

Swami Vivekananda and the Discourse of Personal Empowerment in the Writings of Women Authors from North East India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the discourse of personal empowerment in the writings of women authors from North East India can be read alongside key ideas in Swami Vivekananda's thought. It does not argue for direct literary influence; rather, it develops a comparative interpretive framework. Vivekananda's emphasis on education, inner strength, freedom, dignity, self-realization, and the spiritual equality of women offers a useful lens for reading the self-assertive voices found in the works of writers such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Esther Syiem. Scholarship on North East Indian women's writing shows that these authors repeatedly foreground identity, memory, orality, trauma, cultural survival, and women's agency in the face of marginalization and political violence. Read together, Vivekananda's teachings and these literary narratives reveal a shared concern with strength from within, the recovery of voice, and the transformation of suffering into ethical and cultural resilience. The paper argues that personal empowerment in these writings is not merely individual autonomy; it is also cultural selfhood, moral endurance, and the right to narrate one's own life and community.

Keywords: *Swami Vivekananda; Personal Empowerment; North East India; Women's Writing; Selfhood; Cultural Identity; Indigenous Literature; Women's Agency; Spiritual Humanism.*

INTRODUCTION

Swami Vivekananda's social and educational thought places unusual emphasis on inner strength, human dignity, and the transformative power of education. In his educational philosophy, he famously defines education as "the manifestation of the perfection already in man," linking learning not merely to information but to the unfolding of latent power. In his reflections on women, he repeatedly insists that women must be educated and placed in a position to solve their own problems, and he treats the condition of women as a measure of national progress. Belur Math's official account of his life likewise identifies the uplift of women and the spread of education as integral to his larger mission of social regeneration.

These ideas become especially meaningful when placed beside the writings of women authors from North East India. Literary scholarship shows that this body of writing has emerged as a powerful site for articulating identity, memory, marginality, trauma, and cultural assertion. Researchers have highlighted the importance of writers such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Anjum Hasan, and others in shaping contemporary conversations around indigenous voice, self-determination, and literary representation in the region. At the same time, scholars of North East women's writing have shown that these texts often reclaim silenced histories and resist the homogenizing gaze of the Indian mainstream.

This paper therefore proposes a comparative reading of Vivekananda and selected women writers from North East India. The point is not to claim that these writers consciously derive their work from Vivekananda. Instead, the argument is that Vivekananda's discourse of freedom, selfhood, education, and strength helps illuminate how personal empowerment is imagined in these texts. In these writings, empowerment appears not simply as liberation from patriarchy in a narrow sense, but as the recovery of voice, the defense of culture, the endurance of suffering, and the affirmation of women as moral and historical subjects.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper is guided by four objectives:

1. To examine Swami Vivekananda's ideas on women, education, freedom, and selfhood.
2. To identify major strands of personal empowerment in the writings of women authors from North East India.
3. To compare Vivekananda's discourse of empowerment with selected literary themes such as identity, resilience, cultural reclamation, and women's agency.
4. To show how these writings expand the meaning of empowerment from individual confidence to ethical, cultural, and collective self-affirmation.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative methodology. It uses thematic textual analysis and comparative literary reading. On one side, it draws on Vivekananda's educational and social thought, especially his reflections on education, women's independence, selfhood, and strength. On the other, it engages selected critical scholarship on women authors from North East India, with attention to works and interpretations involving Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Esther Syiem. The study is conceptual rather than empirical: it does not use survey data or statistical tools, but instead develops an analytical conversation between philosophical discourse and literary representation. The approach is therefore hermeneutic, comparative, and interdisciplinary.

MAIN SUBJECT MATTERS

The discourse of personal empowerment in the writings of women authors from North East India becomes especially meaningful when read alongside Swami Vivekananda's teachings on education, freedom, strength, and selfhood. The comparison is not based on direct influence, nor does it try to collapse literary writing into spiritual philosophy. Rather, it works at the level of ideas. Vivekananda's thought offers a language for understanding how human beings discover strength within themselves and grow through freedom, dignity, and education. Women's writing from North East India offers lived and literary forms of that same struggle, often under conditions of marginality, violence, cultural erasure, and gendered invisibility. When these two bodies of thought are placed in conversation, empowerment appears not merely as success or social mobility, but as the recovery of voice, the preservation of identity, and the refusal to let one's selfhood be determined by forces of domination.

