

**"HYENA IN PETTICOAT": WOLLSTONECRAFT'S PEACEFUL REVOLUTION
IN A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN**

Majid Mgamis

Tafila Technical University, Jordan

ABSTRACT: *This study aims at highlighting the peculiar feminist stand of the famous British feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her well-renowned work, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. The paper shows that Wollstonecraft was shrewd enough not to go in direct attack against the strongly-established patriarchal edifice of her time. Unlike mainstream feminist discourse, Wollstonecraft peacefully called for empowering women without negatively affecting the status quo of man. More interestingly, Wollstonecraft does not put the blame on the patriarchal mentality as such. Rather, she addresses women themselves as they contribute to their own subjugation. She calls for a change within women themselves in order for them to achieve the societal transformation they desire.*

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Wollstonecraft, A Vindication

INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has been widely considered as the first feminist text in the canon. Still, there has been much controversy among scholars regarding Wollstonecraft's feminist stand. In particular, critics have been concerned with the ambiguity the text raises regarding Wollstonecraft's feminist agenda. A critical examination of *Vindication* reveals the unique feminist stand of Wollstonecraft in which the bulk of her message does not aim at destroying the patriarchal institution, but constitute a call on women suffering under the dictates of this institution to take the responsibility of their starting their own emancipation. This paper argues that, in *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft is not concerned with critiquing the hegemonic system as much as with empowering women to face the debilitating situation they experience within the phallogocentric ideology.

In response Wollstonecraft's renowned text, the famous English scholar and politician, Horace Walpole, negatively described the author as a "hyena in petticoats" (Johnson 1). Read deconstructively, the term sheds light on the distinctively illuminating nature of Wollstonecraft's approach. Her text is revolutionary par excellence; however, Wollstonecraft insinuates her politically feminist message indirectly in order to evade trenchant attack from the mainstream phallogocentric mentality. It is this very insidious "public protest" of Wollstonecraft that made Richard Polwhele categorizes her among the "unsexed females".

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft's feminist voice is far from being sharp and offending; it does not aim at destroying the patriarchal heritage, however, it aims at establishing a better atmosphere for women's emancipation. As Cora Kaplan puts it, Wollstonecraft's feminist stance departs from "the radical and rationalist agenda" represented by other scholars (254). This view is enhanced by Mitzi Myers (1982), where she elaborates on Wollstonecraft unique agenda and contends that the prominent author was among those scholars who aspired to "endow woman's role with more competence, dignity and consequence" (201).

To put things in context, Wollstonecraft, was born in a uniquely patriarchal society, and was a victim of the male oppression exercised on women. Wollstonecraft's biographer, Edna Nixon, states that Wollstonecraft witnessed the "total subjection of a decent woman" (5) and that in the middle of this environment, Wollstonecraft's "character was weak and indecisive" and her husband "despised her" (5). Wollstonecraft witnesses the same prejudice against women within her own family as well. This explains her contention in *A Vindication* that "a great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents" (231). In comparison to her eldest brother, Edward, Wollstonecraft had little affection from her parents. Mary's sisters, Everina, also had to take full responsibility of her brother's house, and Eliza was in a very desperate marital relationship (Nixon 18-19). Equally important, Wollstonecraft witnessed the debilitating situation of her own mother as a woman who was "weakened and reduced by the demands of a drunken and melancholic husband" (Nixon 5).

It is this experience that has lead Wollstonecraft, like other feminist writers, to contribute to eradicating the suppression imposed on women. In *A Vindication*, Wollstonecraft addresses her "fellow creatures," who are subject to the patriarchal mode of thinking that relegates women to a subsidiary position, locating them primarily within the confinement of the private sphere. In the meantime, Wollstonecraft was well aware that a direct attack against the ironclad patriarchal institution would be futile, not to mention the counter attack it would entail. So she chose an approach that is different from that common stream feminism. Although her ideas are by definition revolutionary, the author insinuates her thought peacefully and non-radically. That is why main intent is for women to acquire strength that facilitates their survival in the male-dominated world. In other words, Wollstonecraft's approach is one that believes that women's emancipation comes from within, from the power residing in their femininity.

