

Interrogating the Discourse of Female Accomplishment: Re-reading Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in the Present Context

Rosnara Khatun

Pirojpur, Malda, West Bengal M.A. in English Literature, University of Gour Banga
WBCSC-SET.

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchal formation of female discourse emphasizes on accomplishment and beauty. The male members traditionally expect women to have male defined accomplishments and virtues. For males, women should emphasize only on dress, beautification and entertainment skills like singing and dancing etc. In the Introduction of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' Wollstonecraft says that the girls are taught from their infancy to the need of accomplishment and beauty to rise in marriage market. Dr. Gregory advises in his treatise to cultivate fondness for dress for the girls because it is natural to them which Wollstonecraft denies by saying that this is all false notion created to deny their humanity. On the other, in his book Emile Rousseau sets out a description of the ideal woman, Sophie and prescribes duties for them. Such theories really hold that "women are created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused".

*The need of accomplishment is very much prevalent still in India. In this respect, we can take example of an advertisement in our matrimonial papers, such as- "Baidya 27/6' handsome, BE, Mech, (JU) working in reputed MNC Kolkata, 6.25 lacs p.a. wanted fair, beautiful, tall, well educated, bride upto 25 yrs." It is the demand of a groom family in 21st century. Are we advanced? How much have we progressed? This paper deals with this issue of female accomplishment with reference to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.*

Keywords: Patriarchy, Discourse, Accomplishment, and Beautification

The patriarchal formation of female discourse emphasizes on accomplishment and beauty. The male members traditionally expect women to have defined accomplishments and virtues. For males, women should emphasize only on dress, beautification and entertainment skills like singing and dancing etc. Girls were to be taught by the conduct books on the subject of moral instruction such as Dr. James Fordyce's sermons to young women and Dr. John Gregory's *Father's Legacy to His Daughters*. In the 'Introduction' of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft says that the girls are taught from their infancy to the need of accomplishment and beauty to rise in marriage market. Dr. Gregory advises in his treatise to cultivate fondness for dress for the girls because it is natural to them which Wollstonecraft denies by saying that this is all false notion created to deny their humanity. Fordyce recommends that young women should be meek and submissive and develops instructions for training girls under the age of ten for womanhood. On the other, in his book *Emile* Rousseau sets out a description of the ideal woman, Sophie and prescribes duties for them. Such theories really hold that "women are created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused." In my paper I am discussing about the dissertation of female accomplishment with reference of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Dr. Gregory and similar male conservatives of eighteenth century believe that women are unequal to men and they are 'useless members of society'. Many critics think that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written as a response to the philosophical assertions of Rousseau and it is often regarded as a political and social manifesto on the condition of woman. Wollstonecraft refers the example of Rousseau, who declared in *Emile*,

"a woman should never for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself."

According to Rousseau woman must be weak and passive because she has less bodily strength than man. She agrees with Rousseau that "bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over women;" but that doesn't mean women are inferior creatures. She insists,

"...not only the virtue, but the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures, ought to endeavor to

acquire human virtues (or perfection) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half-being- one of Rousseau's wild chimeras."

"To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable: these are the duties of women at all times..."(Wollstonecraft) My question is who will set the rules what women should do or not. Wollstonecraft wonders, "Of what materials can that heart be composed, which can melt when, insulted, and instead of revolting at injustice, kiss the rod?" Before Wollstonecraft there were many other works suggesting about the proposals for improving female education. But no one has that courage except Wollstonecraft to criticize about the social system which created a double standard of excellence for male and female. Before writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft says in *Thoughts on the education of daughters* that "daughters" will one day become mothers and teachers. It does not mean that women should abandon these traditional roles but I believe that women can most effectively improve society. If daughters will not be educated or they just listen about accomplishments how the change is possible in society. Often women are regarded as 'weaker vessel'. It is nurture, not nature, which is the cause of gender discriminations.

After reading it, we can think that this is a story of past England. So, we are making a mistake. This need of accomplishment is very much prevalent still in India. In this respect, we can take an example of an advertisement in our matrimonial papers, such as- " Baidya 27/6' handsome, BE, Mech, (JU) working in reputed MNC Kolkata, 6.25 lacs p.a. wanted fair, beautiful, tall, well educated, bride upto 25 yrs." It is the demand of a groom family in 21st century. Are we advanced? How much have we progressed? Sometimes bride family also demands the same. But ask your mind; beauty is always emphasized by a boy, isn't it? The sad part is that, in spite of all the advancement that we are witnessing today in our society, yet a girl child is led to believe that the sole purpose of her life is to get married, beget children by her parents and relatives. This idea is very much ingrained from our birth time and day by day we are becoming a part of it knowingly or unknowingly. But I agree there may be some exception. So, the ideas of Wollstonecraft regarding accomplishments are very much valid in the context of India too. Her ideas are invaluable and we cannot forget her contribution in this respect. But, the most important thing is, what is the way out of this situation?

To give its solution Wollstonecraft values education to rise above this prejudice. To her the perfect education is "an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart" to rise above the false refinement. I suppose that a woman's first responsibility is to make herself a rational creature. To be reasonable and intellectual they must need this power of education. Today women think they are liberated and she is free to choose whatever she wishes to wear. But it is doubtful is she fully free? If a virtue which is applied differentially to men and women Wollstonecraft calls it a sexual virtue and she talks about to acquire 'human virtue'. All these false notions are created to subjugate women according to her. Women are capable of acting like rational creatures and so "let them attain conscious dignity by feeling themselves only dependent on God. Teach them, in common with man, to submit to necessity, instead of giving, to render them more pleasing, a sex to mortals."

I imagine, the attitude of parents must change. They also must realise the very importance of good education which comes to her rescue if she is met with any kind of injustice in her personal life, to support herself, to face the world with more confidence and boldness. With the help of technology it is possible to determine the gender of a child and it is done in many urban cities by highly educated people. We need that type of broader education which can change our narrow point of view and to look things differently. The incidents of rape or gang rape, molestation are their utmost level. The students of Jadavpur University adopted the pad- against- sexism movement in March, 2015 where the napkins were inscribed with slogans related to gender sensitization and the stigma of those raped and molested. The message says: "Girls are raped not because they are girls but because we live in a patriarchal society." The protest came from a post graduate student who lodged a complaint of molestation against the JU authorities. It once again proves that a woman has power to challenge the authority, to protest against the stereotyped notions of society. All you want the courage of mind. Wollstonecraft says, "Let men become more chaste and modest, and if women do not grow wiser in the same ratio, it will be clear that they have weaker understandings." We must strengthen our female mind and after that there will be an end of 'blind obedience'. In his book 'The Idea of Justice' the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen presents "the Rights of Woman as an argumentative model for empowering the marginalized to participate in democratic deliberation about justice." Referring the book as a 'classic' Sen points out that it vindicates "two vital forms of human rights for women: rights to well-being, and even more crucially, rights to the agents of their own course in life." We have travelled a long way up but the path is yet long. It is yet severe and full of hurdles. Education is not only needed for girls but for the both of the sexes to make a world where we can live peacefully. We must make ourselves stronger and let's

not fall prey to the scheming of the stronger ones and let's prove that we are not 'weaker vessel' at all. To conclude with Wollstonecraft's words:

"Let the honest heart shew itself, and reason teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather imbitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds."

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