

From Domesticity to Divinity: Women's Education in the Thought of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract:

This article examines the philosophy of women's education in the thought of Swami Vivekananda, interpreting it as a transformative movement from social confinement within domesticity to the realization of spiritual divinity. Situated within the intellectual and socio-cultural context of nineteenth-century India, the study argues that Vivekananda's approach transcends contemporary reformist discourse by grounding women's empowerment in the metaphysical framework of Advaita Vedānta. Rejecting gender distinctions at the level of the आत्मन् (Ātman), he conceptualizes education as the "manifestation of the perfection already inherent" in every individual, thereby affirming the spiritual equality of men and women.

The paper further analyses Vivekananda's critique of the historical marginalization of women, particularly through the denial of education and restriction to domestic roles. In response, he proposes a holistic model of education that integrates intellectual training, moral discipline, physical strength, and spiritual development. Central to this vision is the idea of शक्ति (Śakti), through which womanhood is reinterpreted as a manifestation of divine power rather than social subordination.

By situating Vivekananda's thought in dialogue with both Indian reform movements and Western feminist perspectives, the article highlights the distinctiveness of his approach, which combines cultural rootedness with universal spiritual humanism. Ultimately, it argues that the transition "from domesticity to divinity" signifies not merely social upliftment but a profound reconfiguration of identity, wherein women emerge as autonomous agents of self-realization and national regeneration.

Keywords: Women's education, Vivekananda, Vedanta, empowerment, Śakti, self-realization, Indian philosophy

1. Introduction:

The issue of women's education in nineteenth-century India cannot be adequately understood without reference to the broader processes of cultural transition, colonial encounter, and internal social reform. During this period, entrenched patriarchal structures had relegated women largely to the domestic sphere, limiting their access to intellectual, economic, and spiritual development. While several reformers addressed these concerns through legal and institutional measures, the deeper philosophical assumptions underlying gender inequality often remained unchallenged. It is in this context that Swami Vivekananda offers a uniquely comprehensive and philosophically grounded perspective.

Vivekananda's reflections on women's education are inseparable from his larger vision of human nature and society. Drawing upon the non-dualistic framework of Advaita Vedānta, he rejects any essential distinction between men and women at the level of the आत्मन् (Ātman), which he regards as pure, infinite, and beyond all empirical categories. From this standpoint, the subordination of women is not merely a social aberration but a consequence of ignorance regarding the true nature of reality. Education, therefore, assumes a central role as the means by which this ignorance is dispelled and the inherent divinity of the individual is realized.

Rather than viewing education solely as a tool for social mobility or economic advancement, Vivekananda conceives it as a process of inner awakening. His well-known formulation—education as the manifestation of the perfection already within—applies equally to women, thereby affirming their capacity for intellectual excellence, moral strength, and spiritual realization. In this sense, his approach moves beyond the framework of reformist paternalism and instead emphasizes autonomy, self-reliance, and self-discovery.

The phrase “From Domesticity to Divinity” captures the transformative movement implicit in Vivekananda's thought. It signifies a shift from externally imposed roles toward an inward recognition of शक्ति (Śakti), the dynamic principle of power and creativity associated with the feminine. This transformation does not entail a rejection of cultural tradition; rather, it involves its reinterpretation in light of a deeper philosophical insight. By re-envisioning womanhood as an expression of divine energy, Vivekananda challenges reductive notions of gender and opens up new possibilities for education and empowerment.

This study aims to critically examine Vivekananda's conception of women's education by analysing its metaphysical foundations, its critique of social practices, and its pedagogical implications. It also situates his thought in dialogue with both Indian reform movements and broader philosophical discussions on gender and education. Through this analysis, the article seeks to demonstrate that Vivekananda's vision represents not merely a historical intervention but an enduring philosophical framework for understanding the relationship between education, identity, and human flourishing.

2. Philosophical Foundations: Vedantic Anthropology and Gender Equality

The philosophical foundations of Swami Vivekananda's conception of women's education are deeply rooted in the metaphysical framework of Advaita Vedānta. His reflections on gender, equality, and

education cannot be properly understood without reference to this underlying anthropology, which affirms the essential unity and divinity of all human beings. By grounding his arguments in Vedantic thought, Vivekananda transcends sociological or reformist approaches and offers a profound ontological basis for gender equality.

