Institutional Learning Management System

for

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ENG-103

FICTIONAL AND NON-FICTIONAL PROSE – 18th AND 19th CENTURY

Module No. 1

Unit 03: Mary Wollstonecraft: ***A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on***

***Political and Moral Subjects***

* 1. **Introduction:**

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects,* published in 1791by Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first works of feminist philosophy, is a potent argument for the worth of women in society and takes on many of the patriarchal ideas of the eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft defends the idea that women have the same fundamental rights as men and also contends that men gain from considering their wives as companions rather than as property. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* continues to be a brave and compelling book touching on topics in women's education.

* 1. **Objectives:**

After going through this unit, the students will be able to:

• learn about the French Revolution in brief

• know and assess the life and works of the author, Mary Wollstonecraft

• develop a conceptual and textual understanding of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

* 1. **About the Author:**

Mary Wollstonecraft was born into an impoverished family on 27 April 1759 in London. She was the eldest daughter and the second child of Elizabeth Dixon. Edward John, Mary Wollstonecraft’s father, was a weaver of handkerchiefs. As their financial situation worsened, the family relocated seven times in ten years. Mary frequently had to shield her mother from her drunken father Edward's violent outbursts. Her relationships with her siblings were tumultuous. She had limited access to formal education but had a lot of assistance from a friend who lived outside of London in Hoxton. This acquaintance had a nice library, and Mary used to spend a lot of time reading through it. During this time, she met Fanny Blood, who was two years older and talented in sewing, watercolour painting, drawing, and the piano. Mary was motivated by her to develop her thoughts through writing.

Wollstonecraft is hailed as a British writer, feminist philosopher, and advocate of women's rights. She wrote novels like *Mary: A Fiction*, treatises, travel accounts, histories of the French Revolution, conduct book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), and children's book *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) within the limited span of her career. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790. However, the most famous work by Wollstonecraft is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

* 1. **Context and Background:**

The French Revolution and the debates it sparked in Britain served as the turbulent backdrop against which *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written. In reaction to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Wollstonecraft entered the debate related to the Revolution for the first time in 1790 with her first book *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. Burke in his essay criticized the viewpoint of many British writers and philosophers who had supported the French Revolution's early phases. In his opinion, a legitimate government was violently overthrown during the French Revolution. He makes it clear that people do not have the right to overthrow their government since civilization is the product of social and political consensus; traditions cannot be continuously questioned which may lead to chaos and anarchy.

It is at this time, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, a French bishop and politician, presented a report *Rapport sur l'instruction publique* to the French National Assembly in 1791 that reaffirmed the prevailing belief that women should only get an education in "the paternal home”. Wollstonecraft authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as a passionate response to this, advocating for gender equality generally and in the sphere of education in particular. Her main contention was that women's lack of access to public education was the only reason they seemed to be less intelligent than males.

William Godwin, a philosopher as well as the author’s husband, claims that Wollstonecraft penned the book rapidly, in just six weeks, with the goal of releasing a second volume. The treatise was written in 1791 and published in the next year, 1792. Wollstonecraft argues that it is crucial for women to have the right and the capacity to support themselves in order to maintain their dignity. She calls for the establishment of a national education system that operates co-ed schools. She dedicated the book to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord with a note, “Having read with great pleasure a pamphlet which you have lately published, I dedicate this volume to you; to induce you to reconsider the subject, and maturely weigh what I have advanced respecting the rights of woman and national education”.

The points made by Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* are expanded upon in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The first book while is about the rights of specific men (British men from the eighteenth century), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is about the rights granted to women in general.

* 1. **Summary:**

The book is divided into thirteen chapters apart from the dedicatory letter to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord and the introduction. At the beginning of her essay, Wollstonecraft declared that she considers man to be her ‘fellow’. She repeatedly emphasized throughout the essay that although males are not necessarily the evil or enemy, their actions are what have led to these deliberate inequities and imbalances between men and women. She highlights that certain men's works throughout history have distorted women's roles and portrayed them as weak and artificial, making them more useless contributors to society. Wollstonecraft also goes into more detail about how males had subtly relegated women to a position of weakness and submission. This, she claimed, was the outcome of a gender-biased attitude of contemporary society in imparting education to the female children of society.

Wollstonecraft focuses particularly on middle-class women in her critique of modern conceptions of women's education and views them as human creatures who have the power to unfold their faculties. She bases her claim that virtue is achieved through knowledge on the idea that virtue is what makes people unique and that reason is what makes people human.

Wollstonecraft disagrees with the conventional wisdom that suggests men and women should pursue different virtues. Although women and men typically have different responsibilities in life, she thinks that both genders should strive for the same ideals. Women, however, are not given enough opportunities to develop their reason and achieve morality because they typically receive informal education. More often than not, they are educated to appease males, preparing them for a brief stage of life- namely, romance and early marriage. Even more so, they lack the skills necessary to create enduring partnerships or provide competent parental care.

According to Wollstonecraft, women are never given the chance to struggle with hardship and so acquire knowledge and morality since they are taught that pleasure is the primary objective of their existence. They are permitted to be led by emotions and delicate senses rather than learning to rely on reason, which does not prepare them to be excellent wives and mothers. They are also particularly vulnerable as a result of the neglect of their education if they become widowed or are seduced and ‘ruined’ by a man, circumstances in which they are left with no way to sustain themselves financially.

