

Visions on Female Education: Mary Wollstonecraft and Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract: In the hierarchical binary relationship between the male and the female, woman always held an inferior position. The traditional idea regarding a woman is that she is a “partly formed” “mutilated male” lacking the power of rationality, reason and intellect. Under this circumstance, any attempt to educate her for her emancipation and empowerment would be futile. One of the earliest eighteenth century British feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft protested against this age-old misogynist conception. In this paper, I first intend to observe how in each of her text, starting from *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she looks upon education as the only means to free woman from her state of social bondage and silent sufferance. She also calls for a uniform system of National Education, in which both boys and girls would be equally enlightened which would in turn assure a better understanding between the two sexes. In the second half of my paper, I desire to speculate how Wollstonecraft's visions regarding female education vibrantly transmitted itself throughout the world to make a fruitful effect in the fertile soils of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance only within a gap of a few years. Following the steps of the social reformers like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Drinkwater Bethune, the enlightened “sannyasi” of Bengal Swami Vivekananda with his worthy disciple Sister Nivedita played a vital role to promote female education in Bengal. Vivekananda pointed out that women have always been posed by society as helpless and dependent on others. It is only through education that women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. The empowered sannyasini, Sister Nivedita came to materialize the visions of her Master to educate and emancipate every single woman of the contemporary society through her endless endeavors.

Keywords: Education, Empowerment, Independence, Gender, Patriarchy.

*I beseech you; struggle with any obstacles rather
than go into a state of dependence.*

(From *Collected Letters*, Mary Wollstonecraft
to Jane Arden, April-June, 1780).

Since Pre-Socrates and Plato, the concept of man and woman has developed in hierarchical terms. The opposition between the masculine and the feminine extends far beyond the relation between man and woman. Binarism lay at the crux of all gender-oriented concepts. From Binarism originated the most common figures for thinking about the basic differences of life. The French feminist writer and dramatist Helene Cixous vividly charts a binary structure of Western thought: Activity/ Passivity; Sun/Moon; Culture/Nature; Day/Night; Father/Mother; Head/Heart; Logos/ Pathos; Form/ Matter; Man/woman (90-98). What Cixous table seems to suggest is that gender is part of this whole series of oppositions. In this hierarchical mode of speculations of gender, women is always thought as weaker and inferior compared to man, which in turn confirms her political, social and cultural subordination in a male-dominated world.

Plato and Aristotle define this opposition between man and woman through a hierarchical relation between an active male form and a passive female matter. Form is disembodied and knowable power which gives sense and being to an otherwise chaotic, passive, undifferentiated and inessential matter. The movement of matter towards its real form created a political hierarchy of levels and resemblances: women must be to men what men are to God. Just as men strive to achieve a position of pure reason and active self-determination, so must women follow the same path. They are basically irrational since the essence of human life-reason-is exemplified in men. Under this circumstance, to educate woman for their upliftment is totally a futile effort.

The eighteenth century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft radically protests against this misogynist age-old patriarchal conception. A worthy descendant of Mary Astell and Catherine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, an established essayist and novelist, asserts her independence as a freeborn female author, the "first of the new genus" to attack the subject position of women within the canonical patriarchal political theory. Inspired by Catherine Macaulay's *Letters on Education*, she comes to see the history of female education as virtual conspiracy of male educators and writers seeking to render women weaker and less rational than they would otherwise have become. For the amelioration of women's abject social condition, then, and for the rise of a revolutionary generation of rational, freethinking independent women, educational reform is essential. In speaking of the girl in each and every work and in letting the girl speak throughout her writings, Wollstonecraft articulates what had not been said before within the canonical conversation. The female protagonist in her texts gives voice to the conflicts of gender and generation unacknowledged within the history of political thought. Mary Wollstonecraft's attack on the socially constructed edifice of feminine modesty, her advocacy of coeducation and her demand of political rights and economic independence for women makes her a

universally acclaimed controversial figure. Now, what I find significantly interesting is that Wollstonecraft's views have a great similarity with that of a pioneer figure of Bengal: Swami Vivekananda. Just as Wollstonecraft is basically a feminist writer, Vivekananda is a religious preacher. Yet what each thinks and says regarding the upliftment of women through education has made a viable impact on contemporary society. Especially in Bengal since the pre-nineteenth century, when women were relegated to a corner in their household and were treated no better than maidservants, Vivekananda's pronouncements brought about a profound change in the fate of the "others" of the society. In this paper it remains my intention to evaluate separately the perspectives of these two social reformers regarding the education of the females which is to be followed by a comparative analysis between the two visions.