A Vindication: Peaceful Change

Wollstonecraft's approach in *A Vindication* is constructive rather than destructive. She does not launch a striking direct attack against the male dominated- society. Although the author records the female oppression in the 18th century England, especially the lack of education for women, she does not dwell on these calamities. The uniqueness of Wollstonecraft's message is represented in the fact that it takes the woman as its target, exhorting her to invest in her own feminine nature to attain emancipation rather than blaming the masculinist mentality for the oppression women suffer from. In this way, Wollstonecraft takes a middle position that allows her to encourage women to turn the table on their "oppressors" without destroying the patriarchal edifice. Put bluntly, Wollstonecraft encourages women to work out their own emancipation from within the realm of their own femininity.

The author contends that women "sometimes boast of their weakness, *cunningly* obtaining power by playing on the weakness of men" (77, italics mine). What is meant by "weakness" in the context of women is the very attributes that the chauvinistic society sets as necessary characteristic of femaleness; namely softness, docility and submissiveness, among others. In this respect, Wollstonecraft is fighting patriarchy from within its own discourse. She observes that "women are told from infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed *cunning*, will obtain for them the protection of man" (49 italics mine). Wollstonecraft wants women to employ this "cunning" for their own benefit. One may well argue that although Wollstonecraft's statement is descriptive, a critical

reading proves that it is essentially prescriptive. Wollstonecraft is calling on women to invest in their “weakness,” which will ultimately turn into a point of power.

Wollstonecraft’s message comes as a reply to Rousseau’s patriarchal view that he introduces in his *Emile or On Education*. Rousseau states that a woman “should never feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural *cunning*” (134 italics mine). It is really significant that Rousseau equates women’s femininity (*cunning*) with independence. Wollstonecraft understands that women’s feminine attributes are the source of their subjectivity and that is why she encourages them to cunningly utilize their natural talents in their struggle as this makes women “like Turkish bashaws, (having) more real power than their masters” (77). Wollstonecraft firmly believes that women possess the potential to be “strong and active,” Hence she contends that a woman’s “first wish should be to make herself respectable, and not to rely for all her happiness on a being subject to like infirmities with herself” (61). In this respect, not only does Wollstonecraft acknowledge the strength of women; she also points out that the weakness Rousseau refers to in women is a characteristic of men as well.

This is the uniqueness of Wollstonecraft’s approach; one that departs from the mainstream feminist narrative which embarks on either lambasting the patriarchal mentality or romanticizing women’s struggle in the male-dominated society. Wollstonecraft’s method is a realistic one. It takes into consideration the impossibility of a complete subversion of the chauvinistic thinking; at the same time it acknowledges the existence of female potential that may play a vital role in women’s emancipation from the entanglement they live in.

Additionally, the significance of the female body in women's struggle for self-affirmation is palpable in Wollstonecraft's agenda. The author does acknowledge the difference in body potentials between the two sexes, stating that “I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue” (59). However, she reiterates that women should “endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body” (111). In line with the argument provided above, the author does not mean muscular strength inasmuch as the physical charms the woman endowed with. This is a clear message on the part of Wollstonecraft that if man has the advantage in his body, woman has the essential stamina in a totally different sphere; namely her femininity.

The above view of Wollstonecraft’s regarding the physical attributes of men and women constitute a living testimony on her attempt to find equilibrium in her approach. As Anne Mellor (2002) puts it , “Wollstonecraft would have women fulfill the social and political roles currently played by men” (154); however, she does not mean to render man irrelevant, but to show that women have a bodily and mental potential that may guarantee a better position for them in both the public sphere and the private sphere. That is why she clearly states : “When I treat of peculiar duties of women...I do not mean to insinuate that they be taken out of their families” (Wollstonecraft 108). This shows that Wollstonecraft did not aim at abolishing the domestic obligations of the woman, but wanted society to give women the respect they deserve as essential contributors to that society. As Barbara Taylor argues, Wollstonecraft did not want “to elevate women above Female duty, but to better equip them for it” (45).

