

# READING *THE WEB OF INDIAN LIFE* AS A CRITIQUE OF THIRD WORLD FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION

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## **Abstract:**

*The paper presents the problem of the female identity in India. Third World feminists object to portrayals of women of non-western societies as passive and voiceless victims as compared to the portrayal of Western women as modern, educated and empowered.*

**Keywords:** *critique, third world, India, female, identity*

Judith Butler in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* observes that a woman is a contested identity complicated by issues like class, ethnicity and sexuality. It is therefore impossible to generalize women's experiences across cultures, ethnicities and histories as gender roles are socially constructed. Representing women as 'powerless' 'exploited' 'sexually harassed' based on the notion of universal 'sameness' of oppression creates an overarching purview of female victimhood. This kind of cultural imperialism tends to rob women of their 'local', 'historical' and 'cultural' contexts. *The Web of Indian Life* by Margaret Elizabeth Nobel or Sister Nivedita is clearly one of the earliest manifestos of Third World feminism. The book challenges the idea that gender oppression is the central 'modus operandi' of patriarchy. According to writer Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Western feminists base their understandings of their third world counterparts on internalized notions of 'racism' and 'classism'. Third World feminists object to portrayals of women of non-western societies as passive and voiceless victims as compared to the portrayal of Western women as modern, educated and empowered. Margaret Elizabeth Nobel was an Irish woman who became one of the most illustrious disciples of the great Indian sage, Swami Vivekananda, and came to be known as Sister Nivedita. She dedicated her life to the service of the Indian people specially women and thereby became one of "The greatest interpreters of ideals, cultures, religions and customs and manners of India" (Preface *The Web of Indian Life*). *The Web of Indian Life* provides for the West the philosophy of thought behind India and her ideals "...as seen through the spectroscopy of a Western mastermind" (Preface *The Web of Indian Life*). Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature, in his introduction to *The Web of Indian Life* observes, "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" (Introduction *The Web of Indian Life*). Nivedita herself observes, "How happy were those days in the little lane! How unlike the terrible pictures of the Hindu routine which ... had embittered my English childhood!

Constant ablutions, endless prostrations, unmeaning caste restrictions, what a torture the dreary tale had been! And the reality so different! ” (Nivedita 17)

Nivedita’s dictum that “Education is vitally determined by circumstances of place” (Nivedita 4) at once places *The Web of Indian Life* within the subversive tradition that defies attempts to chronicle female history with one generalized sweep. During the Vedic age Indian women enjoyed complete freedom, they were given the highest honours and all vocations of life were open to them. ‘Rishikas’ such as Ghosa, Lopamudra and Surya were the authors of several hymns in Rig-veda. Among them Vak is especially known for her hymn on the unity of the universe. The interests of women were not confined to literature and the fine arts alone. There were warriors like Bisapala who went to war with her husband. But when the Indian plains began to be raided again and again by tribes from central Asia, the need for the protection of women became supreme,

These invaders tried to abduct, marry or dishonour women with a view to easy proselytization. Thus by force of circumstances their freedom was curtailed. Child marriage was introduced and *smritis* were written to justify the dependence of women on men at all times, under all conditions of life. Father, husband, brother, or son became her natural guardian and the sphere of her activity was confined to the home (Handoo 5).

To quote the well-known dictum of Manu: a woman is protected by her father during childhood, by her husband during youth and by her sons during old age. “*na stri swatantryam arhati*”(woman is not fit for freedom). Manu in *Manu Samhita* refers to the home and the family as the bedrock of society, and woman is the person on whom the stability and sanctity of the home and household life rests. There was no question of widow-remarriage as marriage was for once and as for divorce, he emphasizes that there is no kind of separation and marriage is indissoluble for life. Delving deep into the Indian psyche Sister Nivedita discerns the philosophy behind the Hindu doctrine, “...the idea of the sanctity of motherhood, based on the inviolability of marriage, finds due and logical completion in the still greater doctrine of the sacredness of religious celibacy” (Nivedita 31). She does not deride *Manu Samhita* or the laws of Manu. She has the insight to realize,