In this chapter, Wollstonecraft specifically criticizes a number of authors from the eighteenth century like Rousseau, Gregory, and Fordyce who wrote about women's education. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who claims that women only need an education insofar as it equips them to serve males, is the subject of her most in-depth criticism. He believes that a woman's entire purpose in life is to please males, especially her husband. Men are advised by Rousseau to be aggressive and domineering with their wives. Otherwise, the women could become arrogant and start acting as though they are in charge. Rousseau continues by advocating for young girls to learn self-control. The only way a young woman may mature into a lady is by restraining her yearning. Wollstonecraft sternly rejects these opinions and points out all the ways that women could benefit society more if they received an education. They could converse more effectively with their husbands and provide their kids with a better education. She also dismisses Gregory's *Legacy to His Daughters* which advises the girls to hide their knowledge. He writes that a woman should never give a man the impression that she is smarter than him. But according to Wollstonecraft, women should develop their intelligence and then demonstrate it to the rest of the world. Men need to grow up and become better people to compete with women and women should not try to hide their knowledge. Wollstonecraft also criticizes Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women* which embargos formal education for women. She concludes this chapter by mentioning that because women have not been educated to discriminate between reason and existing prejudices, they have accepted many of these repressive standards. She also discusses the value of early impressions, the need for humility in both sexes and the difference between virtue and reputation.

She highlights the significance of early associations in the formation of character, noting that erroneous assumptions and early impressions are not nuanced or moderated in women. Girls start to favour rakes over respectable men. In her discussion of modesty, Wollstonecraft clarifies that it differs from humility. The most modest ladies are those who use reason the most. Women's modesty can only get better as their bodies get stronger and their thoughts get bigger through active endeavours. However, when reputation is promoted as the most important thing women should maintain, their morals are compromised. Men make women bear the responsibility of maintaining chastity, but Wollstonecraft thinks, men too themselves must practice chastity.

In addition to advocating for more financial freedom for women, Wollstonecraft also emphasizes the need for civic engagement and public service for women which will help them of being good citizens in addition to being good parents. Additionally, according to Wollstonecraft, parents are incredibly self-centred when it comes to their children because, once they have children, they stop caring about anyone else in the world.

According to Wollstonecraft, a parent's love for their kids is really only a blind type of self-obsession. Mary calls the parents tyrants who expect mindless submission from their children. A good mother must be able to think independently and have some awareness of her parenting style.

Wollstonecraft is adamant that the government should establish some kind of public education system where kids from various backgrounds can interact and study together. Private schools, by their very nature, teach kids to think of themselves as different from the kids who cannot afford to go, which is why Wollstonecraft disapproves of them. She disapproves of home-schooling as well since it might make a kid feel that they are the centre of the universe in their absence. According to Wollstonecraft, males and girls should go to the same schools. Wollstonecraft is of the opinion that socializing men and women together from a young age is the only way to promote equality and respect among them.

Finally, Wollstonecraft urges a "revolution" for women, affirming that their inferior status results from men's biases rather than any innate weakness. Once women are given the freedom to grow in their comprehension and affection, this will be demonstrated. Women will have more independence as rational beings with human souls when they are liberated from ignorance, which will only be to society's advantage.

* 1. **Analysis of the Major Themes:**

Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* creates a unique discourse in which she challenges the notion that women were irrational beings who were merely slaves to their impulses. Mary Wollstonecraft maintained that anyone who held such beliefs should provide evidence for their claims. She explained how parents raised their daughters to be submissive and domesticated. She argued that if girls were given the same possibilities as boys in terms of education and training, it would be clear that they were rational beings. Just like males, women may pursue jobs and enter the workforce. In addition to advocating for females to have the same type of education as boys, Mary Wollstonecraft went one step further and suggested that girls and boys be educated together, which was even more extreme than the previous ideas put forth. Wollstonecraft thought that education might be the key to women's suffrage. She claims that there is no other basis for a person's independence of character but the use of their understanding. She strongly believes that rather than becoming subservient slaves of opinion, women should submit entirely to the authority of reason. She insisted that major topics like reading, writing, math, botany, natural history, and moral philosophy should be taught to women. She also advised engaging in arduous activity to assist energize the intellect. Mary Wollstonecraft vigorously and critically criticizes the attitude of the males who prefer women's emotions to their common sense and reason which highlights the predominance of the patriarchal mindset. She contends that for a marriage to succeed, the husband and wife must respect one another as friends or companions.

She makes a comment on modesty and asserts that there is a significant distinction between the two and that they are not interchangeable. She makes the connection between modesty and reason, arguing that the most modest women are those who utilize reason the most and that this can only happen when such women are reasonably powerful, both physically and mentally. Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft also promotes women's economic independence. She instructs women to take on more duties so they may be good citizens and good mothers, and calls for them to take on a more active role in society.

* 1. **Conclusion:**

*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft develops a different discursive opening for the voices of women by challenging and shifting the positions of power in discursive spaces. This essay emerges discursively as a powerfully visible form of protest literature, serving as a starting point to investigate the emancipatory potential of conversation. This book stands as a ground-breaking work of literature that continues to be relevant in today's feminism and human rights movements.

* 1. **Self-Assessment:**

1. How does Wollstonecraft criticize the hypocrisy of the male-dominated society in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*?
2. Why does Wollstonecraft think education is central to the rights of women?
3. What are Wollstonecraft's views on motherhood?
4. Comment on Wollstonecraft’s views on National Education.
5. Why does Wollstonecraft think education is central to the rights of women?
6. How does Wollstonecraft criticize male notions of virtue?
   1. **Learning Extensions:**

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