



## Mary Wollstonecraft's Reflection on Life and Society: A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

Anasuya Adhikari<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Birbal Saha<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, India

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0388-3545, Email: [anasuyaajpg@gmail.com](mailto:anasuyaajpg@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, India

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4103-6283, Email: [birbalsaha@gmail.com](mailto:birbalsaha@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

In this research work we have examined *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft. The reflection aims to convey the conflict between revolt and conformity that permeates the author's existence. Mary Wollstonecraft's personal struggles as a woman in a patriarchal society shaped her viewpoint and motivated her to speak out for other women. In an attempt to reach her modern audience, Wollstonecraft wrote this text in conventional language even as it pushed the limits of customary thinking. Wollstonecraft battled the traditional beliefs she was raised with in England throughout her writing career and her life, as well as those she adopted in response to her surroundings, primarily in France during her protracted relationships and the French Revolution. This contradiction, which Wollstonecraft herself identifies as a root cause of women's wastefulness as a valuable resource in society, is tied to her own conflict between compliance and revolt. She developed a tension as a result of this fight that is evident in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

**Keywords:** Mary Wollstonecraft, Society, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, The French Revolution, Education

### Introduction

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was driven by her experiences of discrimination as a young woman growing up in a patriarchal society to write *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. When Mary Wollstonecraft was a young woman, she took on roles that were customarily filled by women, especially those from low-income backgrounds. These occupations provide as an illustration of the anticipated conformity Mary Wollstonecraft faced throughout her life. One may argue that her experiences with conformity fuelled the intensity with which she wrote this poem. However, Mary Wollstonecraft lived a life that frequently defied convention as she battled to survive in a patriarchal society (Abbey, 1990) and left behind the traditional thoughts for women (Abrams, 2002). It is possible to argue that she led a revolutionary life or at the very least toyed with rebellion, obfuscating the distinction between her private and public selves. Like many others of her era, she discovered that living a life of conformity only resulted in oppression, yet she was never truly free even when she rebelled, “*It is a melancholy truth; yet such is the blessed effect of civilization! The most respectable women are the most oppressed*” (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 287). Her cause was very similar as we have seen in Indian women like Savitribai Phule and Durgabai Deshmukh (Adhikari & Saha, 2021b) and women in the west like Nel Noddings (Adhikari & Saha, 2021a, 2023).

Although she had no intention of altering the course of history, her writing – particularly *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – left a lasting impression. We have examined several statements in this work that imply a tension between conformity and rebellion and that reflect both principles as examples of how they coexist within this work as well as within her life. Despite being vocal in her support of women's rights and national education, Mary Wollstonecraft was also aware of her place as a woman in a patriarchal culture and used tactful language to effectively express her beliefs. Her opinions were deemed revolutionary at the time since they contradicted local laws and customs (Abbey, 2014). To give her opinions some chance of being heard, she did, however, conform in how she expressed her convictions. “*Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; 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*” (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 135). She began by acknowledging that men were stronger than women before stating that women should, “*endeavor to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness...*” (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 111). This piece demonstrates the coexistence of rebellion and compliance. A thorough appreciation of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the era in which it was written, and Mary Wollstonecraft as the author all depend on an understanding of the roles that conformity and rebellion play in the book.

## A Closer Look at Wollstonecraft's Life and its Influence on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Understanding the experiences of inequity Mary Wollstonecraft faced as a woman in a patriarchal society throughout her life is necessary to comprehend the passion with which she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her work reflects the battle between revolt and conformity that was formed within her due to these events and the social norms of the period, an affirmation of women's rights (Adhikari & Saha, 2022b; 2022c). The conflict between conformity and rebellion - the idealism she advocated and the reality of her time - becomes evident when one is aware of Mary Wollstonecraft's life choices and background. The groundwork for the friction Mary Wollstonecraft would later experience between her reluctance to follow social norms and the pressure she felt to act in accordance with them was laid during her early years (Adhikari & Saha, 2022e). It is often known that Mary Wollstonecraft's mother gave her eldest brother Ned a lot of love and devotion while paying little attention to Mary or her younger siblings. As such, "*embitter and fuel Mary's life*" (Todd, 1976, 721). She penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and writes "*A great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms, around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents...*" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 293).

Her perceptions of the roles of men and women in society were shaped by the way her mother treated her and the relationship she saw between her parents. Janet Todd emphasises that, "*the pains of marriage were engraved on Mary's mind in this demeaning tie of father-tyrant and mother slave, and the authority this mother naturally had over her was tainted by the vision of improper submission*" (Todd, 2010, 5). Wollstonecraft would be profoundly impacted by this, and as an adult, she believed passionately 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*" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 224). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft devoted most of her time to discussing the subject of women's roles in male-female relationships and man's power over them (Adhikari & Saha, 2022d). Her upbringing instilled in her the values of power and love, but also marriage and despotism. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft acknowledged that "*...men, for whom we are told women were made, have too much occupied the thoughts of women; and this association has so entangled love with all their motives of action...when a sense of duty, or fear, or shame, obliges them to restrain this pampered desire of pleasing beyond certain lengths, too far for delicacy...they become abject woes, and fond slaves*" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 249).