Like other reformist writers and activists, Wollstonecraft believes that education lay at the root of social stability and social revolutions. Hence a keen and vital concern with education, especially, the education of girls and women, runs throughout Wollstonecraft's writings. The two years Wollstonecraft spent managing and teaching in her own school in Newington Green made an inerasable impression on her first book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, In the More Important Duties of Life* (1787), the text that first established her as an author. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) calls for uniform education of men and women, which she thinks that only a national school system can implement. Both of her novels, *Mary* and the unfinished *Maria*, centrally address the question of self-education of their heroines.

In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, Mary Wollstonecraft writes: "In the following pages I have endeavored to point out some important things with respect to female education. It is true, many treatises have been already written; yet it occurred to me that much still remained to be said". In this text, Wollstonecraft explores the relationship between the inferior education of a girl and the limited opportunities available to a woman. Her first hand experience of her own life was at the back of her mind. Wollstonecraft was frequently a witness to her father's physical abuse of her mother, who meekly suffered her husband's violence. She also herself failed to receive emotional support from her mother, who openly preferred and indulged Mary's brother, Edward. Wollstonecraft's own formal education had consisted of nothing more than a few years in the village school when her family lived in Beverly in Yorkshire. From an early age she believed that this education had not prepared her for the struggles of life and so she had to engage in a programme of reading and self-improvement. In the *Thoughts*, she assumes an authoritative voice with which she addresses her audience. Her definite instruction is "Above all, try to teach them to combine their ideas...I wish them to be taught to think-thinking, indeed, is a severe exercise".

It is here in the *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* that Wollstonecraft first creates the continuum of female development from childhood to adulthood. Rational women must have a public exposure and it is only education which can endow them the authority and power to govern themselves. Wendy-Gunther Canada in her essay "a Voice from the Void" observes it that it is in the *Thoughts* that "Wollstonecraft first speaks directly in print about the void in women's lives created by the sexual politics of gender and generation ... This chapter is unique within the context of eighteenth century conduct books in that it considers how patriarchal privilege encoded in the customs of primogeniture and coverture limited the life choices of educated women in England" (Canada 40-70). In this text, Wollstonecraft bitterly attacks early marriages because she believes that marriage detracts a girl away from her educational enterprise to become imprisoned in the hearth of an unsuitable partner. This issue she later takes up in her novel, *Mary, A Fiction*. In the *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft has not only shown how social obstacles block a woman's right to education, empowerment and autonomy, but also how women have become victims by the dominating patriarchs.

In her advertisement to *Mary, A fiction*, Wollstonecraft promises her reader that in this "artless tale, without episodes, the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers, is displayed". In this novel, she continues her discussion of female development begun in the *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. The novel revolves around the coming of age of a young woman, fashionably educated and left with a fortune. The book represents Wollstonecraft's early attempts to analyze the situation of powerlessness of women within the home and civil society. It is here that she begins to equate women's condition as wives with slavery. *Mary* is rather an experimental novel, displaying the conflict between a thinking woman who desires to make her own way in the world and the obstacles she encounters from the world of opinions. Regarding this fiction, J.M. S. Tomkins's has rightly observed:

Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) had said that independence was the soil of every virtue... She had written *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) in which the mind of a woman who has thinking powers is displayed and had exhibited the development of these powers as consequent of the most unconventional behavior. She had spoken freely of passion and saw it as an educative force. (Tomkins 314).

Writing amidst the turmoil of the revolutionary decade of 1790-1800, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* envisions an optimistic stance of a virtuous citizen subject preparing to face a brave new egalitarian world. At the end of 1791, the French Feminist Olympe de Gouges published *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* and the question

of women's rights became central to political debates in both France and Britain. Wollstonecraft is prompted to write *The Rights of Woman* after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand Perigord's report *Rapport sur l'instruction publique* (1791) to the National Assembly in France:

Let us bring up women, not to aspire to advantages which the Constitution denies them, but to know and appreciate those which it guarantees them...Men are destined to live on the stage of the world. A public education suits them; it early places before their eyes all the scenes of life: only the proportions are different. The paternal home is better for the education of women: they have less need to learn to deal with the interest of others, than to accustom themselves to a calm and secluded life.

Wollstonecraft dedicates *The Rights of Woman* to Talleyrand:

Having read with great pleasure a pamphlet which you have lately published, I dedicate this volume to you: to induce you to reconsider the subject, and maturely weigh what I have advanced respecting the rights of woman and national education.