A central starting point in Vivekananda's philosophy is his idea that education is not the mechanical accumulation of information but the unfolding of what is already latent within the human being. In the educational writings attributed to him, he repeatedly treats human perfection, strength, and knowledge as inherent possibilities rather than external gifts. This is important for any discourse of empowerment because it rejects a model in which power must be bestowed from above. If education is the manifestation of inner perfection, then empowerment means awakening, not patronage. It means bringing to the surface a capacity that already exists, even if social conditions have suppressed or distorted it. This framework has deep relevance for women's writing from North East India, where female selves often appear not as empty victims awaiting rescue, but as persons whose power has been obscured by history, violence, prejudice, and silence, and who gradually reclaim the authority to narrate their lives.

Vivekananda's insistence that liberty is the first condition of growth further sharpens this reading. His statements on women are particularly striking because he refuses the paternalistic belief that others should solve women's problems on their behalf. Instead, he argues that women must be placed in a position to solve their own problems in their own way, and that education is the means through which such self-

direction becomes possible. This is not simply a reformist sentiment. It is a philosophy of agency. It assumes that dignity grows where freedom exists, and that development is distorted wherever a voice is managed or spoken for by others. This insight becomes powerfully relevant when one turns to the literary field of North East India, where women authors have often had to write against layered forms of marginalization, including patriarchal silencing, regional invisibility, ethnographic stereotyping, and political misrepresentation.

Scholarship on North East Indian writing repeatedly notes that literature from the region has emerged under conditions of relative neglect within mainstream Indian literary discourse. The IIT Indore doctoral thesis on women's writing from North-East India describes this literature as deeply engaged with indigeneity, ethnicity, aesthetics, cultural memory, and the right to represent one's own history. It also emphasizes the importance of literary self-determination and the need for voices from the region to be heard on their own terms. This is crucial for understanding empowerment. In such a context, personal empowerment begins not with abstract declarations of freedom but with narrative authority. To speak from one's own geography, language-world, and historical experience is itself an act of self-assertion. For women authors, this act is even more significant, because it challenges both regional marginalization and gendered silencing at once.

One of the richest meeting points between Vivekananda's thought and North East women's writing lies in the question of voice. Vivekananda's educational philosophy imagines the self as already carrying power within, and the role of education as removing obstacles to its manifestation. Many women writers from North East India enact precisely such a movement in literary form. Their writing does not merely present women as social subjects; it creates spaces in which women speak, remember, interpret, and define. This is why empowerment in these texts is not always loud or overtly ideological. Sometimes it takes the form of testimony, recollection, irony, cultural detail, or quiet refusal. Yet these modes are no less powerful. They show women not as objects within other people's narratives, but as creators of narrative meaning. In that sense, literary voice becomes a form of freedom.

The role of orality in this process is especially important. A Rupkatha article on Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, and Esther Syiem argues that these writers reclaim identity through traditional tales, formulaic structures, and indigenised vocabulary, and that they challenge the hierarchy between orality and writing by bringing oral resources into literary English. This is a major insight because it shows that empowerment in these writings does not necessarily come through the rejection of tradition. On the contrary, tradition often becomes the medium of resistance. Oral memory, inherited story, local imagery, and indigenous rhythms are not signs of backwardness; they are resources of selfhood. When women writers draw upon these materials, they do more than preserve culture. They create a literary space in which their communities become intelligible on their own terms. Personal empowerment, then, is tied to cultural speech. It means having the authority to say who one is without borrowing an alien frame.

