Vol 9, Issue 1, 2026 **Impact Factor: 8.535** DOI: https://doi.org/10.31426/ijamsr.2026.9.1.9015

IJAMSR

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Scientific Research (IJAMSR) ISSN:2581-4281

Swami Vivekananda and North East Women Writers: A Comparative Study of Ideas, Identity, and Representation

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative reading of Swami Vivekananda's reflections on women and selected writings by major women writers from North East India, especially Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Indira Goswami. The study examines three interrelated areas: ideas, identity, and representation. Vivekananda's writings on women are marked by a strong insistence on dignity, education, self-development, and spiritual equality. He repeatedly argued that social progress depends upon the condition of women, urged that women be educated and allowed to shape their own destinies, and connected ideal womanhood with inner strength and independence. At the same time, his discourse often worked through normative images such as motherhood, chastity, and moral heroism. North East women writers, by contrast, tend to represent women less as symbolic ideals and more as historically located subjects shaped by land, memory, conflict, oral inheritance, spirituality, and social struggle. Their work frequently resists monolithic ideas of "Indian womanhood" by foregrounding regional histories, indigenous cosmologies, community trauma, and women's everyday negotiations with power. This paper argues that Vivekananda and North East women writers meet at important points: both value women's inner power, ethical strength, and cultural significance. Yet they also differ sharply in method and imagination. Vivekananda often constructs women through prescriptive spiritual-national ideals, whereas North East women writers present women through layered, embodied, and often fractured lived realities. The comparison shows that Vivekananda remains relevant not because his model can be simply equated with contemporary literary representations, but because his thought opens a productive dialogue with them on agency, identity, education, spirituality, and the politics of representing women in Indian cultural discourse.

Keywords: *Swami Vivekananda, North East women writers, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Indira Goswami, women's identity, representation, spirituality, literary comparison.*

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Introduction

Any meaningful comparison between Swami Vivekananda and North East women writers must begin by recognizing that they belong to very different literary and historical formations. Vivekananda wrote in late nineteenth-century colonial India, when the "woman question" had become central to reformist, religious, and nationalist debates. His comments on women were part of a larger project of social and spiritual regeneration. Writing from North East India, on the other hand, emerges from multilingual, heterogeneous, and often orally grounded cultures whose histories of colonial contact, mission education, ethnicity, displacement, and violence differ substantially from the mainstream narratives of Indian English literature. Recent scholarship on writing in English from the region stresses that it cannot be treated as a single cultural block; it is marked by diverse local traditions, languages, and literary inheritances, even when English functions as a shared medium. That difference is precisely what makes the comparison fruitful. Vivekananda is important because he offered one of the most influential Indian formulations of women's dignity grounded in spirituality, education, and moral strength. North East women writers are important because they complicate any unitary image of Indian womanhood by writing from places where identity is inseparable from land, memory, tribe, religion, oral tradition, migration, and conflict. A comparative study does not aim to collapse them into sameness. It asks instead: what happens when a pan-Indian spiritual-reformist discourse on women is placed beside regional women's writing that speaks from within lived histories? What ideas about women endure, and what ideas become inadequate?

Vivekananda's discourse is often aspirational and normative. He insisted that the welfare of the world depends on the improvement of women's condition, argued that the treatment of women is the measure of a nation's progress, and held that women should be educated and left free to determine the reforms necessary for themselves. He also saw women as spiritual beings fully capable of the highest realization, recalling figures such as Maitreyi and Gargi from the Vedic tradition and suggesting that true human dignity transcends bodily sex difference. Yet his language also idealizes womanhood through images such as the mother, chastity, and moral heroism. That tension between empowerment and idealization is central to his relevance. North East women writers, by contrast, generally move away from universalized ideals and toward situated representation. The critical literature on the region emphasizes that women writers have drawn on oral traditions, the Bible in Christian-majority contexts, local myths, and indigenous relationships to land in order to reclaim identity against homogenizing national narratives. Their texts frequently reveal women not as abstract emblems but as persons negotiating militarization, ethnic memory, spiritual inheritance, social exclusion, environmental belonging, and fragile selfhood. This makes their writing especially valuable in a comparative framework: it tests what becomes visible when women are written from below, from the margins, and from within the lived textures of place.

Objectives of the Study

This study has five main objectives:

1. To examine Swami Vivekananda's key ideas on women, especially dignity, education, self-development, and moral-spiritual strength.

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2. To analyze how selected North East women writers represent women's identity through land, memory, orality, spirituality, and conflict.
3. To compare Vivekananda's normative discourse on womanhood with literary representations by Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Indira Goswami.
4. To identify both convergences and tensions between spiritual idealization and lived female experience.
5. To assess the continuing relevance of such a comparison for literary studies, gender studies, and Indian intellectual history.

