine Indian sculpture,” and so as to justify this at best tautological argument (as all depends on how one defines the “genuine Indian-ness”), she relies upon the empirical judgment advanced by Havell. “Well may Mr. Havell say that the Indian ideal was never realised in Gandharan art and any one who has visited the Gandharan sculptures in the Calcutta Museum and stood face to face with the smart military looking young men ‘who pose uncomfortably there in the attitudes of Indian ascetism’, their moustaches touched with all the hairdresser’s latest art, will echo his words.”<sup>64</sup>

Her conclusion overlaps Havell’s dogmatic dichotomy between “lofty” spirituality of Indian genuine sculpture and “earthly” materialism of the Greco-roman (and in extension Gandharan) sculpture. “There is nothing here [in Gandhara sculpture] of the lofty calm and simplicity of the Buddhas of Magadha, nor is there the spontaneous sweetness and gentleness of the Dhyani Buddha of Borobudur. . . . Well may the writer say, ‘European art has, as it were, its wings clipped: it knows only the beauty of earthly things. Indian art soaring into the highest empyrean, is ever trying to bring down to earth something of the beauty of the things above.’”<sup>65</sup> In addition, in her review of Havell’s *Indian Painting*, published in *The Modern Review* in December 1909, Sister Nivedita again refers to the notion of “nationalisation” of foreign elements, saying that “all foreign artistic ideas were gradually transformed by Indian thought, and nationalised.”<sup>66</sup>

## 10. INDIAN IDEALISM AND SWADESH MOVEMENT

In July 1909, Sister Nivedita reviewed Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* in *The Modern Review* with an enthusiastic recommendation. She first praised the “beauty of print and paper,” chosen after William Morris’s Kelmscott books (and let us remember that she had compared Okakura to William Morris in her preface to *The Ideals of The East*), which also suggests the medieval undertone that Coomaraswamy’s book and William Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement had in common. She then praises the “English” of the book, which she describes as “saturated with the strong simple terms of gospels and Sagas” also giving “the touch of Morris, master-craftsman of the modern world.” Thirdly she highly praised “Dr. Coomaraswamy’s” effort to “find true equivalents in English for the feeling as well as the literal significance of Sinhalese terms, and such a translation as *Luch gate*, or *Yeomen* or *Swing of doom* deserves high praise.”<sup>67</sup>

Faithful to her creed, Sister Nivedita highly appreciated the verification of the “continuity of art in India” achieved by the author. She approvingly quoted Coomaraswamy:

There is remarkable unity underlying the diverse developments of Indian art (including the art of Ceylon, Burma, Siam, and Java), not merely as regards the

persistence in time of elements of decoration, but also geographically (sic); here I refer to the present peculiar isolation of particular trades and techniques which survive, so to say, in scattered ‘islands’ all over India. The argument from distribution is, that knowledge of these crafts was once more widely spread and continuous; it is also fairly clear that it was once very much more extensive and thorough.<sup>68</sup>

In summary, Sister Nivedita insisted upon “[t]he unity of India” which “is indeed manifold in its expression.”<sup>69</sup> And this phrase almost repeats the doctrine put forward by A. K. Coomaraswamy in his dogmatic “Aims of Indian Art,” published in 1908. “Just as through all Indian schools of thought there runs like a golden thread the fundamental idealism of the *Upanishads*, the *Vedānta*, so in all Indian art there is a unity that underlines all its bewildering variety. This unifying principle is here also idealism, and this must of necessity have been so, for the synthesis of Indian thought is one, not many.”<sup>70</sup> Here the notion of Advaita serves as an irrefutable justification of the idealistic view of Indian unifying principle.

Hellenistic element was by definition alien to this unifying principle. A slight reserve which still remained in Sister Nivedita’s treatment of E. B. Havell’s opinion of Gandharan sculpture gives way to a more straightforward assertion: “Dr. Coomaraswamy, however, is no victim of current nonsense about Greece. He refuses to recognise the Hellenic mind as the sole authorised fount of beauty for the early as for the modern world.”<sup>71</sup> And she quoted from Coomaraswamy’s central doctrine:

[T]he influence of Greek on Indian Art, however extensive at a certain period, was ultimately neither very profound nor very important. It is the concentration of attention upon the effeminate and artistically unimportant work of the Gandhara School that has given undue prominence to the Greek influence. It must be admitted also that a certain prejudice has led European investigators to think of classic Greece naturally as the source of all Art, and to suppose that the influence of classic Art must have been as permanently important in the East as in the West.<sup>72</sup>

This idea, which E. B. Havell will take advantage of in his *The Ideals of Indian Art* (1911; the title shows strong influence of Okakura’s book), marks a turning point in the Western idea of the aesthetic Canon. (Let us recall here the famous anecdote about Sir George Birdwood’s invective targeted at Havell’s lecture on Indian Art at the Royal Academy in 1910.) The absolute superiority of the Greco-Roman criteria as the universal ideal is put into question by the “essential Indian-ness” (as Havell will put it). The Eastern ideal reveals itself as no less incompatible than incommensurable with the Western ideal.

