MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: CHALLENGES OF RACE AND CLASS IN FEMINIST DISCOURSE

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Mary Wollstonecraft wrote for revolutionary times, calling for revolutionary ideas to bring about new political and social relations. Human rights ideals put forth by the French Revolution and the American Constitution inform her social outlook. To reform the world, she calls for universality, instead of local manners and sensualist persuasions that present an image of women devoid of strength in character or virtue. However, her preoccupation is not solely with the place and rights of women but more fundamentally with the privilege men are accorded. Wollstonecraft asks, “In what does man’s pre-eminence over the brute creation consists?” (12). She dismisses using bodily strength as the sole criteria to justify the superiority of man and implores the use of reason to challenge what she regards as the subjective opinions of writers of the day. Rather than according merit to these opinions she wants a common playing field where the intellectual abilities and virtues of women are judged on the same terms as those of men (36).

In her treatise Vindication of the Rights of Woman Wollstonecraft boldly extends all rights due to men to women, arguing that the manner of times have changed, formed by more reasonable principles. For Wollstonecraft, equality of the sexes will ensure the emergence of a new social order, a virtuous society. How relevant are these arguments today?

RIGHT PREMISED ON UNIVERSALITY

Wollstonecraft bases her work on philosophical, literary, and religious texts, seeking to counter what she considers regressive viewpoints, in the process becoming perhaps one of the earliest women to interrogate religious text and dogma. She blames writers such as Rousseau and Dr. Gregory for advancing the notion that women are weak, devoid of solid virtues, and therefore useless members of society (22). The perception that women are slaves, playthings, loses them respect.

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Wollstonecraft presents universal arguments that remain relevant for women today. She argues for an array of social, political, and economic rights, among them the right to self-determination, the right to an education, the right to choose a spouse, the right to participation, and the right to a livelihood and to property (168). The context of the debate, however, remains consonant with her times, as shown in her use of language and the basis for her analysis. For instance, to defend the rights of women, she uses moral arguments derived from biblical texts or romantic notions and, rather than employing a rights-based framework, appeals to reason.

Further, presenting a biased view of religion as it pertains to women, she mentions Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. Ironically, Prophet Muhammad is generally seen by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to have been a strong advocate of women’s rights in conservative Arabia. On the one hand, her remarks could suggest existing prejudices regarding foreign civilizations having different moral standards—that is, those that are not Christian or European. On the other, her assertion could represent widely available interpretations of sacred texts about women. Nevertheless, her readiness to engage with the cultural and religious is pivotal in advancing the discussion of rights, particularly in communities where culture or religion is the dominant framework in operation.

The discussion of rights with respect to women contrasts that which is transitory (the need for love and affection) and that which is permanent (the demand for respect and friendship). Wollstonecraft pushes for neutral criteria—that is, other than sex—that distinguishes one human being from another: virtue, reason, and knowledge. She demands a common standard for measuring virtues, necessitating that they be founded on the same principles and have the same aim. A common standard would ensure that all virtues are of the same quality and degree (26). Wollstonecraft asserts that women, like men, possess the ability to reason and thus to become virtuous.

Nevertheless, while she presents a strong case for women’s emancipation, the picture she paints of women is in sharp contrast to what she advocates. The bulk of the treatise presents women as petty, without a will of their own, content to play the role bestowed upon them. She is adamant that women renounce being objects of beauty and that they instead be willing to be viewed as intelligent. Obviously, her view of the
position of woman very much represents the experiences of a particular class of women—those from the middle class and the gentry, since only they could be viewed in such terms, that is, as toys whose sole purpose was to amuse their husbands. Surely, poor women don’t have time for trivia and pomp. Not only do they work alongside their men, but they have additional burdens—reproductive roles—leaving very little time for a display of charms or affections.