Main Subject Matters

1. Vivekananda's Ideas on Women: Dignity, Education, and Inner Power

Vivekananda's thought on women rests on a few recurring principles. First, he links the fate of society to the status of women. In one of his well-known formulations, he states that the welfare of the world is impossible without improving women's condition, and he compares society to a bird that cannot fly with only one wing. Second, he treats women's treatment as a measure of national progress. Third, he insists that women must not remain dependent on male reformers. Instead, women should be educated and then allowed to decide their own path. This is one of the strongest and most forward-looking aspects of his position. Even when his language is moral and civilizational rather than modern-rights-based, it clearly rejects the assumption that women are incapable of self-direction.

His framework is also profoundly spiritual. Vivekananda invokes women sages such as Maitreyi and Gargi to argue that women historically participated in the highest realms of knowledge. He does not present woman merely as dependent wife or domestic subordinate; he often speaks of the mother as the highest ideal and of woman as a form of power. Yet this is where his discourse becomes double-edged. The mother-image can elevate women, but it can also reduce them to idealized moral symbolism. Sahapedia's historical discussion of Vivekananda notes this ambivalence well: nineteenth-century reformist discourse encouraged female education but often still withheld full freedom in matters of marriage, vocation, and personal choice. Thus Vivekananda's ideas on women are enabling, but not without limits.

What matters for this paper is that Vivekananda's discourse is representational as much as philosophical. He does not only argue for women's improvement; he imagines a certain kind of womanhood. The ideal woman in his thought is intellectually developed, spiritually deep, morally self-controlled, and inwardly powerful. He even suggests that the idea of perfect womanhood is bound up with independence. Yet that independence is framed within an ethical ideal, not within a modern politics of open-ended self-fashioning. In literary terms, Vivekananda offers a prescriptive symbolic script: woman as force, mother, educator, ethical center, and civilizational bearer.

2. North East Women's Writing: Identity Beyond Monolith

The literary field of North East India complicates any singular notion of identity. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the term "North-East" often produces an ethnographic monolith in public

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imagination even though the region is multilingual, heterogeneous, and shaped by many community-specific traditions, including unscripted oral cultures. Women writers from the region resist that flattening. Their work often reclaims local histories, specific cultural memory, and distinct symbolic worlds that national discourse tends to collapse. This is crucial for a comparison with Vivekananda. If Vivekananda's woman is frequently a generalized cultural ideal, North East women writers often return us to plurality: many women, many histories, many structures of belonging.

A second striking feature of this writing is the importance of orality. Critical work on women poets from the region argues that writers such as Temsula Ao and Mamang Dai use traditional tales, oral forms, and indigenized vocabulary to reclaim identity and counter anonymity. Warjri's overview likewise shows that in Christian-majority areas, women writers often drew on oral traditions and the Bible, producing a distinct literary aesthetic. Identity in this literature is not merely personal. It is collective, inherited, and often endangered. Stories are not ornament; they are repositories of territory, memory, and intrinsic selfhood. This makes representation inseparable from cultural survival.

A third feature is the close relation between land and self. Warjri notes that oral traditions in the region are closely connected to land as an indispensable part of self-identity. In such writing, mountains, forests, rivers, and villages are not only backdrops; they are archives of belonging, ancestral memory, and moral relation. This is especially visible in Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire, but it also shapes the emotional geography of many North East texts more broadly. Here representation moves away from abstract social categories and toward lived landscapes. Women's identity is formed not only through family and social role, but through home, territory, movement, exile, violence, and ecological memory.

3. Vivekananda and Mamang Dai: Spirituality, Land, and Cultural Being

Mamang Dai is one of the most important voices for understanding how North East women's writing redefines identity. Her official Penguin profile describes her as a writer who has written extensively about the culture and history of Arunachal Pradesh. Critical commentary on her poetry further notes that her work positions the self within social and cultural relationships rooted in land. Warjri's essay cites Dai's own explanation of the Adi worldview: everything has life—rocks, rivers, trees, hills—and all life is sacred, a worldview she associates with Donyi-Polo or "world spirit." This gives Dai's writing a spiritual register, but it is very different from Vivekananda's symbolic use of womanhood. In Dai, spirituality is not primarily a moral prescription for women; it is a living cosmology embedded in landscape.

The comparison here is revealing. Vivekananda imagines the spiritually strong woman as a necessary force for national renewal. Dai, by contrast, does not begin with the nation or with a generalized feminine ideal. She begins with world, memory, and relation. Her writing suggests that identity is sustained through land, story, and a sacred ecology of coexistence. In this sense, both Vivekananda and Dai value inward strength, but they ground it differently. For Vivekananda, inner power is frequently moral, educational, and civilizational. For Dai, it is ontological and ecological: a way of inhabiting a world where human and non-human life are bound together.