This point becomes even clearer in the case of Esther Syiem. In a 2024 interview, she describes how memory and storytelling shaped her creative life, explaining that stories told by family members and visitors from villages gave her a sense of responsibility to retrieve and record what might otherwise disappear. Her reflections suggest that literary creation is not only a personal act of imagination but also a form of cultural stewardship. That is a deeply significant model of empowerment. The empowered writer is not merely someone who asserts an individual ego; she is someone who rescues threatened memory and turns it into living language. Such work resonates strongly with Vivekananda's view that the role of education is to uncover what is latent and to bring hidden strength into expression. Syiem's literary practice can be read, in that sense, as an act of manifestation: what lies submerged in collective memory becomes articulate through her voice.

Mamang Dai's work complicates the discourse of empowerment in productive ways because it resists easy celebration. Critical writing on *Stupid Cupid* argues that the novel interrogates the myth of women's empowerment by presenting North East women as located within multiple structures of marginality related to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography. This is important because it prevents empowerment from becoming a fashionable but empty slogan. Dai's women do not simply step into liberated modernity. They negotiate contradiction, exclusion, desire, and vulnerability. Yet this very complexity enriches the comparative framework. From a Vivekanandan perspective, empowerment is not mere access to status; it is strength from within. Dai's women may not inhabit socially secure worlds, but they inhabit reflective and resistant selves. Their dignity lies in their refusal to disappear into stereotype, and in their continued ability to interpret their own condition. That is a harder, more historically honest form of empowerment than uncomplicated victory.

Temsula Ao's writing brings the themes of conflict, trauma, and testimony into the heart of this discussion. A recent article on *These Hills Called Home* argues that Ao portrays Naga women as doubly marginalized, shaped by both indigenous patriarchy and militarized political violence, while also foregrounding their resilience and agency. The importance of this reading is that it shifts empowerment away from simplistic notions of freedom as comfort or visibility. In a conflict zone, empowerment may take the form of witness, moral endurance, or survival with memory intact. Ao's women are empowered not because suffering disappears, but because their suffering is narrated from within rather than appropriated from outside. Literature becomes the place where wounded lives gain ethical presence. This aligns in a powerful way with Vivekananda's language of fearlessness and strength. His teaching does not assume a world without pain; it asks how the self may remain inwardly unbroken in the face of pain. Ao's work turns that philosophical possibility into historical narrative.

The theme of resilience also appears in broader critical work on North East women's writing and trauma. A study on identity, conflict, and trauma through selected women writers of North-East India argues that literary texts from the region offer access to the wounded psyche and to dimensions of violence that conventional historical narratives often flatten or overlook. This matters because it reveals how women's writing can transform suffering into knowledge. Trauma in such texts is not only represented; it is given voice, rhythm, and form. That shaping process itself is empowering. It resists the reduction of women to mute victims of history. Instead, it shows them as bearers of memory and as interpreters of violence. Read through Vivekananda, this can be understood as moral strength: not the denial of hurt, but the capacity to convert hurt into consciousness, witness, and inward clarity.

Easterine Kire's writing adds another major dimension to the discourse of empowerment by tying feminine agency to cultural continuity. Scholarship on her work emphasizes historical consciousness, Naga identity, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. A feminist study of *A Respectable Woman* highlights how women's representation in Kire's fiction challenges inherited structures of subordination while also foregrounding social, historical, and gendered pressures. Kire's women often inhabit difficult worlds, yet they are not mere symbols of oppression. They remember, sustain, and choose. Their agency is frequently quiet, but its quietness should not be mistaken for weakness. Rather, it reflects a conception of power rooted in endurance, care, and continuity. This resonates strongly with Vivekananda's idea that strength is foundational to growth. In Kire's fictional worlds, strength often appears not as conquest but as steadfastness, as the capacity to keep a people's memory alive even under conditions of erosion.

What makes these writings particularly rich is that they expand the meaning of personal empowerment beyond modern individualism. In many liberal frameworks, empowerment is associated with choice, visibility, and independence. In North East women's writing, however, empowerment is often relational.