This view regarding female duty can be best understood in the light of the author’s sequel to *A Vindication*, namely *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. As critic Mitzi Myers (1980) asserts, *Maria* substantiates Wollstonecraft’s agenda promulgated in her political treatise and that the author kept her pledge to “finish the continuation promised” (107). She states that the

novel resolves the conflict between the need for emancipation and the necessity of meeting social obligations (113). Maria's position in relation to her child, husband and lover, Myers argues, is the embodiment of this conflict. Thus, Wollstonecraft managed to highlight "the dual themes of inner and outer worlds to unify the stances" (113). In other words, both texts substantiate Wollstonecraft's acknowledgement of women's domestic duties despite their potential danger on women's emancipation.

Just like in *A Vindication*, in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft does not merely dwell on the patriarchal oppression of women; rather her major message is represented in lambasting women for their contribution to their own subjugation. In the words of Ann Mellor, the story records "the wrongs done *to* women and the wrongs done *by* women" (415). In this respect, Wollstonecraft highlights and criticizes women's assimilation of the patriarchal dictates especially in terms of their fostering the image of women as essentially sentimental and emotional beings. Strangely, *Maria* spurred much criticism due to its celebration of women's sentimentality and emotion; so much so that critics argued that the author contradicts her call for reason in *A Vindication*. However, it should be noted that the author is not against passion *per se*. In his biography of Wollstonecraft, Nixon emphasizes that Wollstonecraft herself was a very emotional woman and that her letters show her as a woman full of passion. (10). Wollstonecraft's novel celebrates reasonable emotion and love and criticizes excessive sentimentality in women that works on the expense of reason. As Mellor states, Wollstonecraft promotes the kind of sensibility that is based primarily on sympathy and governed by reason (418).

Myers (1980) further solves the alleged contradiction between the two texts. She argues that in both texts Wollstonecraft's main vision was represented in advocating "a rational feminist program" (107). She goes on to propose that Wollstonecraft negates the existence of "innate biological propensity for emotion" in women and attributes women's assimilation of sentimentality to the social dictates that teach women to exhibit such traits. For Myers, Wollstonecraft does not have a case against sentimental feeling as such; but she advocates that emotion and sentimentality should be guided by reason, and thus her feminist version was represented in providing "both an aggrandizement and a critique of feminine feeling and imagination" (111). That is why Myers categorizes Wollstonecraft among the feminist scholars who emphasized "the cultivation of reason as the guide to both self-realization and social progress" (107).

However, Wollstonecraft's concept of femininity departs from the socially-constructed image of womanhood. That is why she criticizes the "books of instruction" that promulgate the patriarchal doctrine of femininity, a doctrine that renders women submissive and marginal (Jones 135) as this ideology was "insultingly supporting (men's) superiority" (Wollstonecraft 100). Wollstonecraft did not want women to submit to this doctrine which renders them "in ignorance, and slavish dependence" (249). She brings to their awareness the fact that they possess the potential that guarantees an independent life and self-assertion for them. She urges the patriarchal society to give women the chance to do so: "Let women share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man" (287). As Eleanor Flexner argues, Wollstonecraft "is intent on removing the stigma attaching to woman--any and all woman--as creatures of instinct and feeling, devoid of intellectual powers or the capacity for intellectual growth" (149).

Like other feminists, Wollstonecraft believed that women would never occupy the position they deserve in society as long as they are not recognized as fully-fledged individuals and

contributors to society. However, she does not merely blame the negligence women face on the man-made society; rather she strongly believes that women, by assimilating the suppressive dictates, contribute to their own misery. Although she affirms that women are “degraded by a concurrence of circumstance” (93), Wollstonecraft states that “the grand source of female folly and vice has ever appeared to me to arise from narrowness of mind” (96-97). That is why she tries to open the horizon of women’s mentality and urges them to recognize as well as utilize their inherent potential in order to extricate themselves out of this entanglement and claim a central position within the private as well as the public spheres.