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There is another difference. Vivekananda often speaks in ideal categories—motherhood, chastity, strength, education. Dai's poetry and prose are less prescriptive. They do not tell women what they ought to be; they reveal how cultural being is felt. That makes her work less normative and more experiential. A comparative reading therefore shows that while Vivekananda supplies a language of women's dignity, Dai enlarges the meaning of dignity by locating selfhood within indigenous relations to land, memory, and sacred continuity.

4. Vivekananda and Temsula Ao: Education, Orality, and Women in Conflict

Temsula Ao offers one of the strongest challenges to idealized discourse on women because her writing is intensely attentive to history, violence, and women's everyday endurance. Sahitya Akademi's profile and other literary sources identify her as a major Naga writer whose work is shaped by oral tradition, myth, and community memory. Critical scholarship also notes that her poetry and prose use storytelling to preserve identity against erasure. In Warjri's overview, Ao appears as a writer who reworks biblical narratives from a woman-centered perspective and who draws on oral heritage to remake English into a language of local selfhood.

Her fiction makes the comparison with Vivekananda especially rich. Zubaan's description of *These Hills Called Home* presents Nagaland as marked by decades of bloodshed, the search for identity, and the impact of violence on ordinary people, including housewives and young women. *Aosenla's Story* is described as the story of a woman coming to terms with herself and reflecting on the life others made for her and the life she eventually created for herself. These summaries are important because they show Ao's emphasis on women as historical subjects, not merely cultural symbols. Women are shaped by war, patriarchy, memory, and domestic power, and their strength is discovered in negotiation, endurance, and self-recognition.

Vivekananda and Ao converge in one important respect: both believe women must not remain passive. Vivekananda insists women should solve their own problems after receiving education; Ao's fiction repeatedly centers women who must interpret and survive structures imposed upon them. Yet their modes of representation differ sharply. Vivekananda often writes from above, offering a programmatic language of uplift. Ao writes from within damaged life-worlds, where female strength is not a slogan but a difficult practice of living. In her work, identity is neither pure nor triumphant. It is fractured, historical, and often tested by forces beyond individual control.

This difference matters because it shows the limits of ideal womanhood. Vivekananda's language of strength is meaningful, but Ao reminds us that women live not in ideals but in structures of fear, family, violence, and memory. Her writing deepens the category of "inner power" by showing it as survival rather than abstraction. Thus, if Vivekananda gives us a discourse of capacity, Ao gives us a literature of lived endurance.

5. Vivekananda and Easterine Kire: Spiritual Worlds and Cultural Memory

Easterine Kire is especially important for a comparative study involving Vivekananda because spirituality is central to both, but in very different ways. Official author profiles describe Kire as a Naga writer whose work is drawn from indigenous Naga culture; Barbican Press notes that she was the first Naga poet

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published in English and the author of the first Naga novel in English. The same sources emphasize her sustained interest in the spiritual universe of the Nagas. In a short essay on spirituality, Kire writes that Naga territories are shared by human and spirit inhabitants, that respect structures relations with human, animal, and spirit worlds alike, and that dreams are a vital part of spiritual experience.

That worldview shapes the representation of women, community, and identity in her fiction. *When the River Sleeps* is presented by its publisher as a narrative set in a landscape of supernatural enchantment, populated by spirits, sorceresses, and dangerous moral tests. *Spirit Nights* is described as a novel that delves deep into the spirituality of her indigenous community through an elder woman protagonist marked by prophetic dreams and deep spiritual perception. These details matter because Kire's literary world restores legitimacy to indigenous knowledge systems that modern discourse often treats as folklore rather than serious ways of knowing.

Compared with Vivekananda, Kire shares an investment in the unseen dimensions of life. Neither writer reduces women or human beings to social materialism alone. Yet Vivekananda's spirituality is universalizing and philosophically abstract; Kire's is culturally specific, place-bound, and cosmological. Vivekananda invokes women's spiritual potential to support social reform and national dignity. Kire presents spirituality as already lived within community memory, dream, taboo, and the permeability between visible and invisible worlds. Her literary method is representational rather than exhortative. She does not ask women to embody an ideal; she shows how women inherit, feel, and mediate worlds of meaning that modernity cannot fully contain.

This difference has implications for identity. Vivekananda often addresses "the women of India" in broad civilizational language. Kire, by contrast, refuses generic identity. Her work insists on the specificity of Naga memory and indigenous spiritual geography. In that sense, Kire's writing can be read as a corrective to any discourse that seeks to speak for Indian womanhood in one register alone. She demonstrates that women's strength may reside in cultural guardianship, dream-knowledge, and narrative continuity as much as in public reform.