At the core of Advaita Vedānta lies the doctrine that the true self (Ātman) is identical with Brahman, the ultimate, non-dual reality. This self is beyond all empirical distinctions such as caste, class, or gender. Vivekananda repeatedly emphasized that the apparent differences between individuals belong to the stages of prakṛti (nature), not to the essential nature of the self. In one of his characteristic assertions, he declares that the soul is “sexless” and beyond all limitations imposed by the body. This metaphysical insight has far-reaching implications. If the essence of every human being is divine and identical, then any form of inequality based on gender is philosophically indefensible. The subordination of women is thus not merely a social injustice but a contradiction of the deepest truths of human existence. Vivekananda’s Vedantic anthropology therefore establishes equality not as a moral concession or political demand, but as an ontological fact.

Within this framework, Vivekananda’s definition of education assumes critical importance. He famously described education as “the manifestation of the perfection already in man.” This formulation applies equally to women, as the same divine potential resides in all individuals. Education is not the transmission of information from teacher to student, but the process by which latent Śakti is brought into expression. This conception radically alters the purpose and method of education. Rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies, education becomes a liberating force that enables individuals to realize their true nature. For women, who have historically been denied access to knowledge, this process is particularly significant. It restores to them the capacity for self-determination and spiritual growth.

A distinctive feature of Vivekananda’s thought is his emphasis on Śakti, the principle of divine energy associated with the feminine. Drawing from both Vedantic and Tantric traditions, he interprets women not as passive beings but as embodiments of Śakti. This perspective challenges the prevailing cultural narratives that depict women as weak or dependent. By invoking the idea of Śakti, Vivekananda reconfigures the meaning of womanhood. Women are not merely equal to men; they are powerful agents of transformation, both in the domestic sphere and in the broader social context. This theological affirmation serves as a powerful counter-narrative to patriarchal ideologies and provides a spiritual foundation for empowerment.

For Vivekananda, gender equality is ultimately inseparable from spiritual realization. It is not enough to advocate for equal rights; one must recognize the deeper unity that underlies all differences. This perspective distinguishes his approach from purely secular or political theories of equality. At the same time, Vivekananda does not dismiss the importance of social reform. Rather, he integrates it within a broader spiritual framework. The upliftment of women becomes both a moral duty and a spiritual necessity, essential for the progress of individuals and society alike. He says that “The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country.” (Vivekananda 2008, p.300) Here, women’s education is directly tied to social regeneration and national development.

In sum, the Vedantic anthropology underlying Vivekananda's thought provides a robust philosophical foundation for gender equality. By affirming the divinity of the self, redefining education as self-manifestation, and invoking the concept of Śakti, he offers a comprehensive vision in which women's empowerment is both a spiritual and social imperative.

3. Critique of Domesticity and Social Degeneration

The critique of domesticity in the thought of Swami Vivekananda must be situated within his broader philosophical anthropology, grounded in Vedanta, and his reformist vision for Indian society. Vivekananda does not nullify domestic life per se; rather, he criticizes the degeneration of domesticity into a restrictive, oppressive, and spiritually stifling institution—particularly in relation to women. His analysis connects the condition of women directly with the moral and civilizational health of society.

In classical Indian thought, the household (gṛhastha āśrama) was regarded as a sacred and productive stage of life. However, Vivekananda observed that in colonial India, this ideal had deteriorated into a system of confinement. Domesticity, instead of being a space for ethical cultivation, had become a structure of subordination. He argued that women were reduced to mere instruments of household maintenance, deprived of intellectual and spiritual development. This degeneration, according to him, was not sanctioned by authentic scriptural sources but was a result of historical distortions and social stagnation. In this sense, Vivekananda's critique is philosophical and genealogical, akin in spirit to later critiques of social institutions by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, though rooted in a different metaphysical framework.

A central tenet of Vivekananda's social philosophy is that the status of women reflects the vitality of a civilization. He famously asserted that no nation can rise without the upliftment of its women. The confinement of women to domestic roles, devoid of education and autonomy, leads to what he considered social degeneration. Here, Vivekananda anticipates a sociological insight: that the family, as a primary unit of socialization, determines the ethical and intellectual formation of future generations. If women—who play a crucial role in early education—are themselves deprived of knowledge, the entire society suffers a decline in moral and intellectual standards.

From a philosophical standpoint, Vivekananda's critique can be interpreted through the lens of freedom and self-realization. Influenced by Advaitic non-dualism, he holds that every individual possesses the same divine essence (Ātman). Therefore, any social arrangement that inhibits the manifestation of this inner potential is fundamentally unjust. Restrictive domesticity, particularly when imposed on women, becomes a form of spiritual bondage. It prevents the realization of one's true nature, thereby contradicting the core principles of Advaita Vedanta. In this respect, his thought resonates with modern philosophical concerns about autonomy and agency, comparable to the ideas of John Stuart Mill on individual liberty.

