

Reading The Contexts, Concerns, and Connotations of Human Rights in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

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Abstract

Literature and Law are indirectly related to each other; their relation is reciprocal and interesting. When it comes to exploring the issues of human rights in any discipline of human knowledge, literature appears a rich area to look into. In this context, Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman appears as a significant work, and the present paper examines the intersection of human rights in Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a powerful critique of systemic oppression and offers a potent call for social justice. Mary Wollstonecraft argues for women's rationality and emphasizes the right to education, reason, and independence in a patriarchal society of 18th-century England. The text highlights the forms of inequality based on gender and illustrates the universal need for human dignity, liberty, and justice. Further, the present paper seeks to understand how literature not only reflects but also resists oppression, contributing to the broader and multifaceted discourse on human rights, foregrounding the lived experiences of the oppressed while advocating systemic change. Moving ahead, the present study examines their thematic convergence to understand literature's role as a vehicle for human rights advocacy.

Keywords: Women's rights, Feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Introduction

Human Rights warrant the major concerns of any civilized society. All sorts of development can be ensured if human beings, the most capable and sustainable resources for making this world a better place to live in, can live a happy and decent life. As per the declaration of the United Nations (n.d.), "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (p. v), and this declaration appears as the most resonant and beautiful words of any international agreement. The concept of human rights is profoundly rooted in the ideals of freedom, equality, dignity, and justice that have long served as a critical framework for resisting oppression and

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articulating collective struggles across cultures and histories. As the ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (UDHR) explains that every individual is free from every kind of fear and terror, whether their person belongs to class, creed, ethnicity, nationality, or any other orientation. The United Nations (n.d.) declares:

The Universal Declaration promises to all the economic, social, political, cultural and civic rights that underpin a life free from want and fear. They are not a reward for good behaviour. They are not country-specific or particular to a certain era or social group. They are the inalienable entitlements of all people, at all times, and in all places- people of every colour, from every race and ethnic group; whether or not they are disabled; citizens or migrants; no matter their sex, their class, their caste, their creed, their age or sexual orientation. (‘United Nations’, p. v-vi)

Human rights are universal in nature. In the words of Eileen Hunt Botting, “Human rights advocacy in the wake of the 1948 Universal Declaration relies on the universalistic status of human rights in international law and policy. Human rights are meant to apply across nations and cultures to each and every human being, for the grave reason that we wish to prevent atrocities like those of the two world wars.” (26)

To be precise, literature offers written work that stands the test of time. It is a record of the development of human civilization. Any written work in its broad sense can be a form of literature. Literature appears as an artistic expression of thought. It is a record of humankind’s hopes and aspirations, ideals and dreams, failures and disappointments, intentions and passion. Since time immemorial, literature and human rights are deeply interwoven. Literature is internally associated with human rights because it can portray and analyze human experiences, including violations of rights, and promote sympathy and awareness. By discovering various voices and approaches, literature can highlight social injustice and moral dilemmas that fuel the struggle for human rights. In addition, literature can inspire actions and motivate every individual to advocate and build a fair and just world. Literature, particularly prose, has played a significant and transformative role in giving voice to the marginalized and critiquing structures of domination. The present paper explores the human rights issues and thematic concerns in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is a saga of confronting systemic inequality and demanding social justice through bold intellectual and emotional interventions.

Method

The author employed qualitative research methods in writing the present research paper, conducting an analytical study of Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman". The research utilizes associations and correlations to develop its ideas.

Discussion

Human rights are the lifeblood of any civil society. Ensuring rights for every individual is an indicator of the success of any good administration. While much has been achieved at the policy and normative level, the situation is quite different if implementation on the ground is assessed. There are many reasons why, despite the strong mandates at the global level, progress in implementation has been so slow. As in Gender Equality and Gender Justice, according to Hannan et al. (2007) that people often think gender equality can wait, not realizing it's important for good planning and making better policies. "A lack of understanding that gender equality has implications for policy development and planning in the areas/issues being considered" (p.3). While many recognize the importance of the broader concepts of equality and justice. It is because, in order to create a fair and just society, it is significant to impart equal rights to both genders of a society; either it is; right of education, right to livelihood, right to free speech and expression etc. and must destroy the inequalities prevailing in every society and nation across the globe such as gender discrimination, harassment of women, suppression of rights, sexual exploitation, slavery in marriage etc.

