

# Mary wollstonecraft`s vindication of the rights of woman

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Mary Wollstonecraft is considered as the “mother of feminism” or rather the “first feminist”. Her book, “A Vindication on the Rights of Woman”, published in 1792, revolves around the central issue of women’s rights especially with respect to women’s education. The book is addressed to Edmund Burke and is considered a milestone in the history of feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London, in 1759, to John Edward Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Dickson.

She had an older brother, Edward (Ned), and four younger siblings. Mary Wollstonecraft lived in Paris during the most climactic episode of the French Revolution: the trial and beheading by guillotine of King Louis XVI. Mary’s father was gruff and abusive and her mother passive and neglectful. Despite this, Mary acquired her education in Yorkshire and made friends with clergyman Mr. Clare who recognized her intelligence and introduced her to the Bible, the works of Jonathan Swift, William Shakespeare and John Milton. In 1788 Wollstonecraft began to establish herself as a writer.

She was a prolific writer and she wrote for Joseph Johnson’s monthly periodical, *The Analytic Review*. In 1790 Mary wrote “A Vindication of the Rights of Men” in response to Edmund Burke’s “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” and thereby established her credentials not only as a woman of opinion, but as a woman who was happy to voice her opinions on an equal platform with other intellectuals of the period.

Edmund Burke, a champion of American Independence as he saw the Glorious French Revolution of 1788 as a moderate and cautious settlement. In his “Reflections on the Revolution in France”, (1790), Burke aimed to denounce the French Revolution, to attack the French revolutionaries and their principles, and to defend the British constitution. <https://assignbuster.com/mary-wollstonecrafts-vindication-of-the-rights-of-woman/>

the British constitution and the notion of prescriptive right. He argued that vice and individual selfishness rather than government were the cause of social unhappiness.

Supporting the aristocracy, Burke made part of his argument through sentimentalized pictures of sexual and familial relationships, especially of the French queen Marie Antoinette as mother and lady, worthy object of chivalric devotion. These pictures were particularly revolting to Wollstonecraft, who did not admire much, the aristocratic families. This book, then, is a reply to the arguments of Edmund Burke.

In "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", Wollstonecraft calls for a revolution in female manners. Wollstonecraft argued that females are in all the most important aspects the same as males and women are superior in the context of strength of mind, perseverance and fortitude. On the basis of these philosophical arguments of sexual equality Wollstonecraft called for the reform of female education, arguing that girls should be educated in the same subjects and by the same methods as boys.

She further advocated a radical revision of British law to enable a new, egalitarian marriage in which women would share equally in the management and possession of all household resources. She demanded that women be paid equally for their labor, that they gain the civil and legal right to possess and distribute property, that they be admitted to all the most prestigious professions. And she argued that women should be given the right to vote.

On Love, Sentiment, Passion and Emotions:

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Wollstonecraft accuses men of sentimentally viewing women as females rather than human beings and hence has been “ more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (Wollstonecraft, xxxi). Wollstonecraft questions why females should always be degraded by being made subservient to love or lust. Wollstonecraft says that love is indeed a noble emotion but it should not be allowed to act as a block to reasoning. Sentimentally, a woman is considered as someone who needs to be trained to be a good wife.

However, a woman who is trained only in pleasing her husband will not be able to appeal to a man’s sexuality in the long run. When her sentimental and sexual appeal fades off, she is likely to seek approval from other men and become bitter. The author eloquently says: “ love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity” (Wollstonecraft, page 27). Thus, Wollstonecraft indicates that there must not be too much sentiment should not be considered in the context of women education.

Wollstonecraft points out to women who tend to acquire a certain artificial mode of behavior because of popular sentiment as to how they should behave. These people under the cloud of sentiment tend to lose their original powers of thinking. “ The greater numbers of people take their opinions on trust to avoid the trouble of exercising their own minds, and these indolent beings naturally adhere to the letter, rather than the spirit of a law, divine or human” (Wollstonecraft, 185).

She says it’s because of their foolish sentiment that makes them fear the “ eye of man”. Their sentiment based behavior is based on having a good reputation and not because of chastity or other virtues. To prove the above <https://assignbuster.com/mary-wollstonecrafts-vindication-of-the-rights-of-woman/>

conclusion, Wollstonecraft cites the examples of affairs that married women of high class society indulge in, and contrasts it to the degradation suffered by a young woman in love. This is mainly because of the sentiment that married women have good reputation.