In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft is full-throated regarding the autonomy of the inner life of women, their dynamic psyche whose moral triumph was to be the foundation of the republican government. She attacks the inequitable system of female education for its subversion of the republican values of liberty and equality. Wollstonecraft speculates that the ideals of the Revolution—"the rights of men and the liberty of reason" propounded two years before *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) are absolutely essential as crucial elements for progressive political thought. On the basis of such assertions, Wollstonecraft in *The Rights of Woman* now demands civil rights and equal educational provisions for women. Her vision is comprehensive. She thinks of the progress of the whole of society in these terms:

I therefore will venture to assert that till women are rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks (Wollstonecraft 3).

Wollstonecraft relentlessly attacks Rousseau for limiting education to boys and consigning girls to a subservient "education for the body" alone. According to her, even in their traditional role as mothers and nurturers, women require a much more substantial education: "If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot" (Wollstonecraft 5). The proper mother is not an amiable, fashionable house-slave, but a reasonable liberated intellectual. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft claims a complete overhaul of the "false system" recommended by "all"

writers on “female education and manners” from Rousseau to Gregory. She calls for “civil equality and economic independence, as well as independence of mind” scarcely to be expected from women “taught to depend entirely on their husbands” (Wollstonecraft 5). Such independence will inspire women to come out of their society dictated roles as wives and mothers in order to pursue traditionally male professions, such as medicine, politics and business (Wollstonecraft 5). Wollstonecraft asserts:

It is time to effect a revolution in female manners- time to restore to them their lost dignity- and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. (Wollstonecraft 3).

Wollstonecraft opines that growing girls should take the “same exercise as boys” and older girls should practice “gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature”. Keeping the needs of daughters and sisters foremost in her mind, she advocates an ambitious scheme of national education. For Wollstonecraft, only a national system of day schools has the capacity to fundamentally change the social relations between the sexes. Raising girls and boys together in “national” day schools established throughout the country and making female education not only equal, but indistinguishable from (a reformed) male education, would enable the “improvement and emancipation of the whole sex” (Wollstonecraft 5).

By being educated together with boys in “public schools” (that is, state managed day schools), girls will learn to become “free” and “independent”, the best foundation for genuine companionship with men in later life. The enlightened mind fortified by a sound education will teach women to better appreciate the fine arts and the beauties of nature, in place of ignorance and low desires. Schooling in “political and moral subjects” will make women more “attentive to domestic duties”, by giving them the strength of an “active mind”. “Indolence and vanity”, not the higher pleasures of “literary pursuits” and the “steady investigation of scientific subjects” poisons domestic life (Wollstonecraft 5). The scientifically trained mother will moreover be in a better position to “nurse” her family’s physical and moral health, and therefore the school curriculum should include subjects like “elements of anatomy and medicine”. The learning of botany, mechanics, astronomy, reading, writing, natural history, natural philosophy and religion should essentially exist in the curriculum of national education. Along with these, the study of the political history of mankind and the progress of civilization must have a certain space in the syllabus. The outcome of such academic efforts will be the emergence of a group of independent-minded women who will be able to see through the reigning “prejudices” of the male-dominated society. As a revolutionary thinker, Wollstonecraft shows her contemporaries as to how education may pave the path for

emancipation and social empowerment of the downtrodden “second sex”. Although Macaulay had provided her with a foundation, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is unprecedented in its systematic character of the analysis of female subjugation and in its scathing critique of the earlier prescriptions for women's education.

As I have earlier noted, the initial efforts which were taken up by Eliot Drinkwater Bethune and Vidyasagar in the nineteenth century to spread education among the poor illiterate women of Bengal were zealously pursued in the subsequent years by Swami Vivekananda through his worthy disciple, Sister Nivedita. “Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man”, says Vivekananda. Society discriminates between a male and a female, whereas the *Vedanta* declares that the One and the same Self is present in all beings”. The Patriarchs of the society have subjected women to a state of abject helplessness and servile dependence on others and so women “weep their eyes out at the approach of the slightest mishap or danger” (Avinashilingam 63). Education must lead to the formation of a strong moral character in the females by which they “must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their way. Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world” (Avinashilingam 64). Women are representations of *shakti*, the power. It is through education that the latent *shakti*, lying dormant within them should be aroused. Hence religious teachings, literature and the knowledge of English should enrich the curriculum of female education. Along with this, the knowledge of home science, cooking and embroidery work are equally necessary for women to imbibe to build up a comfortable home.