In actuality, Wollstonecraft's relationship - or lack thereof - with the two significant males in her early life, her father and elder brother, was what initially stoked her drive for 'independence' while simultaneously feeding her feelings of neediness and insecurity. These are all sensitive issues pertaining to her conflict between defiance and conformity (Adhikari et al. 2023). Later on, Wollstonecraft would establish a strong emotional and professional bond with publisher Joseph Johnson, whom she would come to refer to as her father and brother. She would have a strong and enduring personal and professional relationship with Johnson for the remainder of her life. Joseph Johnson and Wollstonecraft had a close relationship since Johnson recruited Wollstonecraft to work on his new *Analytical Review*, and as Mary Waters noted, "*Wollstonecraft's work for Johnson was central to her own intellectual growth; everything that she read and wrote contributed to her fund of knowledge and her cognitive training, laying the groundwork for the books for which she is best remembered*" (416).

She worked hard for Johnson, producing seven publications in three years (Franklin, 2004). But Johnson, who was also her father and employer, would frequently advance her money to assist her in repaying her creditors for the quality of work she produced. Even before *Vindication* was published, Caroline Franklin referred to Wollstonecraft as a 'pioneer for her generation,' not so much because she was a professional writer as because she had no other means of support (Franklin, 2004, 65). And as Franklin notes, even for men at the time, this was a challenging feat. In her book *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, Barbara Taylor makes the argument that Wollstonecraft gradually ceased to be 'dependent' on Johnson and that his 'patronage' more closely resembled 'collegiality' (Franklin, 2004, 41). In addition to being a "*very commercial partnership with real financial advantage to both sides,*" Taylor characterised their connection as a "*very personal partnership*" (Franklin, 2004, 42). For a young woman, he provided a stability she had never experienced. The erratic and unpleasant atmosphere Wollstonecraft encountered at home was partly influenced by the multiple moves she and her family endured throughout her early years.

During a period when women's education lagged behind men's, Wollstonecraft's educational attainment was essentially sporadic (Adhikari & Saha, 2022a). Her experience was not unusual, though. She mentioned how women's education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 'cramped' their comprehension and provided "*only a disorderly kind of education,*" referring to the kind of education provided to them (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 130). Her own education consisted of attending a Yorkshire day school as a child, where she picked up skills like sewing, basic arithmetic, and enough reading to please a spouse. In his essay, *Mary Wollstonecraft on Education*, Alan Richardson believes that Wollstonecraft recognised the "*history of female education as a virtual conspiracy of male educators and writers seeking to render women more weak and less rational than they would otherwise have become*" (Richardson, 2002, 25), limiting them (women) to the home as a result. Richardson continues by emphasising the need of 'dominant social manners and institutions' for everyone's 'education,' but especially for youngsters. When it came to Mary Wollstonecraft's acquaintance Jane Arden, this was undoubtedly the case. Wollstonecraft would frequently study books with Arden and go to her father's lectures after they first met; Arden's father was a 'self-styled' scientist and philosopher. Wollstonecraft cherished the Arden home's scholarly ambiance. She would later receive tutoring from a neighbour who exposed her to writers and 'well-thought of works,' including Milton, Locke, and Shakespeare. Additionally, she would see Fanny Blood, a personal friend who assisted Wollstonecraft with grammar and helped her arrange her thoughts in her work.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, these early introductions to intellectual concepts proved that education has a lasting impact on a person's character. "*...there is a habitual association of ideas, that grows 'with our growth,' which has a great effect on the moral character of mankind; and by which a turn is given to the mind that commonly remains throughout life*" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 245). According to this theory, Mary Wollstonecraft was a voracious learner who never stopped studying. Her desire for knowledge enabled her to make a living and lead an independent life in a patriarchal society (Adhikari &

Saha, 2022d). Mary Wollstonecraft encountered many religious Dissenters and individuals who were enthusiastic about social change when she founded a school for girls in the Newington Green neighbourhood as an adult. One such individual was Dr. Richard Price, a Unitarian clergyman and philosopher who was regarded as a 'celebrity' by Dissenters. Additionally, Wollstonecraft wrote her first book of instruction at Newington Green, which Joseph Johnson eventually published. Mary Wollstonecraft's writing career began at this point. Initially, her writing was intended to support her salary. She did, however, move to London to pursue her next course of action and become a professional writer after failing in her attempts as a teacher and tutor. This put Wollstonecraft on a path that would challenge disobedience with conformity.

