

# M.A. in English (CCAЕ), Vidyasagar University

## Course 103: Unit 3

### Mary Wollstonecraft – A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

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#### **Life of Mary Wollstonecraft**

Mary Wollstonecraft was born on 27 April 1759 in London. Her father Edward drifted in and out of jobs and locations, never succeeding in establishing himself or his family on a stable basis. A failure on a professional level, he was also abusive as a person, particularly to his wife Elizabeth. Mary's youthful experiences of trying to shield and console her mother strongly colored her later writings against what she thought of as the bondage of marriage.

As an adolescent Mary Wollstonecraft befriended Fanny Blood with whom she formed an enduring bond. After the death of her mother in 1780, Mary abandoned her own home and went to live with the Blood family, a female enclave that subsisted on the small earnings to be made by needlework and painting. Her sister Eliza escaped the home by marriage, but, when after the birth of a child she appeared to her husband to have suffered a nervous collapse, he summoned Mary to help in her recovery. The sister, instead, became convinced that the problem lay in her marriage, and she essentially kidnapped Eliza, afterward arranging for a legal separation of husband and wife.

At this point (1784), facing the universal lack of professional opportunity for women, Wollstonecraft decided to set up a school, with Eliza and Fanny Blood, in Islington. They determined, however, that their prospects would be improved if they transferred it outside the city and thus moved to the northern suburb of Newington Green, where they were joined by the third of the Wollstonecraft sisters Everina. In this idyllic location Mary made the acquaintance of Samuel Johnson, also of the radical Dissenting minister Dr. Richard Price.

In 1785 Fanny Blood left the school to accept an offer of marriage in Lisbon, Portugal. She was soon pregnant, and, in her isolation, she wrote Mary Wollstonecraft, pleading with her to join her and see her through the birth of her child. Although it meant jeopardizing the success of the school, Mary left for Lisbon, where she encountered her friend already in premature

labor. Fanny died in Mary's arms, and the baby survived for only a short time after her. The despondency into which this episode drove Mary is rehearsed in the central chapters of her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction*, published in 1788.

Returning to England, Mary Wollstonecraft found her school in untenable financial condition and was forced to close it. She attempted to realize some income by writing a conduct book based on her experiences as a teacher, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, which would be brought to the press in 1787 by the foremost liberal publisher of the time, Joseph Johnson. Robbed of her independent livelihood, however, she had no resources to support herself, and in 1786 she entered the household of Viscount Kingsborough of Mitchelstown, County Cork, Ireland, where she served as governess to the two daughters. This position lasted a year and drove her to a detestation of the demeaning position of governess that can be seen in many of her later writings. It also led to her second educational publication, a work that, with surprisingly dark colors, drew on her Irish experiences, following the reclamation of two spoiled sisters by a determinedly sober governess named Mrs. Mason, which was published by Johnson in 1788 as *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*. William Blake furnished illustrations for its second edition. Many years later, after she moved to Italy, Mary Shelley found herself befriended by one of those once wayward sisters, who, having escaped an arranged marriage to an Irish peer, in veneration of her former governess had adopted the name of Mrs. Mason and thrived amid the intellectual life of the university town of Pisa.

With her career as an educator frustrated, Mary Wollstonecraft determined to earn her living by her pen, translating from the French and reviewing for Johnson's periodical, the *Analytical Review*. At Joseph Johnson's weekly Tuesday dinners Mary Wollstonecraft met a number of radical thinkers: Thomas Paine, William Blake, William Wordsworth, and most importantly, though at the time he found her somewhat irritating, William Godwin, whom she first met in 1791. With Johnson's liberal circle of intellectuals Mary at last found her rightful place, and soon she found the opportunity to enlist her pen in controversy far beyond the range usually assumed by a female author. Her target was Edmund Burke's conservative *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, written ostensibly as an admonishing letter to Richard Price. Although there were some thirty responses to Burke's rambling diatribe against French democracy, including Thomas Paine's best-selling polemic, *Rights of Man*, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) had the honor of being the first off the press. It is clear, however, that as Wollstonecraft honed her attack on Burke's defence

of landed property over human rights she saw a larger issue on which Burke's entire argument depended: patriarchy. Two years later saw the publication of the work that made her famous and that survives the centuries for the depth and cogency of its analysis, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published by Johnson in 1792.