This view of Wollstonecraft opens a new horizon for the feminist discourse. Instead of targeting the hegemonic system in order to elevate the status of women, Wollstonecraft located the change within women themselves. Women have to recognize their potential and employ it intelligently if they are intent on creating a difference in their lives as well as in the public domain. She puts this clearly as she states : “This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves” (12).

Evidently, Wollstonecraft goes beyond the mere critique of the dominant ideology to stress the idea of self reformation in order for women to achieve a voice in the public and private sphere. She states that “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world” (84). It is worth noting that this perspective highlights Wollstonecraft’s strong belief that the advancement in the status of women is intrinsically connected to the welfare of the whole society. Interestingly, Wollstonecraft’s view does not come from a romantic belief in the superiority of women or hatred of men. As Mellor argues, Wollstonecraft’s had a strong belief in the equal status of men and women especially in terms of their mental capabilities (139-140).

This is the peaceful revolution that Wollstonecraft aimed at achieving, which is the major aspect of her feminist agenda. In addition to being realistic, Wollstonecraft’s feminist stand is more peaceful than revolutionary. After all, Wollstonecraft clarified this as she proclaimed “Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things” (59). Instead, she envisioned a life that is characterized by mutual respect from both the man and the woman would yield healthy results for both.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, Wollstonecraft’s text exhibits her unique feminist approach that aims at repudiating the male hegemony imposed on women. The peculiarity of Wollstonecraft’s feminist stance is multifold. Wollstonecraft does not take the patriarchal institution as the target of her criticism; rather, she turns her critical gaze to her fellow women, whose embracement of the hegemonic ideology facilitated their subjugation. Wollstonecraft is fully aware of the power relation that defines the man – woman integration on both the interpersonal and societal levels. That is why she exhorts women to acquire the strength that is necessary for them to achieve self-realization.

Although Wollstonecraft stresses the importance of both physical and mental strength; she gives more particular attention to the inherent feminine strength. Interestingly, Wollstonecraft’s focus on women’s feminine traits as a source of emancipation subverts the patriarchal belief that feminine qualities are the source of women’s frailty. Whereas the male-

dominated society considers these qualities as women's weakness, Wollstonecraft turns them into a source of empowerment and strength for women. This may constitute a cogent rebuttal to those who have labeled Wollstonecraft as "unfeminine." Wollstonecraft relished her femininity and wanted other women to do so; however, she wanted women to enjoy their rights on equal footing with men. In the words of Margaret Walters, Wollstonecraft wanted "to fulfill both parts of her nature, to work and live like a man, but like a woman as well" (270).

REFERENCES

- Flexner, E. (1972). *Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York: Coward, McGann & Geoghegan.
- Johnson, C. (2002). "Introduction". In Claudia L. Johnson (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (pp 1-6). Cambridge: Cambridge UP .
- Jones, V. (2002) "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Literature of Advice and Instruction." In Claudia L. Johnson (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (pp 119-40). Cambridge: Cambridge UP .
- Kaplan, C. (2002) . "Mary Wollstonecraft's Reception and Legacies." In Claudia L. Johnson (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (pp 246-70). Cambridge: Cambridge UP .
- Mellor, A. (2002). *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780-1830*. Bloomington: Indiana UP .
- Myers, M. (1982) ."Reform or Ruin: 'A Revolution in Female Manners.'" In *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 11 : 199-216.
- Nixon, E. (1971) . *Mary Wollstonecraft: Her Life and Times*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Polwhele, R. (1974). "The Unsex'd Females: A Poem". Ed. Gina Luria. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Rousseau, J. (1979) . *Emile or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books .
- Taylor, B. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP .
- Walters, M. (2001). "The Rights and Wrongs of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau, Simone de Beauvoir." In Mary Evans (Ed.). *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* Vol. I (pp. 269-329). New York: Routledge .
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1891). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London, T. Fisher Unwin.