

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: (1759 — 1797)

The Harbinger of Female Freedom in Europe: With Reference to the Letter Addressed to M. Telleyrand-Perigord And An Introduction written prior to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

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Abstract: A literary fire, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was an revolutionary feminist, She raised voice for helpless women in Europe. She eloquently fought for countless women during her period. She was born on 27th April 1759, in Spitalfields, London. She was the second of the seven children of Elizabeth Dixon and Edward John Wollstonecraft. Mary's father suffered severe loss in business. The financial condition of her father dwindled and deteriorated. The loss of fortune turned Edward violent and he behaved very violently to his wife. As a teen aged girl, Mary witnessed these ugly incidents. She slept outside the door of her mother's bedroom to protect her from the physical abuse and torture of her father. The struggle transformed her as a fiery feminist writer. She was an erudite philosopher and a great champion of women's right. Mary's life attracted the people because of her unconventional life style. She made bold and daring physical relation with opposite sex. Today, Mary has been regarded as one of the sound and robust feminist voice. The feminists often idolize her as their icon. They cite both her life and works to establish feminist theory. During her short span of life she wrote novels, treatise, a travel narrative, a history of the French Revolution, a conduct book and a children's book. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is the milestone in the history of feminist literature. It is a magnum opus to articulate the arguments of female's rights. She argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they are deprived of education.

Key words: Harbinger, Carnal, Liberty, Dedication, Masculine Woman, Progressive.

How to cite this article: R.K. Jha. MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT: (1759 — 1797). Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(82s):1197-1201. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.82s.133.

Mary's personal life had several ups and down. Her love life was rocked twice before she got married to famous philosopher of his time William Godwin. When Mary Wollstonecraft was in London, she had a relation with the artist Henry Fuseli, even though he was married. She proposed a platonic living arrangement with Fuseli and his wife, but it was not accepted. She left for France and ended her relation with Fuseli. She admired the French revolution. Being a British citizen, she did not enjoy the confidence of French Government and the French people. She came into contact with Gilbert Imlay. Imlay saved her from the probable arrest by the French police. To protect Mary Wollstonecraft from arrest, Gilbert Imlay made a false and fabricated statement to the U.S. embassy in Paris that he had married Mary. Mary automatically became an American citizen. In fact, Gilbert Imlay never married Wollstonecraft. As a token of his memory, Mary carried the child of Gilbert Imlay in her womb. She was very much delighted of this pregnancy. She delivered her first baby on 14th May, 1794. The Baby was named Fanny. The relation between Mary and Imlay ended when she came to England. It was the intense love of Imlay, which aroused Mary's interest in sex. Despite Mary's rejection of the sexual component of relationships in the *Rights of Woman*, she discovered that Imlay has ignited the fire of sex in her inert love life.

After two ill-fated affairs, Mary Wollstonecraft married with the philosopher William Godwin, one of the forefathers of anarchist movement in England. Mary died at the age of thirty eight leaving behind several unfinished works. She

attempted to commit suicide but her life was saved by Imlay in 1795. On 30 August, 1797, Mary gave birth to her second daughter, Mary Godwin. After ten days of delivery the revolutionary feminist succumbed to death. William Godwin was devastated by the sudden, demise of his wife on 10 September, 1797. In January 1798 Godwin published memories of his dear departed wife. Godwin had portrayed his wife with love and care. The people were shocked by the life led by Mary Wollstonecraft. However, with the emergence of the feminist movement during the last decade of twentieth century, Mary Wollstonecraft was admired by her dedicated followers. She fought for women's equality and challenged patriarchy. Her second daughter Mary Godwin also became an eminent English author. She became an accomplished writer and authored *Frankenstein*.

