

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE *VINDICATION OF  
THE RIGHTS OW WOMAN*: POSTMODERN FEMINISM  
vs. MASCULINE ENLIGHTENMENT



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This paper aims to show how Mary Wollstonecraft's work *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), despite its obvious humanist adherence, nevertheless transcends the main ethical and political proposals of the eighteenth-century liberal humanism. Her work partakes simultaneously of two ideological strands: on the one hand, as the first articulate feminist text in the Anglo-American context; on the other hand, as an ethical system subjected to the main tenets of the Enlightenment. Given that the echoes of the socio-political upheavals of the French Revolution reached England immediately, Wollstonecraft felt prompted to express her own ideas about the prospective future awaiting women in a reformed society. Wollstonecraft's essay draws partly on Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1762) and partly on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790). Her work, however, suggests the consideration of a theoretical standpoint that was absent from the above-mentioned authors' works: the belief that women too could have access to a rational understanding of the world. The strength of the English writer's text lies in the fact that her arguments for female emancipation have nowadays as much relevance as they had in her own time. The way in which Wollstonecraft's thought surmounts the male theoretical perspective typical of liberal humanism provides an obvious link between her essentially proto-feminist poetics and the current postmodern feminist theory.

Several critics have highlighted the ideological link between feminist discourses and «those of Enlightened modernity and its models of reason, justice and autonomous subjectivity as universal categories» (Waugh, 1992: 189). There are, however, certain limits on the confluence of both systems of thought. The task of feminist criticism in the last three decades has been precisely that of showing how feminist hermeneutics and epistemology defy the masculinist principles of the Enlightenment project. As Patricia Waugh puts it:

Simply in articulating issues of sexual difference, the very existence of feminist discourses weakens the rootedness of Enlightenment thought in the principle of sameness; it exposes the ways in which this 'universal' principle is contradicted by Enlightenment's construction of a public/private split which consigns women to the 'private' realm of feeling, domesticity, the body, in order to clarify a public realm of reason as masculine. (1992: 189)

In the wake of Poststructuralism, feminist lines of thought have emerged which draw attention to the gendered bias present in the philosophical configuration of Modernity. Postmodern feminist thinkers have thus recast the story of human rights from a feminine perspective, breaking out of the constraints imposed by masculine notions about woman's subjective and social condition. It is within this critical milieu that Wollstonecraft's work *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* achieves renewed strength and gains a sharper insight into the feminist debate of our time. Twentieth century thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Jane

Flax, Patricia Waugh, Alice Jardine, Joanna Hodge, even writers such as Virginia Woolf or poets such as Adrienne Rich, arguably owe a debt to the English author's rendering of the feminine predicament in the eighteenth century —a predicament which in many respects parallels our own. Wollstonecraft's proposals and analyses go far beyond the theoretical principles of Enlightenment and in this respect her text has a bearing on some postmodern strain in current feminism.

Basically, the resonance of Wollstonecraft's ideology with postmodern feminism makes itself manifest in the calling into question of a social order that fails to account for the rights and capabilities of female human beings. As she states:

To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments have been brought forward to prove, that the two sexes, in the acquirement of virtue, ought to aim at attaining a very different character; or, to speak explicitly, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue... If ... women are not a swarm of ephemeron triflers, why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence?<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis is placed on the meagre education available to women at the time. Readers are made aware of the pervasiveness of this notion from the outset. The English writer engages in the task of offering sufficient proof of women's rationality. Hence Wollstonecraft's belief that a proper education, a resourceful training of the mind, would enable women to accomplish a virtuous and sound positioning in society. The only male precedence over women she admits is the physical one. As for any other difference between the sexes she makes no allowances. She resorts, then, to an adequate education for women as the major argument in her plea for feminine improvement and self-fulfilment. As she puts it:

One cause of [women's] barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on the subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. (79)