Late that year, in typically daring fashion, Mary Wollstonecraft travelled to France to witness the French Revolution firsthand and to collect material for her *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, which Johnson published in 1794. While in Paris she met an American ship captain and businessman, Gilbert Imlay, and soon became his lover. Indeed, they lived a romantic existence, for all English, however sympathetic to the regime, were under threat by the Terror, and Imlay first hid Mary in the American embassy during its height, then moved to the port of Le Havre where she managed to pass safely as his wife. In 1794 she had a daughter by Imlay, Fanny Imlay, to whom she was deeply attached. Never one to stick at proper female conventions, Mary with her infant daughter undertook an expedition to further Imlay's business interests, the account of which she published as one of her enduring contributions to English literature, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark* (1796). These letters end with a sense of impending disaster, which was, indeed, the case. Upon her return to London, Wollstonecraft discovered that, while she was working on his behalf, Imlay had deserted her. Distraught, she attempted suicide by jumping from Putney Bridge into the Thames.

Recovering from this near disaster, Mary Wollstonecraft renewed her acquaintance with William Godwin, and, though they kept their separate apartments and circle of friends, they soon became romantically involved. Although both had written against the prevailing notions of matrimony, when it became clear that Mary was pregnant they determined to marry: the wedding was performed in St. Pancras Church on 29 March 1797. On 31 August Mary Wollstonecraft gave birth to a daughter, who was given both their names as an intellectual inheritance, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. The child was robust, but there were complications with the afterbirth, and Mary Wollstonecraft quickly sickened from placental infection and died just eleven days after her daughter's birth, on 10 September.

Deeply attached as the lovers had been, this event left Godwin distraught. His means of recovery was to write a biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to which he added an edition of the remarkable fragments of her last novel, *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. Their publication in 1798 had the ironic effect of furnishing critics of Mary Wollstonecraft's lifestyle with the means by

which to attack not just her but all attempts to liberate women from a conventional patriarchal control. In the end justice prevails. In a later time her attackers have receded to historical footnotes, and Mary Wollstonecraft stands in honour for her significant contributions to English letters and human progress.

### **Context**

France in the 1780s was an undemocratic nation. The French legislature, called the Estates-General, was composed of three classes or "estates": the clergy, the aristocracy, and the commoners. Although, commoners, many of them peasants, made up 98 percent of the country, the clergy and nobility consistently outvoted the commoners. When King Louis XVI summoned the Estates-General to meet in 1789, the commoners argued for representation based on population. The Estates-General rejected their claims, sowing the seeds of the revolution. Peasants in France were often starving and could be imprisoned merely on the word of a nobleman. Many of those unjustly imprisoned were kept in the Bastille, a fortress-like building in the city of Paris. In July 1789 peasants stormed the Bastille, freeing the prisoners. They began attacking the nobility, seeking revenge for years of suffering. In August they adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, an aspirational document similar in some ways to the American Declaration of Independence (1776). In 1791 a constituent national assembly drafted and approved a new constitution. It was guided by some of the more moderate voices in France at that time; it retained the monarchy but granted legislative powers to the new Legislative Assembly.

These events transpired before and during Wollstonecraft's writing of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She viewed the French Revolution as a positive step, an opportunity for the common people of France to claim control of their nation. After its initial publication, Wollstonecraft met Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a French diplomat who was known to have some rather limited views on women's education. She dedicated the second edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to him, in the hope it might inspire him to provide a better education for women in the new France.

After *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft travelled to France and began writing a book about the French Revolution. However, the revolution began to take a more violent direction. Revolutionaries led peasants to execute the king, the queen, and many officials of the former aristocratic government, and it was no longer safe for English citizens

to remain in France. For a time Wollstonecraft pretended to be the wife of her American lover, Captain Imlay. Later, she left France entirely.

Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. At the time women in England faced very few choices. Girls received a limited education. A wealthy family might send their daughter to school, but she would mainly learn skills with which to entertain and entice her future husband. Poorer children of both genders usually received little or no education at all. English universities, such as Oxford or Cambridge, did not permit women to attend. This was not true in all countries; some women in other European countries had the opportunity to attend universities, even becoming respected scientists.

In England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, women had no legal rights. A girl was the property of her father until she married, at which point she became the property of her husband. Careers were not an option for women of good families. While women in poorer families often needed to work to contribute to the household, the work was often unhealthy or occurred in illegal circumstances.