With the advent of the modern feminist movement, the mighty novelist Virginia Woolf and Emma Goldman embraced Wollstonecraft as their icon. In 1929, Woolf paid tribute to Wollstonecraft's writings. Woolf described her personality as "experimental in living"—as immortal. Several plaques have been erected to give honour to Mary Wollstonecraft.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written in 1792. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that middle class woman's oppression was largely due to their lack of adequate education. The book is preceded by a letter and an introduction. She was a great philosopher and staunch believer of women's rights during eighteenth century Europe. Mary wrote this book to

give sound argument to Edmund Burke. He wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke in his political treatise defended constitutional monarchy, aristocracy and the massive rights enjoyed by the Church of England. Mary in her work attacked aristocracy and championed the cause of republicanism. Mary Wollstonecraft was the first woman to deliver a reply to Burke openly. Mary addressed a dedicatory letter to M. Talleyrand-Perigord, former Bishop of Autun to elucidate her position first as a woman than as a human being. She defended the rights of women in Europe. In the letter she stated certain valid reasons to Perigord which needed to be assuaged. She requested him that these issues should be addressed to bring the female gender in the mainstream of the nation. She advocated the right for education to women, irrespective of any kind of gender discrimination. The national education policy for the nation should be framed and implemented to give education to every woman. The fruit of education should be tasted both by men and women. It will lead them to psychological satisfaction and pave the path to their social and economic independence. Virtue and independence are part and parcel of human life and complementary to each other. A woman without education is forced to follow the unethical and irrational demands dictated by man. Her virtuous and natural behaviour remained unnoticed. It is never revealed because of unseen pressure from the male chauvinist. Mary told that many people of progressive attitude wanted to give equal rights to woman. They admire the rational views of woman's education. She told that man and woman are two sides of the same coin. They are two different genders but they belong to same biological class, Homo sapiens. Homo sapiens are known for their wisdom. Wollstonecraft says:

My opinion, indeed, respecting the rights and duties of woman, seems to flow so naturally from these simple principles, that I think it scarcely possible, but that some of the enlarged minds who formed your admirable constitution, will coincide with me.¹

France was one of the most advanced nations of the Europe during eighteenth century. The rapid spread of knowledge among the people deprived the woman. England believed the woman was not placed in better position in terms of education before France. But in France, the author observed certain grim reservation for women's education. The concept of the woman was formed as an object rather than subject. The man was attracted towards woman as the object only to satisfy carnal pleasure. The desire of man was limited to lust. There was an air of deception in man's attitude towards woman. The female sex was not given education properly so they

often became the prey of man's narrow dirty thinking. The female gender were taught the lessons, fabricated and tailored by man. The modesty was limited to display the woman as the embodiment of propriety in dress, speech and conduct. They did not dare to speak anything against the will of man. Virtue was not employed to judge a woman in broader sense. It was limited to decency and prudishness. Manners and morals were induced to them to make the woman confused. This was observed in the behaviour of French women. Mary says in her letter to former Bishop of Autun:

Manners and morals are so nearly allied that they have often been confounded; but, though the former should only be the natural reflection of the latter, yet, when various causes have produced factitious and corrupt manners, which are very early caught, morality becomes an empty name. The personal reserve, and scared respect for cleanliness and delicacy in domestic life, which French women almost despise.... (2)

Mary Wollstonecraft fought for the cause of the rights of women. She disliked the discrimination in imparting education to female as par with male. She criticised to this unlawful discrimination and tried to open the eyes of the people, who enjoyed power. Social discrimination against woman is injustice to the spirit of human nature. Humanism and humanity will prevail on, if both male and female will continue to work together. For Mary the education is the intellectual eyes of human life that leads to truth. If an individual seeks truth, he will achieve it, only after treading the path of education. The virtue and education are inseparable. Education gives the quality to know the difference between right and wrong. Mary puts this argument in her letter valiantly to former Bishop of Autun.

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to cooperate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? (2)

Mary argues that to deprive woman from education is not only divine injustice but against their human existence. She puts her own arguments not as a woman but as a human beings. The female population constituted nearly half of the total population in Europe. Astonishingly, the female gender of the human race were deprived from quality education. It was an attempt to keep them in narrow periphery of thinking. They were given

cosmetic education which crippled them intellectually to judge the basic tenants of truth and virtue. Truth and virtue are two sterling qualities to be felt by women. Unfortunately, the rumour concerning woman's education was spread in such a derogatory manner that they were trapped in the sinister design of selfish people. Mary realized that women were psychologically invaded by men. Freedom of thought was permitted to man, but woman faced severe restriction. The role of the woman for building the nation and the society was limited. They were compelled to remain inside their home to perform domestic works. Moreover, the faculty of rationality were also paralysed on insignificant grounds. Mary wrote to M. Talleyrand-Perigord that as a legislator, it was his sacred duty to give equal rights to both sexes.