This self-affirmation of the Eastern Ideal as a unifying principle in Indian artistic expression was the reverse side of the national humiliation India had recently suffered. As I have already demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>73</sup> the metaphor of “scattered islands” contrasted

to the lost “unity” was a (more than) sub-conscious allusion to the political reality after the Bengal Partition put into effect by the Government-General in 1906, which provoked the massive anti-British protests known as the Swadesh National Movement. The bitterness felt by Bengali people facing at the politically fragmented India is here transferred into the Indian art history, so as to rehabilitate the ancient glory of United India for present purposes of nation building.

Sister Nivedita consciously concludes her review by replying to this nationalistic fervor: It is by means of studies such as Coomaraswamy’s that “an unassailable background of knowledge and culture may be added to the sentiment of *Swadesh*, and the doctrine of Nationality. India is full of jewels: all that is needed is men to pick them up!.... Then, and then alone, shall we have a witness to the Indian national unity that no one, for any motive whatsoever, shall be able to withstand. Bhumia Devi Ki Jai! Glory to the Mother, Goddess of the Homestead!”<sup>74</sup>

## 11. “NATIONAL RENAISSANCE” OF INDIAN ART

In her remarkable study *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, Tapati Guha-Thakurta observes that

Havell’s defense and reinterpretation of Indian art history remained enmeshed in the paternalistic obligations of the ruler towards the ruled. Even as he repeatedly underlined his opposition to British art administration in India and Western scholarship on Indian art, he continued to define his alternative commitments within the framework of Empire. In Coomaraswamy, as in Okakura, Orientalism acquired more decidedly nationalistic overtones, rooting itself in the patriotic fervour of a rejuvenated Japan, or a deep crisis of self-identity at the denationalisation of Ceylon. Nivedita, through her direct participation in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, could most effectively harness these ideas in the project of a nationalist “renaissance” of Indian art.<sup>75</sup>

One typical example of Sister Nivedita’s project of “national ‘renaissance’ of Indian Art” may be found in her “art appreciation” (s.d.) in which she speaks of her dream of founding painting galleries. As Guha-Thakurta relevantly points out “it is very difficult”—even in the case of Sister Nivedita—“to separate the contours of the Orientalist reinterpretations of Indian art from the parallel wave of nationalist self-awareness that flooded the subject.”<sup>76</sup> Let us quote a relatively long excerpt that conveys her imagination at work:

I have long thought that if I were an Indian prince I would use my surplus revenues first and foremost for the promotion of civic and historic painting. To this end I

would open competitions and announce prizes, and establish picture-printing press for cheap reproduction of coloured pictures, Here is our dusty lanes, I would like to build open verandahs, running round three sides of a square, and bearing on their inner surfaces great mural pictures—some in pigments, some in mosaics, and some after the fashion of the Indian past, carved in stone in low relief—of the mighty scenes of the civic and national past. . . . [T]he buildings of which I speak should be civic temples, or temples may be of the national spirit. There, no mythic scenes should be allowed. Instead—Ashoka sending forth his missionaries; Kanishka seated in council; Vikramaditya offering the Ashvamedha; the twelve crowned victims of Cheetore—the Coronation of Akbar; the building of the Taj; the funeral of Aurangzeb; the sati of the Queen Jahanabi of hill Tipperah—these, and such as these, should be the subjects here displayed, and every woman on her way to the river-ghat, and every labourer going to and from his work, should be made familiar with the idea of India, and the evolution of India through four thousand years.<sup>77</sup>

In her final years, before her untimely death in 1911, Sister Nivedita could see some of these subject-matters being realized by her close friends and artists, by whom she was adored. Let us take up three representative paintings, following guidance provided by Sister Nivedita herself. The first is *Bharat-Mata* by Abanindra Nath Tagore. The second is *Sati* by Nandalal Bose. And the third and final one is *The Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1203* by Surendra Nath Ganguly. Sister Nivedita's own explanations not only illustrate vividly what we have tried to demonstrate so far in this essay, but they also serve as markers of the path leading to our conclusion. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 Nandalal Bose, *The Artists' Studio Jorasanko*, Tagore Brothers, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Bose himself [from A. K. Coomaraswamy, 1975]

## 12. BHARAT-MATA AND SATI



Fig. 6 Bharat-Mata (1906) by Abanindranath Tagore [From C.W.S.N.]