For Wollstonecraft, the use, or rather abuse, of power is central to understanding human inequality. She argues that legitimizing the difference between men and women by labeling it as natural is an expression of power and a desire to concentrate power in a particular group. She is very clear about the linkages between governance at the national and the private levels, condemning all despotic attitudes and practices. In the case of women, the body is central to her analysis of rights and what hinders a woman’s ability to own her own mind and exercises multiple freedoms: the trapped body in domestic servitude; the sexual body to gratify men’s pleasure; the infantile body intellectually underdeveloped.

What is women’s status in society?

Wollstonecraft strongly opposes the view that women only exist to serve men, a view expressed by dominant philosophers of her time and religious and still retained in most legal systems. Sensualists justify the continued denial of human and legal rights to women on the grounds of intellectual incapacity. They confine women to the domestic sphere, which is by its very nature mundane, where they are deprived of their liberty and any prospects of excelling (20). Since women are denied the ability to improve their faculties, they are perceived as not being intelligent enough to make their own decisions, thus justifying the need for male protection, as is still advocated for by conservative forces in states such as Saudi Arabia and religious entities such as the Vatican. Wollstonecraft speaks to the dilemma women face as their worth is reduced to their beauty and reproductive roles. Rendering women as weak and powerless beings denies them their soul; they are merely appendages of men, their rights and obligations accruing from their relationship to men, as wives, mothers, or daughters.

Clearly a modernist and a feminist, Wollstonecraft mercilessly challenges ideas from antiquity that pertain to women. She does not accept that the low status of women is divinely ordained, since God made all
things right. Rather, she argues, men use reason to justify prejudices that breed inequality. She dismisses the biblical account of creation that posits women as subjugated to men, derived as it is from the concept that women originated in a man’s rib. The most revolutionary aspect of her treatise is her call for a new status for women—that of companions of men. The relationship between the sexes should be founded on friendship and respect; women should be regarded as full members of society. This is critical because it rests on the important proposition that women are rational beings and therefore endowed with intelligence. This assertion turns on its head the age-old view propounded by philosophers, writers, poets, and the clergy that women are weak and dependent creatures.

Wollstonecraft’s preoccupation is not only with emancipating women; she wants freedom for all humankind (178). Significantly, she notes how expediency compromises basic principles/natural rights even when it seems illogical, unreasonable, to do so. The situation is more critical in the absence of checks and balances to contain the actions of men and rulers. Yet her political assessment of the use of force and politics is confined not to the individual but to its social effect—maintaining the social order. A class structure furthered through tradition, liturgy, and ceremonies maintains the status quo. Wollstonecraft sees no hope in relying solely on established practice or norms. Accordingly, she scorns nobility and accuses it of using its status to demand blind submission, thereby engaging in acts of tyranny.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF EDUCATION FOR WOMEN?
The point of knowledge and reason, Wollstonecraft argues, is to achieve a higher purpose—happiness. Providence destined that humankind, men and women both, acquire human virtues, that is, knowledge. Education allows one to be independent, able to exercise one’s own reason and discharge higher duties. Education is thus a fundamental right, a tool for human liberation, and until knowledge is democratized and women are rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and knowledge must receive continual checks (40).

Wollstonecraft sees a direct link between the development of individual character and knowledge. She notes, “Education should be geared at the cultivation of minds and teach children how to think” (163). Education is thus linked with individual ambition—how can women fulfill their ambitions? Women’s subordination is a result of their being denied
knowledge. A proper education would enable a woman to support a single life with dignity. If her intellectual faculties are developed a woman will be more able to guard her modesty.

Thus, education becomes a critical socializing agent for Wollstonecraft. The different types of education availed of determine one's future prospect. Women are socialized by what they see in their mothers. Any attempt at formal education of women was disorderly, providing them only with the superficial knowledge needed for functioning in society—for pleasing and obeying. Rather than learning methodologically, women learn by the rote, acquiring manners before morals. “A mistaken education, a narrow and uncultivated mind and many sexual prejudices tend to make women more constant than men” (31). The conclusion for Wollstonecraft was inescapable—strenthen the female mind by enlarging it and there will be an end to blind obedience (24).