Apart from the impact on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of Wollstonecraft's early life, the French Revolution also had an effect on her. The French Revolution was perceived as a fight for personal freedom against an oppressive monarchy, and it led to numerous political conversations among London's literary elite about a wide range of contentious issues. Joseph Johnson was someone Mary Wollstonecraft had met and was now employed, since he was regarded as a significant character in the London "intelligentsia and with his 'hospitable mansion'...serving as his principle venue for the literary avant garde" (Taylor, 2003), she had numerous conversations about politics and philosophy on evenings with people like Thomas Paine, James Fordyce, William Cowper, and Henry Fuseli, to mention a few. According to Tom Furniss' essay, *Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution*, Wollstonecraft and her London companions viewed the French Revolution as a signpost to the possibility of a new era in social and political interactions. They enthusiastically welcomed the change and urged Britain to follow suit in order to "complete the political process that had begun in England's so-called Glorious Revolution" (Furniss, 2006, 59).

Burke's essay sparked a lot of reactions, but one of the earliest ones to be published was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, in a *Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Furniss, 2006, 60). A month after Burke's *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* was released. It was released under pseudonym, and it was so well received that Johnson quickly released a second edition. However, literary critics heavily criticised Wollstonecraft herself for the second edition, telling her not to 'meddle in men's affairs' (Conger, 1994, 97). *Critical Review* gave "carping criticism - with a chivalrous apology for so addressing a woman," while *Gentlemen's Magazine* declared it 'ridiculous' that a woman would have anything worthwhile to say about the rights of man (Conger, 1994, 97). However, it should come as no surprise that *The Analytical Review* published eulogies for Wollstonecraft's book. Wollstonecraft's interactions with Johnson's social circle and her exposure to the wide range of literature he distributes "not only completed Wollstonecraft's education but gave her the intellectual cutting edge to carve out her own originality" (Franklin, 2004, 60).

She discovered her voice with Joseph Johnson's support and protection. She argued against the notion that women were irrational beings who were just slaves to their desires in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, ignorance simply serves to reinforce the stereotype of women as illogical people. She claimed that "men...act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 127). She viewed as disreputable the method by which parents raised their daughters to be submissive and domesticated, and she expanded Rousseau's views about men's education to women: "...the most perfect education...is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart..." (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 129). According to her, girls would demonstrate that they were rational beings and that there was no justification for not granting them the same possibilities as males in terms of education and training if they were encouraged to develop their minds from a young age. Mary Wollstonecraft went one step further and suggested that girls and boys receive the same kind of education, which was much more radical than anything that had before been suggested.

Many educational philosophers of the era simply dismissed the concept of coeducational education as absurd. It was common to argue that women would lose any influence they had over their husbands if they become educated and independent individuals rather than submissive creatures (Saha & Adhikari, 2023). Mary Wollstonecraft was emphatic that women were to be treated as "...more respectable members of society, and discharge the important duties of life by the light of their reason" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 179). She insisted that it was absurd to think that educated women would lose their 'power' over society's men. "This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 179). She was adamant that women should have the freedom to use their capacity for reason and make significant contributions to society. Mary Wollstonecraft became increasingly assured of her 'place in the world' and that confidence, together with the "philosophical idealism of the early phase of the French Revolution" (Furniss, 2006, 62) gave her the confidence to write on the unfair treatment of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "What Wollstonecraft gained from her radical friends was not just a set of doctrines but a way of life in which feeling and intellect gained social expression" (Jones, 2002, 43).

By the time she penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she had seen first-hand the injustices that come with being a woman in a patriarchal society; she had travelled and experienced sights that few women in her era would ever see; she had also fallen in love and been rejected by lovers; she had provided for her family and herself; she had achieved some success as a writer and earned the respect of both men and women in her profession. Given that she was not like most women in her era, she had led a revolutionary life. Mary Wollstonecraft discovered how to live in both her public and private spheres while balancing rebellion and conformity. She believed she was fully prepared to write about the state of women and provide solutions to the issues that were, in her opinion, currently facing them. Her spirit was powerful. "Thanks to that Being who impressed them [those imaginings of a better way of life for her "fellow creatures"] on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till, becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view, with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex" (Wollstonecraft, 2010, 147). Although she adhered to the conventional idea of thanking that 'Being' for her power and talent, she wrote in a defiant manner. Because she understood how men "flatter[s] woman into a posture of weakness, then declares her weak by nature (or according to God's will), and accordingly denies her access to 'manly' pursuits for a strong mind, she refused to fall for men's language of sensibility" (Conger, 1994, 114). Mary Wollstonecraft had solidified her position in society with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, "...opinion became emancipated from the bonds of economic dependence" (Habermas 33). Most of the time, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was warmly received, and many other strong-willed women looked up to Wollstonecraft's public presence.