The men have compelled all burdens of household work on women, such as nurturing children, taking care of family members, without any excuses. In these drastic situations of life, women have suppressed their hopes, aspirations, and dreams of their own, and it is a profoundly debilitating factor for the society that has created such kind of paradigms where women are not treated equally, and have not been given their avowed place. The men generally called women irrational, weak, meek, sub-human, and have always considered them as an object and 'the other'. For such an instance, Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique* that, "Feminist rhetoric conceptualized 'the politics of housework,' which most women began practicing in their daily lives. Men are not yet taking equal responsibility for children and home, just as women are not yet treated as equal in many offices" (Friedan,22). It must be born in every mind of intellectual beings that if they bind women in the chains of inequality in every domain, then how will these suppressed beings survive? In the present era, we have encountered that women are capable of doing work and can unlock their chains of bondage at any cost and freely perform their innate capabilities in every sphere of life, if they have been completely liberated from every kind of

gender disparities. They can stand alone in social, political, and economic domains and can empower and establish themselves as equals as men. In this context, Friedan writes:

women breaking through the feminine mystique to their own political and economic participation and empowerment in the mainstream of society are not becoming more like men but are expressing in the public sphere some of the values that used to be expressed or allowed only in the private nurture of the home. The mystique we had to rebel against when it was used to confine us to the home, to keep us from developing and using our full personhood in society, distorted those real values women are now embracing, with new power and zest, both in the privacy of the home and in the larger society. And in so doing, they are changing the political and personal dimensions of marriage and families, home and the society they share with men. (Friedan, 22)

In her significant text *The Second Sex* (1949), French existentialist philosopher, social theorist, and feminist activist, Simone de Beauvoir, also describes the significant role of equality and dignity between the two sexes of society by reflecting on the idea that when two genders meet, both want control. If both try equally, a tense relationship forms—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. De Beauvoir and Judith Thurman (2011) write:

By reviewing prehistoric and ethnographic data in the light of existentialist philosophy, we can understand how the hierarchy of the sexes came to be. We have already posited that when two human categories find themselves face-to-face, each one wants to impose its sovereignty on the other; if both hold to this claim equally, a reciprocal relationship is created, either hostile or friendly, but always tense (De Beauvoir & Judith Thurman 96)

In his seminal work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), J.S. Mill reflected upon the function of law in the life of humankind to protect and establish equality, justice, and dignity in every sphere without any prejudice based on gender. J.S. Mill, further, emphasizes the freedom of every individual and criticizes the disparity of privileges affecting other individuals or persons because we are all equal before the law. J.S. Mill writes in 1878:

Again, in practical matters, the burthen of proof is supposed to be with those who are against liberty; who contend for any restriction or prohibition; either any limitation of the general freedom of human action, or any disqualification or disparity of privilege affecting one person or kind of persons, as compared with others. The *à priori* presumption is in favour of freedom and impartiality. It is held that there should be no restraint not required by the general good, and that the law should be no respecter of persons, but should treat all alike, save where dissimilarity of treatment is required by positive reasons, either of justice or of policy. (Mill, 3-4)

Considering all the texts that have been discussed, gender discrimination is prevalent in society. The present paper focuses on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which is written by the

eminent English writer and philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Wollstonecraft is best known for her advocacy on women's rights.

Mary Wollstonecraft's essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," published in the year 1792, is an initial work of feminist philosophy. It offers potent arguments on women's rights to education, and challenges societal norms that restrict women's potential. In her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she observes that men and women both have natural desires, but reason should guide them. With knowledge and kindness, love will bring modesty. Mary Wollstonecraft writes:

Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature; they are only brutal when unchecked by reason, but the obligation to check them is the duty of mankind, not a sexual duty. Nature, in these respects, may safely be left to herself; let women only acquire knowledge and humanity, and love will teach them modesty. (Wollstonecraft 146)

It is because, without the involvement of women, it will be difficult to develop a prosperous society and nation. So, women should have the right to equal education, empowering them with knowledge and opportunity. In the workplace, they deserve fair pay, safety, and leadership roles. In marriage, women have the right to choose their partner, live free from abuse, and make decisions equally. These rights ensure dignity, independence, and justice.

Mostly, the expressions of Mary Wollstonecraft are her lived experiences. In the words of Eileen Hunt Bottling:

Wollstonecraft thinly fictionalized her (and her friend Fanny's and her sister Bess's) experiences of patriarchal oppression in crafting her novels *Mary, a Fiction* (1788) and *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798). In her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), she turned the drama of her recent breakup with Gilbert Imlay into a psychological subtext for her philosophical meditations on the possibility of achieving a "single life with dignity." She also developed a distinctive first-person feminist voice across her oeuvre. Speaking with the "I" and the "We," she began to make claims for women's human rights in a solidaristic fashion, seeking to unite herself with all women ("O my sisters") in the cause of "justice" for their sex. (204)

