

A vindication of the rights of woman



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During the early years of the French Revolution, England became a place of new beginnings, where the idea of the individual emerged, the world of literature was reborn and authority was thoroughly questioned and often uprooted. Great poets and philosophers were awakened, and the ‘ war of pamphlets’ began, proclaiming revolutionary theories, arguing social and political change, and urging self-examination. Mary Wollstonecraft, “ pioneer of feminist thought” (Jane Moore, 1999) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was the first to bring the subordinate attitude that society had towards women into the open, arguing that women were men’s intellectual equals and therefore affirming a woman’s right to a full education. “ A profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore.” (Page166) Continuing on from this radical observation, Wollstonecraft states, that through the education of women, relationships between husbands and wives will be better and the children, future of society will receive a better education. By including the children into these benefits, Wollstonecraft appeals to the men, who at that time considered “ females rather as women than human creature; have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers.” Wollstonecraft continues to say that women are elevated, acknowledging the “ homage” that men pay to women, yet this “ homage” is purely directed towards purile qualities rather than noble. She argues that this elevation does nothing but weaken the women. Wollstonecraft’s preferable woman figure is a rational and useful citizen. It is not only the attitude of men towards women that Wollstonecraft directed her arguments against. Much of her criticism was aimed at the women’s perception of themselves and their own abilities. Wollstonecraft claims in chapter two, <https://assignbuster.com/a-vindication-of-the-rights-of-woman/>

page 170, that the only education women receive is that which is taught by their mothers, “ softness of temper, outward obedience and a scrupulous attention to a purile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man...” Who, “...try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood.” (Page 170-171) Wollstonecraft continues throughout her book to refer to the “ wife” as being an “ overgrown child.” In connecting the way women are treated to how children are treated, emphasis is placed on the fact that as children are dependant on adults, (men), for intellectual guidance, so to do women rely on men, rather than becoming responsible for their own intellectual growth. Keeping these views of women in mind, Wollstonecraft’s ideas were revolutionary. They were the beginnings of emancipation for women. Wollstonecraft argues that men may well be more virtuous in their bodies, yet when it comes to the virtue of one’s nature, she defies any idea of virtue being different for men or women; “ in fact how can they, if virtue has only one eternal standard?” (Page 176) This is one of her main objectives that woman’s physical inferiority has led to false assumptions about her intellectual ability. By including God in the argument, Wollstonecraft dares to confront the church, a leader power of the time, and its opinion that it is only men who have certain Godly qualities. She alludes once again to the Christian teachings, yet this time backing up her point by using the Old Testament. In this case she is against Dr Gregory in his “ Legacy to his daughters,” that girls should “ give lie to her feelings, and not dance with her spirit...” continuing to advise the restraint of speech lest it make her seem immodest. Wollstonecraft fights back by quoting “ the wiser Solomon” saying that the heart should be pure, abundant and natural, out of this state the mouth would speak true

knowledge. Thus the heart is more important than trivial ceremonies placed on women and children, because even people with vice in their heart can perform such actions. This is a very confrontational approach, as both men and women partook of church ceremonies for no other reason than to heighten people's opinion of themselves. Throughout the Vindication, Wollstonecraft makes clear her position that to be a good mother and responsible citizen the woman must be equal with her husband, "and not the humble dependant" (page 178) the only way to achieve this is through friendship, and a natural understanding that both are "creatures of reason." Wollstonecraft does not however deny the passion that is felt in a marriage, she says that when this passion should subside, there should be a friendship in which to educate children and form strong morals on which society can move forward. To have a strong friendship with one's wife would be an absurd idea to many men at that time, but because of the revolutionary awakening occurring, Wollstonecraft was able to try and change this constraining idea which men had. Rousseau is another poet that she fights against to prove her point. While he is concerned about power plays and feeling lacking in some way, Wollstonecraft states "I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves." (Chap 4, page 187) This is her main point, equality, and understanding of ones self. She is encouraging women to educate themselves, push past the false limitations which society has placed on women and begin to cultivate rationality, understanding and peace of mind. (Page 181) None of her arguments seek to make women higher than men, they are rather encouraging woman to embrace this time of new beginnings. Bibliography Moore, J Mary Wollstonecraft UK

(1999)Wollstonecraft, M A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, (1792) in
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