... the laws of Manu are rather the unconscious expression of the spirit of the people than a declaration of the ideals towards which they strive. And for this reason they would afford the most reliable foundation for a healthy criticism of Indian custom. ... For the characteristic emotion of the wife may be described as passionate reverence, that of the Hindu husband a certainly measureless protection. (Nivedita 45)

Radical feminism in its insistence on being absolved of all ties with men and the male world is critical of institutions like marriage and motherhood. Donna Haraway criticizes such traditional gender and feminist discourses founded upon Oedipal narratives and Christian origin myths through her use of the ‘cyborg’ metaphor, “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden, it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (Haraway 32). Similarly in India since ancient times God has been worshiped as the

mother. To look upon all women as a manifestation of God, has been one of the great Indian traditions. Sister Nivedita rightly places her finger on the pulse of Indian life and thought,

The very word 'mother' is held to be sacred...There is no timely services that may not be rendered to one, however young or beautiful, by the passing stranger, if he only he addresses thus. Even a father, looking at some small daughter...may address her as "little mother". And the mother of the nation, Uma Hemavati, is portrayed always as a child, thought of always as a daughter of the house. In motherhood alone thus marriage becomes holy; without it, the mere indulgence of affection... this is the true secret of the longing for children. (Nivedita 28)

Motherhood is a profound form of self expression and a reassertion of female identity, "With the coming of her first -born, be it boy or girl, the young wife has been advanced, as it were, out of the novitiate. She has become a member of authoritative circle. It is as if the whole world recognizes that henceforth there will be one soul at least to whom her every act is holy" (Nivedita 21). Assessing Hindu conjugal life, Nivedita observes,

...and it is very touching to notice how, as years go on, he leans more and more to the habit of addressing her as "O thou, mother of our son!" In early manhood he trusts to her advice to moderate the folly of his own rasher inclinations, in old age he becomes as everywhere in the world, more entirely the eldest of her brains, and she more and more the real head and center of the home. But always she remains as she was at the beginning, Lakshmi, her husband's Goddess of fortune. (Nivedita 47)

Nivedita observes how unlike the west, "Indian men do not rise when a woman enters, or remain standing till she is seated. Nor do they hasten to open the door through which she is about to pass" (Nivedita 46). According to Indian etiquette the idea is that man should precede woman, maintaining the tradition of the path-breaker in the jungle. He should be the first least some misfortune befalls them. What comes to light is the idea that in India men and women are therefore not on a similar footing. Nivedita constructs feminine identity from a religious, ethical perspective where the underlying emphasis is rather on the recognition of 'difference' between male and female identities. Some post-structural feminists feel that difference is powerful as equality is essentially defined from the male perspective.

Literature as Nivedita finds it "consists largely of man's praise of women in relation to himself" (Nivedita 52). Her sentiment echoes the basic tenets of feminism. In this connection she observes how "Neither Europe nor modern spirit can claim the glory of having created the idea of woman as an individual", "the woman of solitude, the woman who stands alone" (Nivedita 52, 53) Such persons in the world of Indian women are the widows, who receive the sanction of religious life, "Life ebbs: but discipline gathers its perfect fruit, in lives stately and grave and dignified for all their simplicity and bareness;...in an ideal of sainthood justified; an opportunity of power created" (Nivedita 62, 63).

Sister Nivedita's dynamic vision becomes clear through her realization that Indian womanhood again is not a monolithic, homogeneous ideal as India is a subcontinent with various cultural and ethical realities,

The Bengali wife worships her husband and serves her children and her household with all the rapt idealism of the saints. The women of Maharashtra are as strong and as actual as any in the west. The Rajputni queen prides herself on the unflinching courage of her race... The woman of Madras struggles with agony to reach the spiritual polestar, building up again and again like some careful beaver, any fragment of her wall of custom that the resistless tides of the modern world may attempt to break away. And the daughters of Gujerat are, like the woman of the merchant-people everywhere, soft and silken and flower-like, dainty and clinging as a dream... Joan of Arc was not more a patriot than Chand Bibi or the wonderful queen of Jhansi, who, in the year 1857 fought in person with the British troops” (Nivedita 74, 75, 76).