The respect for the sentiment of the world has, however, been termed the principal duty of woman in the most express words, for Rousseau declares, 'that reputation is no less indispensable than chastity. According to Wollstonecraft, " A sentiment that often exists unsupported by virtue, unsupported by that sublime morality which makes the habitual breach of one duty a breach of the whole moral law" (Wollstonecraft, 197). Thus, according to the author, sentiment should be one that is supported by virtue and values. Only such sentiment based on values can lead to morality and truly great character. This value-based sentiment can be had only through education and a thinking mind, which is why the author supports the right of women to education.

The author also points to the fact that the sentimental image of a woman is provided through novels. She feels that women rights in particular write works of fiction that are all steeped in sentimental jargon, which tend to corrupt the mind and the heart. The female characters are often stereotyped and shown as submissive and having no thinking brain of their own. Women writers tend to prefer unnatural sentimental flights of fantasy in their works and in the process they create damaging stereotypes. Wollstonecraft complains of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791).

She points out that all female writers tend to give a sanction to the libertine reveries of men, poison the minds of their own sex, and strengthen a male  
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prejudice that makes women systematically weak? Contrary to sentimental novels, novels of sensibility matter because they shape behavior and serve as an index to broader cultural ills. Woman is “ made by her education “ the slave of sensibility,” Wollstonecraft observes (174). She holds that novels, music, poetry, and gallantry make women “ creatures of sensation” (78) through their sentimental content. Thus she holds that sentimental stereotypes of women tend to create emotional women: “ All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions wavering” (77). She says that education that tends to inflame the passions must indeed be miserable. Education should strengthen the passions and not inflame them.

The sentiment of being always a woman is the “ very consciousness that degrades the sex” (135). Here, Wollstonecraft points out the subtle connection between emotion and reason. She agrees that a man, or a woman, of any feeling, must always wish to convince a beloved object that it is the caresses of the individual, not the sex, that are received and returned with pleasure; and, that the heart, rather than the senses, is moved. “ Without this natural delicacy, love becomes a selfish personal gratification that soon degrades the character” (135). She carries the sentiment still further.

She says, affection can justify many personal gestures, but accepting liberal gestures in the name of gallantry is despicable. “ When a man squeezes the hand of a pretty woman, handing her to a carriage, whom he has never seen before, she will consider such an impertinent freedom in the light of an insult, if she has any true delicacy, instead of being flattered by this

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unmeaning homage to beauty" (135). The understanding can come only by eradication of sentimental notions. She questions Rousseau as to how he can expect women to be virtuous and constant when reason is not the foundation of their character or truth the pursuit of their inquiries.

Wollstonecraft opines that women must try to improve their character but they cannot do this as long as they are attached to their sentiments. They need to "curb the wild emotions that agitate a reed, over which ever passing breeze has power?" (28). According to the author, love, the common passion replaces choice and reason with chance and sensation. This passion however subsides like a fever once the security of marriage sets in. On the other hand, reasoning can allow a man and woman to enjoy the calm tenderness of friendship and the confidence of respect.

Underlining the fleeting nature of love, eloquently Wollstonecraft says: "Passions are spurs to action, and open the mind; but they sink into mere appetites, become a personal and momentary gratification when the object is gained, and the satisfied mind rests in enjoyment" (28). She even says wickedly, that "caresses which should excite confidence in his children are lavished on the overgrown child, his wife" (28) thereby indicating in a subtle manner that all emotions only serve in keeping her stagnant at her childhood state of mind.

She describes the sentiment of a woman as the outcome of "a mistaken education, a narrow uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices" (31) that tend to keep a woman loyal to her husband; if sentiments were to rule, she says, life is better spent in eating drinking and loving. But then, it is only a fleeting shadow. She says that reasoning should be able subside love into <https://assignbuster.com/mary-wollstonecrafts-vindication-of-the-rights-of-woman/>

friendship. But here, the author clarifies that she does not allude to romantic passion which cannot be clipped, but rather she refers to the small enjoyments of life.

Thus we find that the book “ A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” is one that surpasses the test of time. Women today still remain tied to their emotions either by choice or by society. This makes the book relevant even in the modern day context. A revolutionary figure in a revolutionary time, Wollstonecraft took up and lived out not only the liberal call for women's educational and moral equality, but also virtually all of the other related, violently contested questions of the 1790s- questions pertaining to the principles of political authority, tyranny, liberty, class, sex, marriage, childrearing, property, prejudice, reason, sentimentality, promises, suicide, to mention only a few. Clearly, she struck many a raw nerve and faced huge opposition. That her views are relevant till today, mark Wollstonecraft and her book as classics in feminist literature. The book is a must read for anyone interested in the history of feminism.

#### Bibliography:

Wollstonecraft, Mary (1792). A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.