Wollstonecraft's life demonstrated many of the challenges women faced. Her family suffered because of her father's poor financial choices, but no one could stop him because he was the head of the household. She needed to support herself, but her job opportunities were limited to what she described as the "menial" work of a governess or running her own small school, which failed financially. She eventually found work with a radical publisher in London, but few women would have had the qualifications for such work. To maintain her employment Wollstonecraft taught herself several languages to translate texts for her employer. Wollstonecraft drew on personal experience as well as societal attitudes in writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

## **The Enlightenment**

Wollstonecraft was writing near the end of the Enlightenment, which was a period of history that celebrated the rise of rational and science-based thinking. British scientists like Isaac Newton were important contributors to the Enlightenment. This period saw the rise of political theories that celebrated democracy and the common man; Enlightenment ideals shaped the politics of many leaders of the American and French revolutions of the late 18th century. Adherents often rejected involvement in organized religion, though Wollstonecraft did not.

English philosopher John Locke was a major figure in the Enlightenment and a huge influence on Wollstonecraft, though he wrote almost 100 years before the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Locke argued that human beings had certain "natural rights" that humans earned simply by existing. He included life, liberty, and property among those rights, which later inspired American politician Thomas Jefferson to include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in his writing of the Declaration of Independence. In theory natural rights applied to all people, including women; however, in practice women's rights were severely curtailed. Locke emphasized the idea of a "social contract," which argued governments draw their power from the consent of the governed, an idea that would strongly influence the direction of the American and French Revolutions. Wollstonecraft's argument that women should be better represented in government reflects this idea.

Locke's ideas on education also influenced her. He believed the mind is a blank state at birth—a *tabula rasa*. A proper education can fill the brain with the best ideas to produce a productive, moral community of individuals. Wollstonecraft does not specifically mention the *tabula rasa*, but her ideas follow a similar pattern: a woman's mind is a blank slate, and if you do not educate her, you cannot expect her to produce worthwhile, complex ideas.

Wollstonecraft did not fully embrace all Enlightenment thinkers, however. She reserves strong words for French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Rousseau was a controversial and highly influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. Like many Enlightenment thinkers, Rousseau had arguments with organized religion, which Wollstonecraft did not support. Rousseau wrote about the potential for humans to live in a primitive "state of nature," where human altruism and goodness could thrive. Wollstonecraft seems to believe he was advocating an actual return to that primitive state, something most scholars agree he did not support.

Most problematically for Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's views on the education of women are sexist. He wrote a book called *Emile* (1762), in which he describes his view of the appropriate education for a young man named Emile and the young woman, Sophie, he will marry. Although Emile's education is appropriately rigorous for a young man in this ideal society, Rousseau's prescription for Sophie is she should learn how to please her man. Rousseau argues women prefer playing with dolls and learning to sew, so those areas should be the focus for their education rather than abstract, complex topics. Wollstonecraft intensely disagrees with Rousseau's stance on women's role in his ideal society.

Wollstonecraft devotes a portion of her book to responding to ideas, enlightened and otherwise, expressed by other writers. There are a couple of purposes for this strategy. First, because she makes a strong argument about how inadequate most women's education is, she needs to demonstrate her own command of the leading ideas and theories of her time. Second, she wants to place her ideas in the context of other Enlightenment thinkers. Part of her argument to the reader is that a truly enlightened person would not deprive women of their ability to become enlightened, too.

### **Feminism and Sexuality**

Over the years scholars have debated to what extent Wollstonecraft qualifies as a true feminist. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she encourages men to view women as thinking creatures but never explicitly claims women are equal with men. Although she briefly advocates for career options for women, she spends more time addressing how a better education could improve women as wives and mothers. She spends minimal time addressing other sexist standards of the day, including a husband's ability to beat or rape his wife without consequence. She reassures the reader a woman can learn to think without being "masculine."

Wollstonecraft struggles with women's sexuality in the book. She argues that women who are sexually active outside of marriage should not suffer because of it, but she also spends a lot of time addressing the ideas of "modesty." She argues strongly against sensibility, sentimentality, and sensuality—interchangeable terms at that time for feelings and emotions—as the opposite of rational behaviour.

Some of these contradictions appear in feminist writings throughout history. Feminist writers and women in general may be conflicted over the place of love, marriage, and sexuality in a woman's life. For all Wollstonecraft's arguments against sensibility and sexuality, she made very unconventional and emotional choices in her personal life, including relationships that led her to attempt suicide and multiple sexual relationships outside of marriage, behaviours that were scandalous in her time.

Over 200 years after her death, most scholars seem to agree that Wollstonecraft was a feminist in the modern sense of the word, a bold thinker who recognized the ways in which society socializes both boys and girls into specific roles and behaviours and who recommended ways to correct these prejudices.

## Summary

The publication begins with a brief note from Wollstonecraft to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a French statesman, whom she hopes will change his mind about women's education after reading her book. Wollstonecraft introduces her main argument: adult women's faults and deficiencies are the result of the inadequate education they receive.

