

II MA ENGLISH WOMENS' WRITING UNIT - I 18PELE3

A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN - MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* is considered by many to be the manifesto of feminism and one of the first written expressions of feminist ideas. Although others before Wollstonecraft had written about the need for women's rights, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the first comprehensive statement about the need for women to be educated and for philosophical treatises on the nature of gender differences.

Wollstonecraft's primary concern is the education of women. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is, in large part, a rebuttal to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas, expressed primarily in his book *Émile: Ou, De l'éducation* concerning the proper education of men and women.

The title of Wollstonecraft's collection also reflects that of another work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, which Wollstonecraft wrote in response to Edmund Burke's criticisms of the French Revolution, which he expressed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke rejects not only the revolution's violence, but also the premise that all men could and should govern themselves. Wollstonecraft's critique points out the flagrant problems among the working classes in England, effectively disputing Burke's claims.

In the chapter five, Wollstonecraft critically addresses how some other writers have written about women.

Section 1: Rousseau

- Rousseau, unsurprisingly, is a chief target. Wollstonecraft disagrees with his claims that women are weaker than men, so their role is to please men.

- Rousseau wants the education of women to focus solely on how to please men. Her whole purpose is to be "a more alluring and indulgent companion." Wollstonecraft queries how such education prepares women to become "chaste wives and sensible mothers." She says "many women in the world ... have strengthened their own minds ... yet have never met with a hero, in the shape of a husband."

- Wollstonecraft acknowledges men's physical strength, but says, "were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence."

Section 2: Dr. Fordyce

- Dr. Fordyce's sermons are often recommended to young girls, but Wollstonecraft would not share them with her students. She objects to the "lover-like phrases of pumped up passion" with which he describes the loveliness of women. Speaking to women in such a way limits their ability to see themselves as "rational creatures." Fordyce suggests women need only "a small degree of knowledge" to maintain their appeal to men.

- Although men in literature have a wide range of different characters and roles to play, women are always supposed to be the same. Wollstonecraft thinks Fordyce's description of women as "levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compassion" is impossible and unrealistic. She doesn't think he intends any harm, but so many people read his books she feels compelled to respond.

Section 3: Dr. Gregory

- Wollstonecraft returns to *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, which she admits is written with "parental solicitude," but is seriously misguided.

- Gregory thinks all men will set out to deceive his daughters. If all men are untrustworthy, Wollstonecraft queries, why teach women to depend on men for everything?

- Gregory warns his daughters not to be "out of the track of common life" and tells them to conceal it if they have more learning than others, particularly from men. The "dissimulation" and deceit is what bothers Wollstonecraft most.

Section 4: Other Writers

- Wollstonecraft says she will not attempt to respond to all writers because most of them hold similar ideas.

- She objects to Baroness de Stael's reaction to Rousseau. The Baroness is willing to forgive his sexism, but Wollstonecraft cannot.

- Madame de Genlis wrote *Letters on Education*, which Wollstonecraft describes as full of unreasonable and strong prejudice, as in her expectation of "not only blind submission to parents; but to the opinion of the world."

- On the other hand, Wollstonecraft believes Mrs. Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* deserve praise and that English historian Catharine Macaulay has not received the respect she deserved. Wollstonecraft refuses to use the phrase "masculine understanding" in referring to Macaulay, but her work "was a proof that a woman can acquire judgment, in the full extent of the word."

Section 5: Lord Chesterfield

- Wollstonecraft turns to letters written by Lord Chesterfield to his son, which became a popular manual for the education of young men. She objects to “the art of acquiring an early knowledge of the world,” asking why young men should be expected to develop wisdom about the world at a young age? She refers to the Bible and the famous line from it: for everything there is a season.

- She rejects the idea of “blind obedience,” arguing education should prepare people “to encounter the evils of life with dignity, and to acquire wisdom and virtue by the exercise of their own faculties.” Wollstonecraft suggests men may develop “superior judgment, and more fortitude than women” because they allow themselves to experience “grand passions” and make mistakes. Wollstonecraft insists a young person cannot have a “just” view of life until he has experienced it for himself and she objects to “hasty premature instruction” that forms and solidifies prejudices.

Analysis

Wollstonecraft made a living reviewing texts written by other authors, and she puts her experience to work in this chapter. She quotes heavily from the authors she references, which gives a modern reader insight into how most writers of the era addressed the topic of women in society. Wollstonecraft’s objections to Rousseau are well-documented. His emphasis on female frailty and the need for women to be shaped and guided by men is anathema to Wollstonecraft. She also addresses many other popular writers of the time.

Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* was almost 30 years old at the time Wollstonecraft was writing, but it was still a popular book. He was a minister, and his ideas about women alternate between praising their beauty and encouraging them to be “meek” and emotionally sensitive.

Wollstonecraft raises a new criticism of Dr. Gregory: his emphasis on the deceptiveness of men. She acknowledges his good intentions but asks a fair question: what father can encourage his daughter to depend upon her husband and then immediately warn her that her husband may deceive her? To Wollstonecraft, this inconsistency is another reason society should encourage women to think for themselves.

Female writers also come under review. Baroness de Stael was known for hosting literary salons where great thinkers might discuss the issues of the day. Both she and Madame de Genlis, an aristocrat who wrote on educational issues, were far more lenient on Rousseau than Wollstonecraft could accept. She did approve of Mrs. Chapone, who

wrote a popular advice book on good conduct for young ladies. Surprising for the time, her book put great emphasis on learning and reading. Wollstonecraft praises Mrs. Chapone as “worthy of respect.” She also has great respect for English historian and philosopher Catharine Macaulay.

Wollstonecraft tackles a highly popular source of advice for young men: Lord Chesterfield’s letters to his son. Like Dr. Gregory’s letter to his daughters, Chesterfield’s letters gave advice to a well-bred young man as he grows up. Wollstonecraft was not alone in her dislike of them. English author Samuel Johnson claimed they taught “the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing-master.”

Wollstonecraft was still a relatively unknown writer at this stage, and she needs to prove herself the intellectual equal of the men she is writing to and about. Allusions to other texts prove she is well-read and help demonstrate her point to her reader. This entire chapter serves that purpose, much the way a modern researcher might conduct a literature review of other publications in his or her field of expertise. It shows she considered herself a part of Enlightenment scholarship and was out to prove it. No better way than to join the fray and argue it out with her male “colleagues,” most of whom probably wished she would just shut up and go away.

SULTANA'S DREAM

Sultana's Dream by Rokheya Shekhawat Hossein (1880 - 1932)

Sultana's Dream is a 1905 feminist utopian story written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, a Muslim feminist, writer and social reformer from India. It was published in the same year in Madras based English periodical The Indian Ladies Magazine. The word sultana here means a female sultan, a Muslim ruler. It depicts a feminist utopia (called Lady land) in which women run everything and men are secluded, in a mirror-image of the traditional practice of purdah. The women are aided by "electrical" technology which enables labourless farming and flying cars; the women scientists have discovered how to trap solar power and control the weather. This results in "a sort of gender-based Planet of the Apes where the roles are reversed and the men are locked away in a technologically advanced future." There, traditional stereotypes such as "Men have bigger brains" and women are "naturally weak" are countered with logic such as "an elephant also has a bigger and heavier brain" and "a lion is stronger than a man" and yet no one dominates men. In Lady land crime is eliminated, since men were considered responsible for all of it. The workday is only two hours long, since men used to waste six hours of each day in smoking. The religion is one of love and truth. Purity is held above all, such that the list of "sacred relations" is widely extended.

Sultana's Dream by Rokheya Shekhawat Hossein (1880 - 1932)

Sultana's Dream is a charming yet sharp-tongued utopia about Indian women. It was written in 1905, which adds a further dimension to the story about an India turned into matriarchy.

The novella is about the experiences of the narrator, as she (perhaps?) dozes off, while "thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood." She meets another woman, Sister Sara, who tells her of how her world is organized. Sister Sara's world is in fact opposite from the one our narrator lives in. The purdah still exists, but it is the men who are locked up and deprived of their rights. The women have invented a way of intercepting the rays of the sun and producing water from the cloud, and hence all work can be limited to a few hours a day. No one is hungry or has to be criminal. In short, the women co-exist in peace and utter merriment.

In Ladyland, as Sister Sara's world is called, the traditional gender roles are thus retained, while turned around. One gender is strong, intelligent and rational, and the other is weak, dumb and irrational. But in Ladyland the former are the women and the

latter men, and this is presented by Sister Sara as a perfectly natural condition. The point being, of course, that these characteristics are culturally produced, not biologically.

After a tour of Ladyland, including a visit to the queen, our narrator is returned in an air-car (another of the women's clever inventions), and wakes up from her dream.

Sultana's Dream is a strong vision of a society in which much of the world as we know it is turned upside down. It suggests that a complete change, not to say revolution, is indeed possible, if only the oppressed (in this case women) stand by each other and decide that they are the strong, intelligent and rational ones. The gender roles only exist as long as we acknowledge them, and if we start questioning them, we might build not only a different, but a better world.