The education which is to be imparted to women must be intellectual, spiritual and national. The essence of true womanhood consists in the preserving of chastity and purity in character. Education must help in awakening “true womanhood” whose external manifestation is to be expressed in the whole-hearted dedicated service to the nation. Brahmacharinis should take up the task to open educational centres in villages and towns with the zeal to educate girls and women. Now, what is the target of education? Education teaches a woman to be a good mother, observes Vivekananda. It is at this point that I do find proximity between Wollstonecraft and Vivekananda's vision regarding the goal of education. Wollstonecraft asserts: “...make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives and mothers...” (Wollstonecraft 187). And Vivekananda declares: “In the present day it has become necessary for them (women) to learn self-defence- how grand was the queen of Jhansi! So shall we bring to the need of India great fearless women- women worthy to continue the traditions of Sanghamitta, Lila, Ahalya Bai, and Mira Bai-women fit to be mothers of heroes, because they are pure and fearless... We must see to their growing up as ideal matrons of home in time. The children of such mothers will

make further progress in the virtues that distinguish themselves. It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born... If the women are raised, their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country; then will culture, knowledge, power and devotion awaken in the country” (Avinashilingam 66-67). Vivekananda's ideals concerning the role of education in forming diligent mothers find a close echo to what Wollstonecraft propounds: “If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot” (Wollstonecraft 5). Therefore the proper mother should not be an amiable, fashionable house-slave, but a reasonable liberated intellectual.

Vivekananda, the enlightened “sannyasi” materializes his dreams through his worthy disciple Sister Nivedita. In her, Vivekananda finds a “mistress, servant, friend in one”. Before coming to India, Sister Nivedita as Margaret Elizabeth Nobel embraced teaching in schools only at the age of seventeen. After working in Keswick as a school teacher, Margaret subsequently established a school at Wimbledon where she followed her own unique methods of teaching. She was herself a prolific writer and wrote in the paper and periodicals. She soon became a known name among the intellectuals of London. After Margaret came to India in November 1898, she, as Sister Nivedita opened a girls' school as in Bagbazar area of Calcutta. Sister Nivedita's target was to educate those girls who were deprived of even basic education. To promote her cause, Swamiji, organized a meeting at Balaram Bose's house. In this meeting, Nivedita explained the plan of her proposed school and requested everyone to send their girls to the school to study. Vivekananda inspired the members saying “Ye get up! Get up! It's not good enough to just become girls' fathers. All of you must cooperate in the matter of their education as per national ideals. Stand up and commit. Reply to her appeal. Say “We all agree. We shall send our girls to you”. On 13th November, 1898, on the day of Kali Puja, at 16 Bosepara Lane in Bagbazar Nivedita started the school. The school was inaugurated by Sarada Devi, in the presence of Swami Vivekananda. Sarada Devi blessed and prayed for the school saying: “I pray that the blessings of the Divine Mother may be upon the school and the girls; and the girls trained from the school may become ideal girls”.

Sister Nivedita went from home to home to educate girls, many of whom were in a pitiable condition owing to the socio-economic condition of the early twentieth century India. In many cases she encountered refusals from the male members of the girls' family. Nivedita had widows and adult women among her students. She taught sewing, elementary rules of hygiene and nursing apart from regular courses which echoes Wollstonecraft's proposed curriculum in her scheme of National Education. Collecting money for the smooth running of the school was no means an easy task. To meet the expenses, Sister Nivedita wrote and

lectured in England and America. Swami Vivekananda had identified a potential in Margaret, which he wanted to make use of for the educational upliftment of the poor ignorant Indian women. He had once confessed to his disciple: "I have plans for the women of my country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me" (Sister Nivedita). Swami Vivekananda wrote a poem to Sister Nivedita: *A Blessing to Sister Nivedita*, where he regards her as "The mistress, servant, friend in one":

The mothers's heart, the hero's will
The sweetness of the southern breeze,
The sacred charm and strength that dwell
Of Aryan altars, flaming, free;
All these be yours and many more
No ancient soul could dream before
Be thou to India's future son
The mistress, servant, friend in one.

Another emanated incarnation of universal motherhood was Shri Shri Sharada Ma. A simple, uneducated village girl, Ma Sarada won the heart of innumerable disciples to become their glorious mother. There was no need for her to assert her ideals through revolutionary methods, but the sheer charm of her personality, her tolerance and love for mankind turned her into the "Sanghajanani" of Ram Krishna Mission to enlighten and guide thousands of disciples spread throughout the world.

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