The self becomes stronger through connection to land, story, language, ancestry, and community. This is not a retreat from individuality; it is a different model of individuality. The person is not diminished by belonging but deepened by it. Such a model has an interesting affinity with Vivekananda's thought, which also resists reducing the self to egoistic separateness. His philosophy of the divine within suggests that inner strength is not narcissism but the recognition of a deeper selfhood beyond fear and smallness. In the literature, this deeper selfhood often appears through rootedness. Women become empowered by recovering the worlds that have made them, not by pretending they emerged without history.

Another important connection lies in the question of language. North East women writers often write in English, yet their work is shaped by oral traditions, indigenous vocabulary, local metaphors, and region-specific rhythms. This linguistic hybridity is itself politically meaningful. It allows authors to inhabit a language associated with mainstream or colonial power while simultaneously reshaping it from within. The result is not mimicry but transformation. Empowerment here occurs at the level of literary form: women make English answer to their own landscapes and memories. The Rupkatha essay on orality in three women poets shows how this process creates a hybrid space that subverts the hierarchy between oral and written traditions. Such subversion has a Vivekanandan resonance as well, because his educational and philosophical writings consistently insist that truth must be realized in one's own terms, not passively borrowed. Both projects, in different ways, resist derivative existence.

The discourse of personal empowerment in these writings also has a strong ethical dimension. These authors do not present agency as mere assertion of self-interest. Their women often carry burdens of memory, kinship, grief, and communal obligation. They are called upon to remember for others, endure for others, or speak where silence has become the norm. This gives empowerment an ethical seriousness. It is not simply the right to choose one's life; it is the responsibility to preserve truth and humanity under difficult conditions. Vivekananda's thought is helpful here because he links strength to character rather than to domination. He repeatedly treats real power as inseparable from moral and spiritual development. When read through this lens, North East women's writing appears as a literature not only of assertion but of ethical self-fashioning. Its empowered women are not detached from suffering communities; they are answerable to them.

At the same time, this literature remains attentive to ambivalence. Empowerment is not final, pure, or complete. It is often compromised by social pressure, by historical violence, by institutional neglect, and by the complex realities of gender in traditional and modern settings alike. This ambivalence is important because it prevents the comparison with Vivekananda from becoming simplistic. His discourse of strength is aspirational; the literature shows what happens when aspiration meets wounded reality. Yet the gap between the two is productive rather than contradictory. The philosophical language of freedom, manifestation, and self-direction gains historical density when read through these texts, while the literary narratives gain conceptual clarity when read through the idea of inner awakening and fearlessness. Each side complicates the other.

What finally emerges from this comparative reading is a broader understanding of empowerment itself. Personal empowerment in the writings of women authors from North East India is not reducible to individual confidence, economic mobility, or symbolic visibility. It includes the power to narrate one's own existence, the courage to remain human in violent landscapes, the retrieval of oral and cultural memory, the transformation of pain into testimony, and the preservation of identity without surrender to imposed categories. Vivekananda's teachings illuminate this process because they define education and growth in terms of awakening, freedom, and strength. The literary texts deepen it because they show how such awakening occurs under real and difficult historical conditions. Together, they suggest that empowerment is at once inward and outward, intimate and collective, spiritual and historical. It is the making of a self that can speak, remember, endure, and create meaning in the face of erasure.

CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda and the women authors of North East India belong to different historical, philosophical, and literary worlds. Yet a comparative reading reveals a striking meeting point: both are deeply concerned with the awakening of human strength under conditions of subordination. Vivekananda frames empowerment through education, freedom, dignity, and the spiritual capacity of women to shape their own futures. The writings of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Esther Syiem, and related authors render that empowerment in lived, literary, and culturally grounded forms. Their texts show women speaking, remembering, preserving, resisting, grieving, and enduring.

The discourse of personal empowerment that emerges from this comparison is therefore broader than self-confidence or social mobility. It includes the right to narrate one's own experience, the courage to maintain identity under pressure, the recovery of memory, the preservation of culture, and the ethical strength to convert suffering into meaning. Read this way, Vivekananda's teachings remain relevant not because they erase historical difference, but because they illuminate a continuing struggle for inner freedom and dignified selfhood that these women writers express with remarkable force.

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