Wollstonecraft accuses women of indirect compliance with the very system that oppresses them. Women's self-effacement within this male designed system of education is another element she highlights in her *Vindication*. Implicitly she took issue with such contemporary thinkers as Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Carter and Hannah More, who willingly adopted and accepted masculine discourses on women's spiritual and intellectual inferiority. Wollstonecraft committed herself to making women see that they could use reason as well as men could, and rejected the feminine mystique put forward in male treatises of the time such as James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), John Gregory's *Father's Legacy to His Daughter* (1774) and, needless to say, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), who «have contributed to render women [more] artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been...» (103). Jane Moore remarks in this respect:

The nascent feminist interests of [the *Vindication*] result in a call to women to resist identification with dominant masculine assumptions on what it means to be a woman. This involves rejecting what the *Vindication* pinpoints as an artificial literary rhetoric of femininity and identifying instead with a philosophical rational discourse... (1989: 158)

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (1792), p. 100. I am using the Penguin edition of 1986. Introduced and edited by Miriam Brody. All quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will be indicated at the end of the cited text.

Consonant with the ethical modern doctrine on humankind, Wollstonecraft prides herself on advocating the use of reason for women. The constant allusion to reason makes her text worthy of inclusion in the Enlightenment poetics, but she poses a challenge to patriarchal assumptions about women's subjectivity when subscribing to the necessity of an intellectual training for women. So as to be more explicit about her concerns, Wollstonecraft reviews the type of education girls receive as a foil to the one boys get:

In the present state of society a little learning is required to support the character of a gentleman, and boys are obliged to submit to a few years of discipline. But in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinated to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment. (105)

Wollstonecraft encourages women, so to speak, to use their intellectual energy and warns against the allure of romantic love and useless beauty. As Jane Moore suggests: «The *Vindication* proposes that in order to return to the state where reason naturally reigns, women must throw off the artificial trappings —and tropings— of an unnatural culturally constituted femininity» (1989: 162). Beneath the dismissal of the constant cultivation of the body required of women lies the critical commentary implicit in the *Vindication* about the rigid social division of the sexes. In other words, this text epitomizes the first written argumentation denouncing the gendered, and for that matter, unjust organization of society. Wollstonecraft understood the way in which gender relations are presented as natural, but actually constitute a relation of power and domination. The configuration of women's sexuality as the negative Other to men's rationality is one of the elements that makes possible patriarchal victimization of women in our society. Obviously, dichotomies such as mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, day/night, activity/passivity, logos/pathos revert to the ultimate and basic dualism of man/woman. They lie at the heart of modern ethics and politics as set up by freethinkers like Voltaire or Rousseau. Wollstonecraft's early realization of this fact provides another link with the postmodern task of challenging the axiological dimension accorded to the elements that make up the above-mentioned dualisms. That is to say, the positive, active and rational conditions are granted to men; the opposite qualities are attributed to women. The work of the British author subverts the extant binarism of gender difference present in all eighteenth century philosophical, political and ethical constructions. In a similar vein, postmodern feminists have tried to rebut the masculine claim that identifies women with the emotional, with sexuality, with the material side of life. The body of women constitutes the central point in women's subordination. Their reproductive capacity has historically formed the staple of patriarchal philosophical and actual denigration of women. American critic Susan Bordo states clearly:

[...] neither Foucault nor any other poststructuralist thinker discovered or invented the 'seminal idea' that the 'definition and shaping' of the body is the 'the focal point for struggles over the shape of power'. That was discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its recent marriage with poststructuralism -as far back, indeed, as Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 description of the production of the 'docile body' of the domesticated woman of privilege. (1993: 185)