But, if women are to be excluded, without having a voice, from a participation of the natural rights of mankind, prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they want reason—else this flaw in your NEW CONSTITUTION will ever shew that man must, in some shape, act like a tyrant, and tyranny, in whatever part of society it rears its brazen front, will ever undermine morality. (3)

Only a uncivilized and irrational society could think to deprive woman from her natural rights. If the woman remained without proper education, probably it will bring only doom for the nation. The man always considered woman as inferior because of her lack of mental exercise and physical strength. They were delivered limited education. The woman did not come to this world to fulfil the carnal desire of man. The education of woman will lead her to the path for equal rights. After the revolution of 1789, France introspected her demerits and deeply meditated the universal ideas of liberty, equality and justice. Earlier the status of woman in France was not good. They tried to overcome the gap between the two sexes.

England, wanted to awake herself to fulfil the aspiration of deprived women folk. Mary ended her dedication to Perigord with a prophetic vision to build the English nation on the sound pillars of equality and justice for both sexes.

I wish, Sir, to set some investigations of this kind afloat in France; and should they lead to a confirmation of my principles, when your constitution is revised the Rights of Woman may be respected, if it be fully proved that reason calls for this respect, and loudly demands JUSTICE for one half of the human race. (4)

Mary Wollstonecraft ended the letter with a vision of liberty and equality for the women. The visionary letter set the foundation of equality for female gender.

INTRODUCTION PRIOR TO

The Vindication of the Rights of Women

After addressing the “Dedicatory Letter” to M. Talleyrand - Perigord, the former Bishop of Autun, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a fiery introduction before writing the book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The English people had serious reservation to share equal rights with woman. They denied to give equal rights to woman. The people in political corridor and the religious institution tried to crack the confidence of women by robbing their legitimate rights. Mary Wollstonecraft championed the cause of women's right. She struggled against the oppressive forces. They challenged the human rights of women. The introduction presents Mary in pensive and meditative mood. She was in melancholic mood to find her own sex in deplorable condition. These women were discriminated by men. The men considered themselves superior because of their knowledge and massive strength. They showed their supremacy by citing the weakness of women. Mary demolished the irrational myths propagated by man with her robust arguments. She observed that the women folk were neglected in every sphere of public life. These women were called weak because of their secondary status in the society. Mary argued that the world will be never become civilized, if the fruit of education to sizeable population of human race is deprived. Without virtue and education, of womens, the existence of human civilization becomes insignificant.

Mary further told that nature has biologically created male and female. It did not give supremacy to man over woman. Nature created two different genders to fulfil the biological needs of human race. But it has been interpreted in wrong manner by the people having shallow cerebral knowledge. The creation of nature is divine and supreme. The physical strength of man might be more than woman, but what woman could do, man will never succeed in performing those things. The woman is divinely blessed to carry a baby in her womb. Woman serves different roles in family designated for her. She acts as mother, daughter, sister and wife in a family. Unfortunately, the importance of woman has been underestimated by the male chauvinists. Mary lamented on the adverse role played by the schools and the managements for female education. While giving education in schools, girls were segregated from boys only to make them feel inferior. The objective of such a disastrous step was to create a feeble sex in the form of woman. These schools and managements indulged in such kinds of unbearable activity only by the blessings of great writers and the people in power. The male writers displayed serious reservation on woman's talent. Even the parents had also the same kind of rotten mentality. Their love for the female child was mere show. The proper education was not the focal point for the girl child.

They were given education in such a way that they think that they have to exhibit their physical beauty to please the male's eyes. Mary decries on such a deplorable dual education system. The women were kept away from rational thinking and scientific temperament.