6. Vivekananda and Indira Goswami: Compassion, Suffering, and Social Critique

Indira Goswami occupies a different position within North East women's writing because her fiction is deeply engaged with social suffering, widowhood, ritual cruelty, and the contradictions of sacred institutions. The Library of Congress describes her as one of the pre-eminent Assamese writers and highlights her empathy for laborers, urban hardship, and widows in Vrindavan and Assam. The Jnanpith archive records her as the recipient of the 2000 award for Assamese literature. These details reflect not only literary stature but also the ethical seriousness of her work. Goswami is especially important in comparison with Vivekananda because she exposes the gap between symbolic reverence and actual social life. Vivekananda glorifies women as mothers, moral centers, and bearers of spiritual power. Goswami, however, writes women trapped inside oppressive customs, forced rituals, poverty, and systems that claim sanctity while producing suffering. The Library of Congress notes both her compassion and her subtle anger at oppressive social customs. This makes her writing a powerful counterpoint to idealized discourse. She asks, in effect: what use is sacred language if women continue to live in abandonment and humiliation?

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Yet the contrast should not be overstated into total opposition. Vivekananda's best insights—his insistence on women's dignity, his condemnation of their degradation, his belief that society cannot progress while women are held back—remain compatible with Goswami's ethical world. What Goswami adds is realism. She returns the sacred to the test of suffering. In her fiction, female subjectivity is not redeemed by symbolic praise; it demands social truth. If Vivekananda offers a rhetoric of elevation, Goswami offers a literature of exposure. Together, they make visible one of the central tensions of Indian gender discourse: the coexistence of reverence and injustice.

7. Ideas, Identity, and Representation: Points of Convergence and Tension

The comparative pattern can now be stated more clearly. At the level of ideas, Vivekananda and North East women writers share an investment in women's inner strength. Vivekananda sees women as capable of self-direction, education, and spiritual greatness. Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Indira Goswami all, in different ways, portray women as bearers of endurance, memory, wisdom, compassion, and moral force. None of them writes women as inherently weak. There is also a common refusal to treat the female self as merely decorative or secondary. Women matter because they carry worlds: ethical worlds, spiritual worlds, familial worlds, historical worlds.

At the level of identity, however, the difference is striking. Vivekananda tends to speak in civilizational categories such as "the women of India," often searching for a national ideal that combines spirituality and intellect. North East women writers resist that scale of abstraction. Their identities are tribal, regional, linguistic, ecological, religious, historical, and often internally fractured. Critical work on the region repeatedly warns against homogenizing the North East; its literature is shaped by many unscripted traditions, distinct communities, and local relationships to land and memory. Thus, while Vivekananda seeks synthesis, North East women writers often insist on plurality.

At the level of representation, the contrast becomes even sharper. Vivekananda often represents women through ideals: mother, sage, spiritual force, morally disciplined agent of national renewal. North East women writers represent women through complexity: widow, dream-keeper, housewife in a war zone, woman haunted by memory, subject of land and loss, survivor of ritual and political violence. In Vivekananda, womanhood is often what society should aspire to honor. In these writers, womanhood is what literature must struggle to witness. This is not a simple contradiction, because ideals can inspire and realism can wound. But it is an important difference in literary method.

The comparison therefore reveals both continuity and critique. Vivekananda offers a powerful vocabulary of dignity, education, and spiritual agency. North East women writers test that vocabulary against lived experience. They ask whether women can be understood only through ideal forms, or whether literature must also account for region, trauma, embodiment, and unresolved history. Their answer is clear: representation must move beyond reverence toward complexity. In that sense, these writers do not merely echo Vivekananda's ideas; they deepen, regionalize, and sometimes unsettle them.

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Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda and North East women writers belong to different moments and speak in different idioms, yet their comparison is intellectually rewarding. Vivekananda's discourse on women is shaped by the language of reform, spirituality, and national regeneration. He insists on women's dignity, education, self-development, and spiritual capacity, and he condemns any civilization that degrades women. These remain powerful and enduring contributions.

North East women writers such as Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Indira Goswami carry the discussion into another register. They represent women not as abstract ideals but as living subjects of history, land, belief, violence, memory, and ethical struggle. Their writing resists homogenized identity and restores particularity to women's lives. Through them, representation becomes less about prescribing what women should be and more about witnessing how women endure, remember, question, and create meaning. The most valuable conclusion of this study is not that Vivekananda and North East women writers agree completely, nor that they cancel each other out. It is that they illuminate each other's limits and possibilities. Vivekananda offers an ethical-spiritual vocabulary of women's power; the writers test that vocabulary in the lived worlds of region, plurality, trauma, and cultural memory. Between them emerges a richer understanding of ideas, identity, and representation in Indian literature—one that honors both aspiration and experience, both dignity and difficulty, both symbol and life.

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