Rather than embarking on a specialized gender-segregated education, Wollstonecraft advocates for universal access to education irrespective of sex or class. Uncharacteristically for her times, she favors coeducation and vouches for a mix of public and private education, providing equal opportunities (165, 167). Like educators of today, she thinks education should be relevant, shaped by the opinions and manners of the society in which students live. Nevertheless, she encourages separating children by skill level, which in effect ensures continuation of a class structure whereby children from more affluent backgrounds have a greater advantage in excelling in the sciences or arts, while less affluent children remain concentrated in the crafts, a less valued and menial sector that ensures that they perpetually remain at the service of others.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft envisaged an education that is wholesome. The best education, she argued, strengthens the body and forms the heart, since the exercise of mental faculties contributes to a stronger body and more pleasant disposition. To enable this, she calls for a physical and moral environment conducive of learning, facilitated in part by democratizing education, with parents having a place and say in running of schools. The state has a role in the provision of education, “so that it is not left to whims of individual masters.” Ironically, success in universalizing access to basic education in most developing countries has pushed international financial institutions such as the World Bank to liberalize (read privatize) the education sector, with dire consequences for accessibility, not only for primary education but also for tertiary education for
the majority. Under these policies education is once again becoming a privilege of the few, marginalizing women and the poor.

Moreover, the notion that education alone will enable a woman to guard her modesty appears simplistic. If Wollstonecraft implies that women (and men) who are educated would be more chaste, in greater control of their raw sexual urges, then she would be disappointed by modern feminist theory that, in discussing the body, advocates for a sexual revolution, for erotic justice, spearheaded in the 1960s, concretized at the International Conference on Population and Development, and gaining more acceptability in ongoing efforts to check the spread of HIV/AIDS. Otherwise, research continually establishes that all women, irrespective of their social or academic status, are victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Certainly the issue is more complex. Whereas the popular notion in development circles is that an educated woman can exercise more choices with regards her body, namely, is likely to have sex late, have fewer children, practice safe sex, and so on, the reality is quite different: Women are still victims of repressive sexual politics not only at home but also on campuses and other “male” institutions such as the military. Women are still raped and sexually harassed on campus by students and faculty and elsewhere by employers and supervisors. In an extreme example, a first-year student, Levina Mukasa, at the University of Dar es Salaam decided to take her own life after authorities failed to respond to her complaints of sexual harassment by a third-year engineering student. During student unrest in many countries, including Tanzania, women are the first victims of physical and sexual violence.

Thus education seems to play a small role in facilitating mutuality and respect between the genders, requiring advocates to move beyond moral persuasion and instead call for more stringent institutional measures to check violations against women that occur as a result of their sex—for example, sexual harassment policies. Moreover, education increasingly has come to acquire a functional role unrelated to the development of independent thought but, rather, churning out employees to feed a globalized production system that pays little regard to human dignity. I thus concur with Mary Wollstonecraft in her call to democratize education. However, the impetus should not only boil down to redefining the purpose of education; it should also include the means through which it is legitimized.
CONCLUSION

In many ways Wollstonecraft's treatise captures the inherent contradiction and timeless debates on rights: not all women face oppression to the same degree—in one situation mistresses may prevail in affections and even status, whereas wives and daughters are deprived of liberty (24). Nor are all men powerful; power depends on social, economic, ethnic, and other factors. Clearly, both men and women have greater options than they did in Wollstonecraft's day, but such liberties and opportunities are meaningless if tyranny rules.

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NOTES

1. This evokes present-day distinctions between basic needs and strategic needs/basic rights. Wollstonecraft argues that the weak motivation to guarantee equal rights to women is the tendency to view only the present needs of women not their future fate.

2. Still, one wonders how she would have reacted to the body of research that suggests that there is indeed a difference in the intellectual abilities of men and women and studies showing that girls perform better in schools that are segregated by gender.