The body of women as the surface on which male culture and power relations are inscribed is what, according to Bordo, Wollstonecraft herself had envisioned so long ago. The micro-relations of power, to use the Foucauldian phrase, come fully into view when we analyse the discursive conceptualization of the body of women as impure, low, weak, passive and evil. This idea is also present, though in embryonic form, in the work of other proto-feminist thinkers such as Gabrielle Suchon and Olympe des Gouges, who, along

with the English author, belong in that early tradition of feminist advocacy for women's emancipation. We thus deem Wollstonecraft as the linking figure in this feminist line that, evolving from the seventeenth century —Gabrielle Suchon published her *Traité de la moral et de la politique* in 1693— has addressed similar notions to those postulated by post-modern feminism on the sexual base of women's oppression. As Cora Kaplan asserts:

The foregrounding of female sexuality as the source of women's subordination is the element that most obviously links Wollstonecraft's analysis with radical and revolutionary feminism in the distinct but linked tendencies that have developed in Britain, France and the United States over the last fourteen years. (1986: 51)

Wollstonecraft obviously deserves the credit for having been the first woman thinker in posing the issue of women's subordination in terms of gender, or, so to speak, in using gender as a category of analysis, thus suspending patriarchal discourses on the essential and immanent weakness of female subjectivity and rationality.

The English writer's main interest throughout the book is bound up with improving the lives of women in her time. She deplored the confinement of women to a sedentary and cloistered life, in which both their bodies and minds are prevented from developing in a «natural» and «rational» way. She was directly at odds with Rousseau, who had stated that women had a natural tendency to be occupied with dolls, clothing, romance, etc., and that, accordingly, their secondary place in society and subjection to patriarchal order was something that should be taken as read. According to the French thinker, women's deep self is immanently attached to frivolous and trivial business like provoking men, making up and indulging in useless talk all day. Wollstonecraft's point is that the lack of an efficient and complete training in useful matters for life is what renders women emotional and weak creatures, not their nature. The English writer takes up, then, an anti-essentialist position and argues for the mutability of manners and morals. In line with this she asserts that «... it cannot be demonstrated that woman is essentially inferior to man because she has always been subjugated» (122). To cultivate the art of dissimulation, to be frivolous and coquettish, etc., are self-imposed skills that women deploy in order to keep their safe but unenviable position within the patriarchal status quo. Wollstonecraft insists on reason and autonomy for women on the grounds that women are able to think and work too if they are given the chance and the right means. This premise, as simple and sound as it is, sparked off a scandal. Wollstonecraft represents a clear example of «ad feminam»<sup>2</sup> criticism. That is to say, her philosophy was judged untenable, subversive and simply wrong just because her life was deemed unconventional and licentious. Horace Walpole's famous label «the hyena in petticoats» to refer to Wollstonecraft testifies to this.

Feminist critics have also foregrounded the universal nature of Wollstonecraft's ethical project. Her work affords a remarkable parallel to the Enlightened commitment to fight for social justice. In the light of the wider philosophical context of Cartesian paradigms she subordinates the progress of humankind to the change in the condition of women, since it is not reasonable to maintain a social system in which half of the species remains in slavery: «I ... will venture to assert that till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks»

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<sup>2</sup> I have taken this term from Adrienne Rich's poem «Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law» (section 3), where she plays with the conventional phrase «ad hominem» and turns it into «ad feminam», thus pointing out the masculine bias of language itself. Adrienne Rich, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, New York: Norton, 1963, p. 22.

(126). This universalizing standpoint resembles the one most postmodern feminists adopt about improving the world we inhabit. In this view, Wollstonecraft's proposals and ideology are still worthy of consideration and need reappraisal. Her contention for a change in female education involves the rejection of part of the Modern revolutionary scheme, for as Joanna Hodge remarks «women do not fit into the mould of subjectivity constructed in the philosophy of modernity, because women are not encouraged to assert autonomy and to assert a capacity for self determination» (1989: 101). Wollstonecraft's thinking regarding the woman question is remarkably logical and cogent in keeping with the liberal creed: if human beings are to use and apply reason to social and political matters in order to establish the principles of natural right and set up the conditions to construct an egalitarian society, the situation of women must be reviewed. In other words, if Enlightenment thinkers don't engage in giving the same legal and social status to women, as befits eighteenth century advocates of freethinking, the significance of the Modern project will be missed. The discrepancy between civilization as it is and the possibility of an improved society is what makes Wollstonecraft assert that:

