

Consider Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* as an early feminist tract.

Or

What does Wollstonecraft have to say about women education?

Or

Write a short essay explaining the key ideas discussed by Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication*.

Or

“Ultimately Wollstonecraft seems to demand equality for women mainly as a means to an end—that of a compassionate marriage—rather than as an end in itself.” Comment.

Ans. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was written in the backdrop of French Revolution. This was an era when a great philosophical debate was undertaken by eminent philosophers and critics regarding the justification of the revolution in France. Thus where on one hand there were English conservatives such as Edmund Burke, who considered the sudden overthrow of the French traditional authority to be unjustified on the other hand there were liberals such as Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft et al who defended the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity as propagated by the French Revolution. In this context Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the rights of Man* in which she opposed Burke's assertions (as proposed in *Reflection on the French Revolution*) that the French revolution would breed chaos and terror. However her more significant contribution to this era of revolution was *A Vindication to the rights of Women* which appears to be complementary to her previous document. Herein extending her argument as proposed in *The Vindication of the Rights of Men*, that civil and religious liberties are part of an individual's birth right Wollstonecraft challenges and questions the deprivation of women that has continued throughout ages and was still prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Now Wollstonecraft's treatise was certainly pioneering and remarkable because until its publication there was no 'feminist' tract that criticized the social and economic system which created double standard of excellence for male and female and relegated women to an inferior status.

Wollstonecraft's primary concern in her essay however was the celebration of the rationality of women. Women it was believed were susceptible to sensibility and too fragile to be able to think clearly. It was against such thoughts that Wollstonecraft first raised her voice. She argued that women were indeed capable of rational thought if educated properly. Though she accepts the presence of excessive sensibility in women that makes them to “bloom at every momentary gust of feeling”, and goes on to burr their rational faculty, Wollstonecraft attributes this weakness of the “farer sex” to the faulty social system in which men consider females rather women than human creatures. Wollstonecraft further asserts that for centuries man have been anxious to make women to be ‘allowing mistress’ than ‘affectionate wives’ and ‘rational mothers’. Women, she argues are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers that they should be beautiful and everything else is needless for them. Contextually Wollstonecraft expresses her exasperation when she says: “How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes.” Extending her arguments Wollstonecraft

opines, if girls were encouraged from the cradle early age to develop their minds it would certainly be seen that they too are rational creatures. And then there would be no reason left whatsoever for providing them less professional opportunities than their male counterparts.

Wollstonecraft's primary attack was directed towards the views of women education put forward by Rousseau, Dr. Gregory and countless others who held that if Women were educated and not docile creatures they would lose any power they had over their husbands. Hence Rousseau in his *Emily* proposed that education should be imparted to women only to empower them in order to please and accompany their spouses. Wollstonecraft was furious about this and asserted that, truth and knowledge can never be different for the two sexes. Contextually she states: "I do not wish them to have power over men but over themselves." In other words what the first feminist critic intended to convey was the fact that the perfect education for women should not cultivate ignorance in the name of and innocence and virtue. Rather it should enable them to establish their individuality in the society so that they are not reduced to mere ornaments to be traded with in marriage. Thus Women, Wollstonecraft argues should have the taste of independence that according to her is the grand basis of life and which God has equally bestowed on each and every individual on this earth. As it is only then they can comprehend their duties as wives, mothers and social citizens.

Another sense in which Wollstonecraft justifies rational female education is by implying that "if women are not prepared by education to become the companion of men then they will stop the progress of civilization" because then there would be no educated mother to make the children understand the meaning of patriotism or true citizenship. Thus it may be asserted that Wollstonecraft, while writing *Vindication of the Rights of Women* had the vision of an ideal family in her mind. A family where husbands were not tyrants to their wives and the babies were nourished by intelligent mothers and not sent away to nurses and then to boarding schools to learn their roles as national citizens.

In proposing the same type of education for girls as that proposed for boys Wollstonecraft further went a step forward and advocated that women should be educated together with the boys in a co-educational school. Wollstonecraft's idea of co-educational schooling as a prospective plan for national education was a counter attack on that of puritans and conservatives who radically opposed this schooling system. Thus in Chapter 12, "On National Education", Wollstonecraft proposes that all children irrespective of their sexes should be sent to a "country day school". Now justifying this she asserts, co-education is necessary as it cultivates the virtues of nationality and self-governance (that were usually attributed to men) and also the virtue of patience, gentleness, affection and tenderness (usually attributed to female) in both the sexes. Nay she further claims, as it is the marriage between a man and a woman which is the "cement of society", it is cogently required that both the sexes acquire a mutual understanding of one another from an early age. Nay she further goes on to advocate an informal conversational method along with lots of physical exercise should form the part of school education irrespective of sexual orientations.

After having presented her larger philosophic arguments regarding women education Wollstonecraft endeavored to convince the “reasonable men” the true necessity of a proper woman education so that they can come forward in order to generously snap the chains of ignorance that women have suffered through ages and encourage rational fellowship of their wives instead of slavish obedience. And by doing so Wollstonecraft claims that they (men) would find the women to be “more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, and more reasonable mothers” – in a word, better citizens.

Indeed Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was a path breaking attempt. It was an eye-opener for holding up woman’s cause that was so long neglected in the west. But at the same time, the fact remains debatable that to what extent *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* can be called a feminist text. The reason for this is that though in her treatise Wollstonecraft claims gender equality in the fields of education and moral law, her later arguments appears ambiguous and contradictory. As she famously and ambiguously states: “Let it not be concluded that I wish to invert the order of things; I have already granted, that, from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue.” Nay she (Wollstonecraft) further makes an appeal to the reasonable men to come forward and change the women’s position; which in the later course of the history has proved itself to be more fanciful than realistic. Since women’s rights like any other rights should be realized not through appeal always but by other stronger means. Again as a part of her argument that women should not be overly influenced by their feelings which is an hindrance in the path of rationality, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that they should not be constrained by or made slaves to their bodies or their sexual feelings. This particular argument has led many modern feminists to suggest that Wollstonecraft intentionally avoids granting women any sexual desire. Cora Kaplan argues that the "negative and prescriptive assault on female sexuality" is a "*leitmotif*" of the *Rights of Woman*.

However in spite of such limitations in Wollstonecraft’s treatise the fact that should be remembered while analyzing it, is that Wollstonecraft was writing in an age when Women were described being merely “frail creatures” formed for “softness and sweet attractive grace.” (Milton) It was an age when the very terms ‘feminist’ and ‘feminism’ were unknown. Moreover, there was no feminist movement to speak of during Wollstonecraft's lifetime. Hence in such a social, political and literary backdrop when Wollstonecraft spoke of radical changes in the field of Women education she certainly heralded the birth of a new sphere of social criticism- the feminist criticism. Even in today’s literary scenario the observations made by Wollstonecraft seems relevant when one speaks of eco- feminism that advocates, the fact that it is not the competition but co-operation between men and women that is the foundation of a happy society. So to conclude in the words of Virginia Woolf: “All women in the world should join hands in order to show their respect to the tomb of Mary Wollstonecraft... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their mind ... and their right of education. (No Room For One’s Own)