---

## Conclusion

The conflict that most women in Wollstonecraft's day faced between the public and private domains is another facet of this study. This contradiction, which Wollstonecraft herself identifies as a root cause of women's wastefulness as a valuable resource in society, is tied to her own conflict between compliance and revolt. Wollstonecraft battled the conventional ideals she was raised with and the ones she adopted in reaction to her circumstances throughout her writing career and life. She developed a tension as a result of this fight that is evident in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Lastly, the conclusion encapsulates Wollstonecraft's concerns regarding her writing career as well as the wider ramifications of that work for women in her era. She opened up a conversation on women's roles in society by using the power of her words.

---

## References

1. Abbey, R. (1999). Marriage as Friendship in the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft. *Hypathia*, 14(3), 78-95.
2. Abbey, R. (2014). Are Women Human? Wollstonecraft's Defense of Rights for Women. In E. Botting (Ed.), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 229-245). New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Abrams, L. (2002). *Making of modern woman. Europe 1789-1917*. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited.
4. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2023). The Three Epochs of Education: Outlining Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Montessori and Nel Noddings. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 10 (1), 698-703.
5. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2022a). Contouring Education: Ruminating Mary Wollstonecraft's Thoughts. *IAR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(4), 12-17.
6. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2022b). The feminist responses to Mary Wollstonecraft: A reading. *EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)*, 7(9), 32-38.
7. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2022c). Deconstructing Mary Wollstonecraft: Reconstructing Modern Woman. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*. 11(7(5)), 90-94.
8. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2022d). The Context of Sexuality in Mary Wollstonecraft. *Vidyawarta: Peer Reviewed International Journal*. 47(09), 176-187.
9. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2022e). The Different Voices of a Feminist: A Cogitation on Mary Wollstonecraft. *The Prism: A Peer-Reviewed Journal*, 14, 239-248.
10. Adhikari, A., Karim, M.R., Saha, B., & Sen, S. (2023). Trauma Theory in Mary Wollstonecraft's Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman, *Conhecimento & Diversidade*. 15(37), 146-161.
11. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2021a). Life, Works and Philosophy of Nel Noddings. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, 10(8(2)), 61-64.
12. Adhikari, A., & Saha, B. (2021b). Lesser known Indian Women Educators and Reformers. *International Journal of Research and Review*, 8(9), 442-447.
13. Almassi, B. (2022). *Masculinity in Early Feminist Philosophy*. In: Nontoxic: Masculinity, Allyship, and Feminist Philosophy. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
14. Botting, E. H. (2016). *Theories of Human Development: Wollstonecraft and Mill on Sex, Gender and Education*. Wollstonecraft, Mill and Women's Human Rights. Yale University Press.
15. Chris, J. (2002). *The Vindications and their political tradition*. The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft. Ed. Claudia L. Johnson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 42-58.
16. Conger, S. M. (1994). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press
17. Falco, M. (1996). *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Edited by Maria J. Falco. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
18. Ferguson, S. (1999). *The Radical Ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft*. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 32(3), 427-450.
19. Franklin, C. (2004). *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan. UK.
20. Furniss, T. (2006). *Mary Wollstonecraft's French Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
21. Habermas, J. (1996). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. MIT Boston.
22. Howard, C. (2004). Wollstonecraft's Thoughts on Slavery and Corruption. *The Eighteenth Century*, 45(1), 61- 86.

23. Hutner, H. (1999). Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft by Gary Kelly; Feminist Interpretations of Mary Wollstonecraft by Maria J. Falco; Wollstonecraft's Daughters: Womanhood in England and France, 1780-1920 by Clarissa Campbell Orr  
Review by: Heidi Hutner. *Signs*, 24(3), 788-792.
24. Neill, A. (2006). *Civilization and the Rights of Woman: Liberty and captivity in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft*. Routledge.
25. Richardson, A. (2002). *Mary Wollstonecraft on Education*. Cambridge University Press.
26. Saha, B. & Adhikari, A. (2023). Educational Philosophy and Practices of Mary Wollstonecraft and Nel Noddings. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, 4(10), 664-667.
27. Stone, O. M. (1972). The Status of Women in Great Britain. *The American Journal of Comparative Law*. 20(4), 591-621.
28. Taylor, B. (2003). *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
29. Todd, J. M. (1976). The Biographies of Mary Wollstonecraft. *Signs*, 1(3). 721-734.
30. Waters, M. A. (2004). "The First of a New Genus": Mary Wollstonecraft as a Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37(3), 415-434.
31. Wollstonecraft, M. (2010). *A Vindication of the rights of woman: with strictures on political and moral subjects*. The Floating press.