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess that either Nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. (79)

The actual limitations of the Enlightened tenets are put forward when we come close to seeing how modern humanist philosophy does not include women. As Wollstonecraft herself puts it: «Men, indeed, appear to me to 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» (101). In view of this incoherency we have to conclude that the liberal praxis lacked consistency in Wollstonecraft's time and still does in our own. Postmodern feminism has attempted to expose the weaknesses peculiar to Western philosophical knowledge of human rights, with its failure to include marginalized social groups. According to Bidy Martin: «... feminist analyses demonstrate ever more convincingly that women's silence and exclusion from struggles over representation have been the condition of possibility for humanist thought: the position of woman has indeed been that of an internal exclusion within Western culture ... (1988: 13). The exclusion of women from the modern plan represents a significant incongruity at a theoretical level. Wollstonecraft herself raised the suspicion that women were not going to be treated on equal terms with men. Wollstonecraft's text has not lost a whit of its strength and relevance for contemporary women. If universal givens such as equality, liberty and progress constituted in the eighteenth century the theoretical symbols of a better future still to come, nowadays they keep representing the basic principles to accomplish the same objective. As Cora Kaplan states: »Almost two centuries of feminist activity and debate have passed, two hundred years in which women's understandings have been widely exercised, yet most of Mary Wollstonecraft's modest proposals for female emancipation are still demands on a feminist platform ...» (1986: 32).

Placed in our particular and contradictory *fin de siècle* Wollstonecraft's call for a «revolution in female manners» (132) enjoys the same relevance as it did in her time. Her early untheorized account of gender as a social and cultural construction rather than biological, points to her as a dominant figure within the feminist movement of our era.

The powerful insight of her ideology attests to the critical attention she still gets from feminists and social thinkers in general. The English author comes to the end of her plea

endorsing a course of action directed towards the reform of female education, and focusing, once again, on the necessary equality there must be between the sexes:

Asserting the rights which women in common with men ought to contend for, I have not attempted to extenuate their faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society. If so, it is reasonable to suppose that they will change their character, and correct their vices and follies, when they are allowed to be free in a physical, moral, and civil sense. (319)

Wollstonecraft's ethical and social constructions go further than the paradigms of liberal humanism, approaching the question of human rights from a feminine point of view that had been eschewed by Enlightened thinking. This weakness implicit in the theoretical program of Modernity made itself manifest in the actual subjugation of women that followed once the idealistic echoes of the French Revolution had died away. The woman question would arise again at the turn of the nineteenth century, when women struggled to obtain the same rights that a century before were supposedly granted to all human beings. Some dates are important in this sense: suffrage is granted to women over 30 in England as late as 1918 and extended to all women over 21 in 1928. This simple fact, which finally gave women social and individual identity, reveals how much women's rights had lain in abeyance, despite the efforts of women theorists.

Wollstonecraft's text affords a remarkable parallel to the postmodern feminist discourses that engage too in the criticism of the essentialism latent in the gendered organization of society. The most revealing notion in her ideology is the division between social conventions and the immanent constituents of human subjectivity, undoing the typical overlapping of the two made by Modern epistemological configurations. She applies this to women's condition, calling for its necessary revolution as linked to universal transformation: «It is time to effect a revolution in female manners —time to restore to them their lost dignity— and make them, as part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners (132)». These last lines succeed in summarising Wollstonecraft's overall feminist thought, since they foreground the primacy of feminine interests in her ideology and emphasize the central notion in the articulation of her plea: the need of a prompt transformation in women's social condition. This is the element which forges the main link between Wollstonecraft's ideology and postmodern feminist theorists. I've tried to show the way in which the English author's ideas do not only advance postmodern feminist thinking, but constitute an essential part of it, notwithstanding the historical gap between both.

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