- **Chapters 1–6**

Wollstonecraft places her argument in the context of societal ideas of the time: the value of liberty and the rejection of "hereditary honours, riches, and monarchy." She claims the differences between women and men are because of the poor methods of teaching that girls receive. While acknowledging the physical superiority of men, she complains the supervision of girls' physical activities are so restrictive that their bodies are even weaker than necessary. She refutes the idea girls naturally prefer dolls and quiet activities.

Wollstonecraft argues women are "degraded" by society through poor education, lack of respect, and limited choices as adults. She objects that English society encourages women to dwell solely on "sensation," emotion, or sentiment rather than logic and abstract reasoning. Responding to other writers who have written about women, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Scottish minister Dr. Fordyce, physician Dr. Gregory, and many others, Wollstonecraft describes what she perceives as the "great advantages" of a good education and decries many supposedly feminine behaviours that she believes are actually the result of the limited education provided for women. A better-educated woman, she argues, would be a better wife and mother.

- **Chapters 7–11**

Wollstonecraft writes about "modesty," which she defines both as sexual modesty and also a personal modesty in which the mental image of one's self is not inflated, but realistic. She insists men and women need both types of modesty.

Discussing women and politics, Wollstonecraft argues women need voices that speak for them in government. While calling on society to treat all working women better, she also suggests that society open a wide variety of careers to women, including medicine, business, and more.

Obsessively strict or tyrannical parents receive special criticism. She argues women would be more reasoned and patient mothers if they received a better education. Wollstonecraft believes children owe some respect and duty to their parents, but that they should not be expected to demonstrate "blind obedience."



- **Chapters 12–13**

Many readers may recognize standards of today's education systems in Wollstonecraft's detailed outline of a reform plan for national education in late 18th century England. She proposes coeducational day schools where all children under nine years old can study together, followed by different educational options for those planning on various careers or those who will pursue higher education.

In the final chapter she criticizes women for foolish choices but reiterates her belief these are the result of ignorance and poor education rather than a fundamental weakness of women. She asks men to either help women obtain a better education or be more tolerant of such weaknesses as visiting con-artists who portray themselves as doctors or being influenced by romance novels.

### **Need for reform of women's education**

Wollstonecraft was a passionate advocate for education reform, and this was one of her best-received ideas. Indeed, many critics focused on the *Vindication* as primarily significant for its writing on education. Wollstonecraft saw the need for co-education; boys and girls would be improved by attending school together. She believed they needed to attend school together from the earliest age, despite gender or class, and have time to develop their bodily and mental strengths. She did advocate a later stratification based upon social class, however. Education reform was particularly important for women since their lack of continuous and substantive education was the most salient reason for what Wollstonecraft identified as their ignorance, indolence, and subordination. Instead, women should be able to study serious subjects and even enter into some professions. Education would allow women to learn how to exercise reason and perfect their virtue. It would result in their becoming better wives and mothers, which would redound to the benefit of society.

### **Categorization of “women's manners”**

This phrase is used several times in the *Vindication*. In chapter three, Wollstonecraft writes, "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. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners" (45). In chapter thirteen she uses the phrase again, writing, "That women at present are by ignorance rendered foolish or vicious, is, I think, not to be disputed; and, that the most salutary effects tending to

improve mankind, might be expected from a REVOLUTION in female manners, appears at least, with a face of probability, to rise out of the observation" (192). She desires that women throw off the bonds men place upon them in terms of rendering them only beautiful, foolish, and useless; she wants them to attain a rational education, develop their reason, perfect their virtue, and embody true modesty that arises from purity of mind and rationality. They should not be a second-class species or mere playthings of men. They should endeavour to attain education, financial independence, some political participation, and autonomy. In contrast, the gendered social system of her day is dangerous and ultimately unfulfilling for women, men, and society as a whole.

### **The unnecessary need for sentimentality**

Wollstonecraft is quite vociferous in her criticism of sensibility. She was disgusted with the silliness of women. This silliness included cultivating a weakness and delicacy of body; delighting in transient pleasures; reading stupid novels and poetry; visiting fortune-tellers and mediums; caring only about one's person and attracting a man; trying to gratify one's vanity; indulging one's emotions and sentiments; preferring rakes and lotharios to men of character; and gossiping. Through such choices, women's minds are rendered pliant and weak, and they become nearly incapable of exercising reason. Women in her time are socialized to be enslaved to their bodies and sexuality. Yet, women's bodies are not primarily for men to act upon, and a woman's mind should not become a soft, underdeveloped mass.