Fig. 7 Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951)

Firstly, on *Bharat-Mata* (1906?) (Fig. 6) executed by Abanindra Nath Tagore (1871-1951) (Fig. 7), a full-length citation is once again indispensable, so as to understand not only Sister Nivedita's subtle observations on the details of the depiction but also the deep emotion and controlled enthusiasm with which she conducted her writing work. These lines can be read as a synthesis of her Indian life.

We have here a picture which bids fair to prove the beginning of a new age in Indian art. Using all the added means of expression which the modern period has bestowed upon him, the artist has here given expression nevertheless to a purely Indian idea, in Indian form. The curving line of lotuses and the white radiance of the halo are beautiful additions to the Asiatically-conceived figure with its four arms, as the symbol of the divine multiplication of power. This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging, as it were, the spirit of the motherhood,—giver of Faith and Learning, of Clothing and Food,—and portraying Her, as she appears to the eyes of Her children. What he sees in Her is here made clear to all of us. Spirit of the motherland, giver of all good, yet eternally virgin, eternally raft from human sense in prayer and gift. The misty lotuses and the white light set Her apart from the common world, as much as the four arms, and Her infinite love. And yet in every detail, of “Shankha” bracelet, and close-veiling garment, of bare feet, and open, sincere expression, is she not after all, our very own, heart of our heart, at once mother and daughter of the

Indian land, even as to the Rishis of old was Ushabala, in her Indian girlhood, daughter of the dawn?<sup>78</sup>

In short, Sister Nivedita sees in this female figure the incarnation of the rejuvenated India as she hoped to realize through her own experience and her understanding of Kālī the Mother, which may be regarded as the negative of the present picture. It is by “crossing over” the dreadful Kālī and through its negative aspects that we should contemplate this radiant image of the eternal motherhood.

In *Sati* (ca. 1907) (Fig. 8), Nandalal Bose (1883-1966) (Fig. 9) treated a subject that was super-sensitive for Christian missionaries. Sister Nivedita had tried to defend the “ideal” of the practice against the European “prejudice” of regarding this self-sacrifice as a pure insanity and savage custom of inhuman and forced burning suicide. Instead of interpreting Sati as a proof of the female subordination and oppression, Sister Nivedita recognizes in this practice a dignity of the Oriental woman, in her semi-divine glory and triumph:

We see before us a woman, beautiful indeed, and adorned like a bride, with her whole mind set on the moment of triumph, yet without the slightest consciousness of her own glory. The form is pure Sattva, without one particle of Rajas, as the Indian thinker might express it. The spire-like flames leap up. She kneels throned on a summit of fire. Yet there is no fear. No farewell sob is mingled with her praying. Her eyes see nothing—neither the flames beneath, nor the loved ones she is leaving—nothing at all, save the sacred form of him whom she is about to rejoin. Her mind is quiet, flooded with peace. The moment is one of union. She knows nothing of separation.<sup>79</sup>

In this practice of self-abnegation, Sister Nivedita finds a sign of Oriental superiority over the Occident in ethical matters. “In this perfect fearlessness, this absence of any self-



Fig. 8 *Sati* (ca.1907) by Nandalal Bose [from *Ajia kindai kaiga no yoake ten* 『アジア近代絵画の夜明け展』, 1985]



Fig. 9 Nandalal Bose (1883-1966)

consciousness, what a witness we find to the Indian Conception of the Glory of Woman!" And she proposes a parallel between Christian martyrdom and Indian wifehood. "From the cloistered wifehood of the old Indian home to the martyr death of the Great Saint—was it not in truth a path of glory, on which each footprint should receive our salutation?" Thus she convinces the (Western) readers of the holy and sacred nature of the practice of Sati in the mirror of Catholic—as well as Islamic—examples. In reference to Islam, she writes, "The sacred texts go so far as to say that he who dies for his country at once attains the Beatific Vision."<sup>80</sup> The ultimate self-sacrifice corresponds to Sister Nivedita's ultimate vision of the Kali sacrifice: "the man to whom once the great word of religion was 'My child, you need not know much in order to please Me. Only love Me dearly. Talk to me as you would talk to your mother, if she had taken you on her knee,'—that same man will now be able to say through every word and act and thought, 'Though Thou slay me, yet will I trust in Thee.'"<sup>81</sup>