For Vivekananda, the remedy to this degeneration lies in education, particularly the education of women. However, his conception of education is not merely instrumental or utilitarian; it is deeply spiritual and transformative. Education should enable individuals to realize their inherent divinity and develop strength, independence, and character. Vivekananda contend that "Educate your women first

and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them.” (Vivekananda 2008, p.325) This strikingly modern statement affirms women’s autonomy and rejects paternalistic reform. He advocates for an education system that integrates: Intellectual development, Moral training, Physical strength, Spiritual awareness. Such an education would not only liberate women from oppressive domesticity but also regenerate society as a whole.

Importantly, Vivekananda does not call for the abolition of domestic life. Instead, he envisions its reconstruction. The household should become a site of mutual respect, shared responsibility, and spiritual growth. Women should participate in domestic life not as subordinates but as equal partners. This reconstructed domesticity aligns with his broader vision of a society grounded in strength (śakti), harmony, and spiritual unity. The empowerment of women thus becomes both a moral imperative and a practical necessity for national regeneration.

4. Education as Empowerment and Self-Reliance:

The philosophy of education articulated by Swami Vivekananda is also fundamentally grounded in the ideals of empowerment and self-reliance. Rejecting both colonial models of passive learning and indigenous patterns of rote instruction, Vivekananda advances a transformative conception of education as the awakening of inner strength (śakti) and the realization of human potential. His educational vision integrates metaphysical principles from Vedanta with a practical program of social regeneration, particularly emphasizing the empowerment of marginalized groups, especially women.

One of Vivekananda’s most frequently cited definitions of education is: “Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.” (Vivekananda 2008, p. 302) This formulation encapsulates his Advaitic conviction that every individual is inherently divine. The role of education is not to impose knowledge from without but to unfold the latent capacities within. This perspective is deeply rooted in the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta, where the identity of Ātman (self) and Brahman (ultimate reality) affirms the intrinsic dignity and potential of all individuals. Consequently, education becomes a process of self-discovery and self-empowerment, rather than mere information acquisition. In contrast to utilitarian or examination-oriented systems, Vivekananda emphasizes on Character formation, Strength of will, Fearlessness and Moral autonomy. Thus, empowerment is conceived not only in social or economic terms but as spiritual self-affirmation.

Closely linked to empowerment is the ideal of self-reliance. Vivekananda repeatedly criticizes dependency—whether intellectual, economic, or cultural—as a primary cause of national weakness. Education, in his view, must cultivate the capacity to stand on one’s own feet. Self-reliance (svāvalamban) involves-Intellectual independence (freedom from blind imitation) ,Economic competence (capacity for productive work) and Moral responsibility (ability to make ethical decisions) . He told that “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them.” (Vivekananda 2008, p. 325)This strikingly modern statement affirms women’s autonomy and rejects paternalistic reform. Here, Vivekananda’s thought exhibits a striking convergence with modern notions of autonomy found in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, though the foundations differ. While Kant grounds autonomy in rational self-legislation, Vivekananda situates it in the realization of one’s divine nature.

A crucial dimension of Vivekananda's educational philosophy is its application to the condition of women. He views women's education as indispensable for both individual empowerment and societal progress. Denying education to women, he argues, results in the perpetuation of ignorance across generations. Unlike purely instrumental approaches, Vivekananda insists that women's education must be holistic, such as, intellectual training, moral and spiritual instruction, physical development, practical skills for independence etc. He opposes the reduction of women's education to domestic training alone. Instead, he envisions women as agents of transformation, capable of contributing to all spheres of life. This position aligns him, in certain respects, with liberal feminist arguments advanced by thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, while remaining distinct in its spiritual orientation.

For Vivekananda, education is not merely an individual good but a collective necessity. The empowerment of individuals through education leads to the regeneration of society and the nation. He envisions an educated populace characterized by strength, self-confidence, and ethical commitment. For him, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. (Vivekananda 2008, p. 229)" This statement reflects his conviction that women's empowerment is not merely social reform but a moral and spiritual necessity. In this context, self-reliance becomes a national virtue. A society composed of self-reliant individuals is capable of resisting cultural subjugation achieving economic independence and fostering social cohesion Thus, education functions as a bridge between personal transformation and collective progress.