Nivedita tracing the stoicism in these women says, “Nor, amongst these strong outstanding types, is there any failure of individual achievement” (Nivedita 75). Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar feel, “Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as ‘feudal residues’ or label us as ‘traditional’ also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of western feminism. They need to be continually challenged...” (7). It is such a similar challenge that Sister Nivedita sets for herself when she writes,

And in certain parts of the province of Malabar woman is actually in the ascendancy. This curious country, of woman learned in Sanskrit, and kings who rule as the regents of their sisters, will have many disclosures to make to the world when India shall have produced a sufficient number of competent sociologists of her own blood... The term *matriarchal* is more accurate, in as much as the husband visits the wife in her own home, and the right of inheritance is through the mother. Thus, far from India’s being the land of the uniform oppression of woman by a uniform method, it represents the whole cycle of feminist institutions. There is literally no theory of feminine rights and position that does not find illustration somewhere within her boundaries (Nivedita 79).

Surprisingly one of the very first theorizations on what came to be known as ‘Eco-feminism’ in 1974 by Francoise d’Eaubonne can be found in Sister Nivedita’s *The Web of Indian Life*. Pondering on the western notion of equality between man and woman Nivedita observes,

This fact lends colour to the theory of modern sociologists that fisher-life is the source of all equality between the sexes. For the man, pursuing the conquest of the sea must leave the wife regnant over the affairs of field and farm... If this theory be correct, the freedom of the Indian woman of the first Aryan period is to be explained as an outcome of the struggle with earth and forest... If he cleared the jungle and hunted the game, she had to give aid in field and garden... It began to be otherwise, however, when the country was cleared, agriculture established on the Aryan scale, and the energy of the race concentrated on the higher problems of conserving and extending its culture of mind and spirit. (Nivedita 81, 82)

Fran Hosken writes, "Rape, forced prostitution, polygamy, genital mutilation, pornography, the beating of girls and women, purdah (segregation of women) are all violations of basic human rights" (15). Mohanty observes that by equating purdah with rape, forced prostitution and domestic violence, Hosken "...asserts its sexual control function as the primary explanation for purdah. Institutions of purdah are thus denied any cultural and historical specificity..." (Mohanty 66). Expressing a similar sentiment from the vantage point of Hindu cultural practices, Nivedita says, "Even queens in the east are too sacred to be looked upon by common eyes... The long silken tent through which such ladies move from palace-door to carriage-step is no vulgar prison, but a shrine. Bereft of its concealment, they would feel dishonoured..." (Nivedita 50). Nivedita here is acknowledging women's agency that Western critical thought had so imperceptibly ignored.

Sister Nivedita's portrayal of Indian womanhood concerns itself chiefly with the ideals that the great Indian civilization had set for itself, "On its ideal sight, the life of an Indian woman is a poem of the Indian soil". But even when she looks an unmistakably ideal situation she is never far away from an assessment of the actual reality. Nivedita was well aware that the lack of education for women was like a canker eating at the heart of Indian national character. Hence she began her services to Indian womanhood by establishing the first public school for women in Calcutta. But she was also aware of the fact that Indian women should be spoken to in the language of Indian ideology and not in terms of the west. According to the Sister Nivedita,

When the women see themselves in their true place, as related to the soil on which they live, as related to the past out of which they have sprung; when they become aware of the needs of their own people, on the actual colossal scale of those needs; when the mother-heart has once awakened in them to beat for land and people, instead of family, village, and homestead alone... (Nivedita 95, 96).

Nivedita preaches feminism of the highest order. She tries to awaken in the women a sense of nationalist feeling which would go a long way in nation building and bringing emancipation both to the men and women of the land, making them move from the particular to the universal. It is only then, Sister Nivedita realizes that the true national ideal can stand revealed "Janani Janmabhumiascha Swargadwapi Gariashi" (Mother and motherland are as glorious as the heavens).

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