### 13. *THE FLIGHT OF LAKSHMAN SEN IN 1203*: AN INTERPRETATION

The third and final painting to be examined here is *The Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1203* (1907?) by Surendra Nath Ganguly (?-1909?) (Fig. 10). In her review article on "Havell on Indian Painting" (1908), first published in *The Modern Review* in December 1909, Sister Nivedita explains the historical deed as follows:

There is no weakness in the final picture of the modern school reproduced by Mr. Havell. Whatever we may think historically of the Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1203, before the Mohammedans, —and I for one do not accept a word of the current nonsense that would make of him a coward!—this picture by Surendra Nath Ganguly, is magnificent, strong, nervous, full of energy and vigor. The escape of a discrowned king speaks in every line. . . . And after all, is not the moment portrayed, one of promise, if also of regret? Sadness for the occasion, promise for the art? The picture speaks of both. The boat waits by the palace-step.



Fig. 10 *The Flight of Lakshman Sen in 1203* (ca.1907) by Suren Ganguly [from Mitter 1994, p. 344]

But—the door is left open, and in the grim determination of the face of the fugitive king, hope still lives! It is a moment of withdrawal rather than flight. In some remote fastness of his kingdom, Lakshman Sen will still live and reign. When the hour strikes, he will return again.<sup>82</sup>

At first reading we may be astonished and puzzled by this apparently highly subjective interpretation given by sister Nivedita. To those who know the famous words of General Douglas MacArthur before his “withdrawal”—and not “flight”—from the Philippines (“We shall return!”), is this picture more easily understood? However, we already have the key to solve this enigma. Let us recall the will of reincarnation: “Whenever the Dharma decays, and when that which is not Dharma prevails, then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, *for the firm establishment of the national righteousness*; I am born again and again.” These lines of *Bhagavad-Gita*, already quoted,<sup>83</sup> which also evoke the determination of the “Bodhisattvas who refuse Nirvana until the rest of mankind is saved,”<sup>84</sup> find refrains in the final passage of *The Web of Indian Life*. Sister Nivedita, after raising the questions “The road is clear, but has India strength to follow it?” and “Is the mighty Mother not now exhausted?”, gives her message as the ultimate reply:

[A]n indomitable hope wakes still in the heart of the Indian peasant. “That which is, shall pass: and that which has been, shall again be,” he mutters “to the end of time.” And we seem to catch in his words the sound of a great prophecy, of which his is but the echo—/ “Whatever the Dharma decays, and Adharma prevails, then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, *for the firm establishment of The National Righteousness*, I am born again and again.<sup>85</sup>

Undoubtedly the historical “flight” of 1203 alludes to the present state of India under British rule, seven hundred years later, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Without explicitly declaring it, Sister Nivedita here is praying for the reestablishment of the Dharma, or the “National Righteousness” in India. “When the hour strikes” the ideal of India as unifying organic entity, as she perceived it, “will return again!” For, as Sister Nivedita herself had remarked, “[A]gitation against abuses [including the one made by the British rulers] has never been the method of Hinduism. Rather has the faith progressed by lifting repeatedly in moments of crisis the banner of the highest ideal.”<sup>86</sup>

The three paintings, executed around 1906-07 and briefly treated here in the light of Sister Nivedita’s writing around 1907-09, seem to affirmatively testify to this prophecy of uplifting of the ideal “in moments of crisis.” And this prophecy was partly realized by the reserved but vigorous eloquence through which Sister Nivedita celebrated these artistic achievements as the triumph of the making of a new “Indian” art in the context of a face-off between Western value judgment and Oriental reaction—a historical confrontation of which Sister Nivedita was herself a particular incarnation and one of the main

historical catalysts.

This essay is based on the author's public lecture at the Watarium Museum on 21 May 2002, in the Fifth Research Program on Okakura Tenshin. Quotations from British English published in India observe the original spellings, and diacritical marks in non-English terms are as they appear in the original sources.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- C.W.S.N. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Pravrajika Atmaprana, in 5 vols. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1967-68 (vol. 1-vol. 4), 1975 (vol. 5) .
- C.E.W. Okakura Kakuzo. *Collected English Writings*, ed. Sunao Nakamura, in 3 vols. Heibonsha, 1984.
- L.S.N. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankra Prasad Basu, in 3 vols. Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1967.