Vivekananda's educational philosophy is not purely theoretical; it includes a strong emphasis on practical training. He advocates for the integration of vocational education with moral and spiritual development. Such as: training in crafts and industries, development of physical strength, cultivation of perseverance and self-confidence etc. He famously declared that education should produce individuals who are "strong in body, mind, and spirit." (Vivekananda 2008, p. 365) This holistic approach ensures that empowerment is not abstract but concretely realized in everyday life.

5. From Domesticity to Divinity: The Ideal of Womanhood

The ideal of womanhood articulated by Swami Vivekananda represents a profound transformation from the limited framework of domesticity to a spiritually grounded vision of divinity. While acknowledging the historical role of women within the household, Vivekananda transcends this conventional paradigm by reinterpreting womanhood through the metaphysical and ethical lens of Vedanta. His thought situates women not as subordinate participants in social life but as embodiments of spiritual power (*śakti*), integral to both personal and civilizational advancement.

Vivekananda does not dismiss domesticity outright; rather, he critiques its degeneration into a restrictive and oppressive institution. In its ideal form, the household (*gr̥hastha*) is a site of moral cultivation and spiritual practice. However, in its degenerate form, it reduces women to roles defined by dependency and subordination. Against this background, Vivekananda calls for a reevaluation of domestic life, wherein women are not confined but empowered participants. Domesticity must be transformed from a condition of limitation into a sphere of dignified agency and shared responsibility.

Central to Vivekananda's ideal of womanhood is the concept of śakti, the dynamic cosmic energy that sustains and animates the universe. Drawing from the broader framework of Hindu spirituality, particularly the worship of the Divine Feminine, he affirms that women are manifestations of this śakti. This conception elevates womanhood from a sociological category to a metaphysical principle. Women are not merely to be protected or revered in a symbolic sense; they are to be recognized as sources of power, creativity, and spiritual insight. Vivekananda's frequent invocation of goddess traditions—such as the worship of Durga and Kali—serves to reinforce this vision. These figures symbolize strength; independence, and transformative energy, qualities that he believed should be cultivated in real women through education and social reform.

The philosophical basis of Vivekananda's ideal lies in the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta. According to this doctrine, the same ultimate reality (Brahman) manifests in all beings, irrespective of gender. Therefore, any hierarchical distinction between men and women is ultimately illusory and ethically unjustifiable. This metaphysical egalitarianism leads to a radical ethical conclusion: women possess the same capacity for self-realization (mokṣa) as men. Consequently, denying them access to education, spiritual practice, or social participation constitutes a violation of their fundamental nature.

Traditional constructions of womanhood in many societies have emphasized passivity, obedience, and sacrifice. Vivekananda reinterprets these virtues in an active and empowering sense. Strength, fearlessness, and independence become the defining characteristics of the ideal woman. He explicitly rejects models of femininity that valorize weakness. Instead, he calls for the cultivation of physical strength, intellectual clarity, moral courage and spiritual depth. In this respect, his vision resonates with modern feminist critiques of gender norms, while remaining distinct in its spiritual grounding. The ideal woman is not merely equal to man; she is a co-creator of social and spiritual reality. He holds that "The ideal woman in India is the mother—the mother first and the mother last." (Vivekananda 2008, p. 214) While emphasizing motherhood, Vivekananda simultaneously reinterprets it in spiritual and empowering terms, rather than restrictive domesticity.

The transition from domesticity to divinity is made possible through education. For Vivekananda, education is the primary instrument through which women can realize their inherent śakti and transcend limiting social roles. Such education must be holistic (integrating body, mind, and spirit), culturally rooted (drawing from indigenous traditions) and practically oriented (enabling self-reliance). He emphasizes that educated women will not abandon their roles but will transform them, bringing intelligence, strength, and spiritual awareness into every sphere of life.

6. Educational Method and Curriculum:

The educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is not limited to abstract ideals of self-realization and empowerment; it extends to a concrete vision of method and curriculum. His approach represents a synthesis of metaphysical insight derived from Vedanta and a pragmatic concern for social transformation. Rejecting both mechanical instruction and purely utilitarian education, Vivekananda proposes a holistic pedagogy aimed at the integral development of the human personality.

At the core of Vivekananda's method lies the principle that knowledge is inherent within the individual. This view, grounded in Advaita Vedanta, implies that teaching is not the transmission of information but

the awakening of inner potential. Accordingly, the role of the teacher is redefined not as an authoritarian instructor, but as a guide, facilitator, and inspirer. The process of education becomes one of self-activity, where the learner actively participates in the unfolding of knowledge. This epistemological stance stands in contrast to rote-based systems and aligns, in certain respects, with the pedagogical insights of Socrates, particularly the method of eliciting knowledge through questioning.