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty;.... —One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as woman than human creatures,.... (6)

Mary observed that the foundation which built woman's education had serious flaw. First the women education had to face the adverse opinion of established writers. French writer Jean Jacques Rousseau did not regard woman as human being but considered her as alluring mistress, an object for physical pleasure. The mental map of such a mighty writer was beyond imagination. For him women were meant to derive only carnal satisfaction. They did not see women as affectionate wife, loveable sister, rational mother and dutiful sister. The education was limited for women. Their minds were occupied with false refinements. The reason and virtue attained by the man were superior than woman in education setup. These qualities were achieved by them through education. The women were deliberately deprived of reason and virtue, as a part of cunning conspiracy. They were denied the quality education which their opposite sex enjoyed. Mary voiced against such inequality and corrupt practices followed by the school authority against female education. The reason behind such kind of exploitation of women became possible because they exist in male dominated world. The civilized women of the time were taught by elders to follow the dictates of their men or husband.

The very concept of female education was distorted. The noble spirit of love was meant only surrender. The vacant space of these women's brain were filled with false impression and refinement. The genius authors wrote the books without placing the women in equal status with men. They gave the women a secondary place in comparison to their opposite sex. Wollstonecraft attacks such kind of rotten mentality of men against women.

But not content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to obtain a durable interest in their hearts, or to become the friends of the fellow

creatures who find amusement in the society. (7)

During the period, when Mary was writing, the men in Europe coined the word 'masculine women' for the progressive women. Mary supported this concept of masculine women because it challenged the male ego. It also hurt their unethical supremacy. The women achieved the same position which their opposite sex enjoyed. The fruit of education made the struggle of women successful. They became virtuous like men. Mary appreciated the herculean efforts of these women. These qualities helped women to overcome defeat. It helped them to differentiate between right and wrong, truth and false. The education became an eye opener to them. They realized the limitations of fabricated education forced on them. The 'great' writers always tried to define education keeping the interest of men. They wanted to give pseudo education to female sex.

Perhaps the seeds of false refinement, immortality, and vanity, have ever been shed by the great. Weak, artificial beings, raised above the common wants and affections of their race, in a premature unnatural manner, undermine the very foundation of virtue, and spread corruption through the whole mass of society! (7-8)

The masculine women were criticized because of their success. They were earlier supposed to remain aloof from the mainstream of nation. The very reason of attaining virtue only support the concept of the equality of human being. The spirit of divinity gives equal rights to both genders—man and woman. Of course, the illusion created by man that he is superior to woman has no valid acceptance and rationality. Virtue and education should be imparted to every human being irrespective of gender. Ironically, man always tried to hinder the quality education to woman. Mary felt pity for her own sex because they did not understand the sinister design employed by man. These men created women to suit their mental make-up. They devised new phrases for the women to please them. These phrases were not related to their intellectual beauty but always confined to their physical body. They disliked the growth of intellectually matured women. Mary says:

—I wish to persuade women to endeavour 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, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt. (8)

Mary suggested to her sex that they should become intellectually bold to solve the situation by observing certain ethics. They should express their energetic emotions. They should not become mentally inert and intellectually insipid. The education should be imparted to women folk to overcome weakness associated with their sex. The women were tagged as frivolous sex because of their behaviour. They were ridiculed by the writers because of feeble nature. The libertines took the woman as guarantee for their physical pleasure. Most of the women were treated like toys in the hands of men. The word 'masculine' adhered the principle that woman should not become second sex. The women were not taught to cherish the virtue of courage and fortitude. They were not respected in their old age after the departure of their physical beauty. The society was responsible for fabricating and inculcating such false ideas for the weakness for women.

that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire—mere propagators of fools!—if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over, I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.

(9)

The dependence of women on men made them further weak. The only quality that women folk wanted to achieve during that time was physical elegance to attract the men. They became the prey of passion because of their ill-bred cosmetic education. The education lacked depth of learning and profound philosophy. They were not delivered education to elevate their rational thoughts. Mary wanted that woman should first become human being. Later she should be identified with her sex. She ends the introduction with prophetic vision.

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... Many individuals have more sense than their male relatives; and, as nothing preponderates where there is a constant struggle for an equilibrium, without it has naturally more gravity, some women govern their husbands without degrading themselves, because intellect will always govern. (10)

Reference:

1. *A Vindication of the Rights Of Woman*
Mary Wollstonecraft (Dover Publications,

Inc. Mineola, New York) 1996 Letter—To M. Talleyrand-Perigord & Introduction P. 1. (All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.