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For more bibliography, refer to Inaga 2001b. For additional sources including publications in Japanese, please see Inaga Shigemi 稲賀繁美, “Okakura Tenshin to Indo: ekkyōsuru kindai kokumin ishiki to han-Ajia ideogōgi no kisū” 岡倉天心とインド:越境する近代国民意識と汎アジア・イデオロギーの帰趨, in Modanizumu Kenkyūkai モダニズム研究会, ed., *Modanizumu no ekkyō* モダニズムの越境 (Transgressions of Modernism). Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 2002, pp. 76-100.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Both these writers, it is interesting to note, spent their childhoods in Ireland, which was then still under British Colonial rule.
- <sup>2</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Preface,” in Sister Nivedita and Coomaraswamy 1914.
- <sup>3</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, pp. 245-6. Tagore’s introduction was dated 21 October 1917.
- <sup>4</sup> All four of these excerpts from reviews are reproduced in the editor’s preface to C.W.S.N. vol. 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Written in 1902. C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 166. Okakura’s Indian writing was published posthumously, in 1938, as *The Awakening of the East* despite the fact that he himself seems to have preferred the title *We Are One*.
- <sup>6</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 1, p. 420.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 419-20.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 429-30.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> This image reminds Western readers of the *memento mori* of Greek thought.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 431. It may be worth remarking that Sister Nivedita identified herself as a Hindu in this passage.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 427.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Web of Indian Life*, C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 69.
- <sup>19</sup> C.W.S.N. vol. 4, pp. 512-3.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Awakening of the East*; S.E.R., vol. 1, p. 151.
- <sup>21</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 461. Regarding Okakura's departure, we know that he embarked on the Kanagawa-maru in Singapore on 16 October 1902.
- <sup>22</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 68.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 73.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Awakening of the East*, E.C.W., vol. 1, p. 150.
- <sup>25</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 73.
- <sup>26</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 152.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Awakening of the East*, C.E.W., vol. 1, pp. 150-51.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Ideals of the East*, C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 130.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter to Josephine MacLeod, July 1902, L.S.N., vol. 1, no. 197.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Web of Indian Life*, C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 181.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Ideals of the East*; C.E.W. vol. 1, p. 130.
- <sup>32</sup> L.S.N., vol. 2, p. 705, no. 325.
- <sup>33</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 140.
- <sup>34</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Ideals of the East*, C.E.W., vol. 1, introduction, p. 11.
- <sup>36</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, pp. 147-48.
- <sup>37</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 16.
- <sup>38</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 147.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 146.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 142.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 147.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 146.
- <sup>44</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1., p. 154.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> "India has no apology to make," lecture delivered on 4 February 1902 at the Mahajan Sabha in Madras, C.W.S.N, vol. 2, p. 452.
- <sup>47</sup> "The Synthesis of Indian Thought," C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 140; cf. p. 235.
- <sup>48</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 235.

- <sup>49</sup> Atmaprana 1995: 201.
- <sup>50</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 76.
- <sup>51</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>52</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 132.
- <sup>53</sup> C.E.W., vol. 2, pp. 77-78.
- <sup>54</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 16.
- <sup>55</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 77.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 239.
- <sup>57</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 11.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 166.
- <sup>60</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 12.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 21- 27.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 27.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 45.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 45.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy 1985, p. 1.
- <sup>71</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 50.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 51.
- <sup>73</sup> Inaga 2001.
- <sup>74</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 52.
- <sup>75</sup> Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p. 182.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 58.
- <sup>78</sup> First published in *Prabasi*, August, 1906; C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 57.
- <sup>79</sup> *The Modern Review*, April 1908; C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 66.
- <sup>80</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 77.
- <sup>81</sup> "Kali and her Worship" [1899], C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 427.
- <sup>82</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 3, p. 37.
- <sup>83</sup> C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 140.
- <sup>84</sup> Quoted earlier. C.E.W., vol. 1, p. 150.
- <sup>85</sup> Last passage of "On the Loom of Time," being the final chapter of *The Web of Indian Life*, C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 243.
- <sup>86</sup> Originally written in 1903; C.W.S.N., vol. 2, p. 140.

## 要旨

『母なるカーリー』『インド生活の縦糸・横糸』および「美術論」  
シスター・ニヴェデイタ（1867-1911）とその「母なる働き」  
—岡倉天心滞印著述（1901-02）と「国民形成における芸術の機能」  
をめぐる新たな考察

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稲賀 繁美

本論文は、岡倉天心の滞印中に執筆された『東洋の理想』および『東洋の覚醒』と題して出版されることになる手稿さらにはその後の英文著述を、『東洋の理想』の監修者となったシスター・ニヴェデイタの同時期の著述と読み比べることにより、両者の相互影響に関して、新たな仮説を提出することを目的とする。とりわけ1910年代にいたるインドの民族主義的・国民主義的な美術論の隆盛にあって、岡倉がニヴェデイタを媒介として果たした役割のみならず、ニヴェデイタの周辺から岡倉が受けた刺激に関して、それぞれの著作に密着した実証的な指摘に基づき、20世紀初頭のアジアの知的環境の一斑を復元しようとするものである。