For Vivekananda, the ultimate aim of education is character formation. Intellectual training alone is insufficient; education must cultivate virtues such as truthfulness, courage, self-discipline, and compassion. He famously emphasized “man-making education,” by which he meant the development of strength (śakti), fearlessness, moral integrity and self-confidence. This ethical orientation reflects a broader philosophical commitment to the unity of knowledge and action. Education must not only inform but also transform the individual.

Vivekananda advocates a variety of pedagogical methods that emphasize active engagement and holistic development:

- **Experiential Learning:** Learning should arise from direct experience rather than abstract instruction. Students should engage with the world through observation, practice, and reflection.
- **Dialogue and Inquiry:** Echoing the spirit of Socrates, Vivekananda values questioning and discussion as means of intellectual awakening.
- **Discipline and Self-Control:** Education must include the cultivation of concentration and mental discipline, which he regarded as essential for both intellectual and spiritual growth.
- **Imitation of Ideals:** The presence of exemplary teachers and role models plays a crucial role. Students learn not only through instruction but through the embodiment of ideals in their teachers.

Vivekananda’s proposed curriculum is comprehensive and integrative, aiming at the balanced development of body, mind, and spirit. It includes the following components:

- **Spiritual and Moral:** Education Instruction in ethical principles and spiritual practices forms the foundation of the curriculum. Texts such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gītā are seen as sources of universal wisdom.
- **Intellectual and Scientific Training:** Vivekananda strongly supports the study of modern sciences, mathematics, and philosophy. He rejects the false dichotomy between tradition and modernity, advocating instead their integration.
- **Physical Education:** Physical strength is essential for the development of a strong character. He famously remarked that playing football may bring one closer to spiritual realization than mere book learning, emphasizing the importance of bodily vigor.
- **Vocational and Technical Education:** To promote self-reliance, the curriculum must include training in crafts, industries, and practical skills. This ensures that education is not detached from the economic realities of life.
- **Education for Women:** Vivekananda insists that the curriculum for women must be equally comprehensive, including not only domestic skills but also intellectual, physical, and spiritual training. This reflects his commitment to gender equality and empowerment.

Vivekananda emphasized the importance of education in the mother tongue, arguing that true understanding is best achieved in a language familiar to the learner. At the same time, he supports the learning of English and other languages for global engagement.. He also advocates for an education system rooted in Indian culture and values, while remaining open to global knowledge. This balanced approach aims to produce individuals who are both culturally grounded and intellectually cosmopolitan.

7. Conclusion:

The exploration of women’s education in the thought of Swami Vivekananda reveals a philosophically rich and socially transformative vision that transcends the binaries of tradition and modernity. His formulation of the movement “from domesticity to divinity” encapsulates not merely a program of social reform but a deeper metaphysical reorientation grounded in the principles of Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta. In this framework, the question of women’s education is inseparable from the nature of reality, the dignity of the human person, and the ethical foundations of society.

Vivekananda’s critique of domesticity is neither an outright rejection of the household nor an uncritical acceptance of inherited norms. Rather, it is a critical reconstruction. He identifies the degeneration of domestic life into a structure of confinement and subordination as a historical distortion rather than a necessary feature of Indian culture. By retrieving the spiritual egalitarianism implicit in the Upanishadic vision—where the same Ātman resides in all beings—he dismantles the ideological basis of gender hierarchy. In doing so, he restores to women their rightful status as equal participants in the pursuit of knowledge, virtue, and liberation.

The transition to “divinity” signifies the recognition and actualization of śakti, the inherent power and spiritual potential within women. This transformation is not symbolic but practical, mediated through a comprehensive and liberative conception of education. For Vivekananda, education is the decisive instrument through which women can overcome imposed limitations and realize their intrinsic capacities. It is through education that women acquire not only intellectual competence but also moral strength, physical vitality, and spiritual awareness. Such an education, grounded in self-reliance and character formation, enables women to become autonomous agents rather than passive recipients of social roles.

In conclusion, the movement from domesticity to divinity in the educational thought of Swami Vivekananda offers a comprehensive and enduring framework for understanding the role of women in society. It redefines education as a process of inner awakening and social empowerment, challenges entrenched structures of inequality, and envisions a society grounded in strength, dignity, and spiritual unity. The continuing relevance of this vision lies in its capacity to integrate metaphysical insight with practical reform, thereby providing a robust philosophical foundation for contemporary discourses on gender, education, and human development.

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