In this series, the chimerical treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is a rudimentary formal work of feminism that investigates certain human rights concerns specifically dealing with the women's fundamental rights such as education, social positions and equality, Wollstonecraft argued that women have been placed at the lower section of

society and seemed inferior to men mainly because they were denied equal access in every sphere of life:

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. (Wollstonecraft 5)

Mary Wollstonecraft claims that women cannot be forced to focus only on household work and should not be restricted only to the four walls of the household. Even if uneducated, women will still interfere in important matters, ignoring their home duties and using clever tricks to disrupt logical plans that they do not fully understand or grasp. Wollstonecraft further states on women that:

I have repeatedly asserted, and produced what appeared to me irrefragable arguments drawn from matters of fact, to prove my assertion, that women cannot, by force, be confined to domestic concerns; for they will, however ignorant, intermeddle with more weighty affairs, neglecting private duties only to disturb, by cunning tricks, the orderly plans of reason which rise above their comprehension. (Wollstonecraft 5)

However, in the same context, in another work, *Feminism Is For Everybody*, Mary Wollstonecraft reflects on how the feminist movement began focusing more on getting equal rights at work and fighting male control. As women were seen more as victims in need of help through fair laws or special support, the earlier idea that women should first deal with their own learned sexism became less important. In *Feminism Is For Everybody*, Hooks and Gloria Watkins write that:

The direction of the feminist movement could shift to a focus on equality in the workforce and confronting male domination. With heightened focus on the construction of women as a "victim" of gender equality deserving of reparations (whether through changes in discriminatory laws or affirmative action policies), the idea that women needed to first confront their internalized sexism as part of becoming a feminist lost currency. (Hooks & Gloria Watkins 10)

Further Hooks and Gloria Watkins exhibited that “The vision of ‘women's liberation’ which captured and still holds the public imagination was the one representing women as wanting what men had” (p. 4). It is clear from the statement that women have been taught since birth, all the lessons regarding their etiquettes and all attributes that a woman must have as per the desires of men, women have been trained accordingly and, in this perspective, women have lost their liberation and have been captured into the clutches of the patriarchal system of dominance.

“A Vindication of the Rights of Women” critically expressed disagreement with Rousseau, illustrating that Rousseau loved being alone and strongly believed that humans were meant to live alone by nature. By this, he thought God made life only to bring happiness, so any evil must come from people, not from God. But in saying this, he praised one side of God while ignoring other important parts of God’s nature. In my opinion, it depicts that Rousseau had not understood the true meaning of God, who loves the entire creation, and every creature of His creation is unique and equal before Him. For this instance, Wollstonecraft states:

Rousseau became enamoured of solitude, and being at the same time an optimist, he labours with uncommon eloquence to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal. Misled by his respect for the goodness of God, who certainly-- for what man of sense and feeling can doubt it, gave life only to communicate happiness, he considers evil as positive, and the work of man; not aware that he was exalting one attribute at the expense of another, equally necessary to divine perfection. (Wollstonecraft 14)

“A Vindication of the Rights of Women” has also examined that for the atrocities of man, and for excuses, many simple arguments have been brought forward to prove that in the acquisition of two genders, virtue, to obtain a very different character: or to speak, women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind, which deserves the name of virtue. Wollstonecraft drops few lines:

The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force. Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (Wollstonecraft 20)

Further, in “A Vindication of the Rights of Women”, the writer expresses views that men have become a hindrance to women and questions Milton’s view of women as soft and graceful. She wonders if he meant, like in some old beliefs, that women have no souls and exist only to please men with beauty and obedience, especially when men stop thinking deeply and just seek physical pleasure instead. Wollstonecraft writes down some of the lines:

Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation. (Wollstonecraft 20)

However, for such context, in *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir and Judith Thurman (2011) mentioned “Aristotle’s idea that woman is merely matter, and ‘the principle of movement which is male in all living beings is better and more divine,’ is an idea that expresses a will to power that goes beyond all of what is known” (De Beauvoir & Judith Thurman, 113). Through this highly evocative statement, it is reflected that Aristotle believed women were just passive matter, while men had the active, powerful force in life. It represents that women are irrational, negative, illogical, emotional, obedient, nurturing, and caring, and a body enwrapped in beauty and nothing else, whereas men are rational, strong, tough, leaders, independent, aggressive in nature, and dominant. He thought this male force is better and more divine. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the writer sees this belief as a strong desire for male power, going beyond what is reasonable or truly known about people. In addition to this, there are many obnoxious notions for women that consider them weak, delicate, and incapable of constructing logical reasoning effectively in a patriarchal society that makes them financially dependent on their husbands. However, it has been found that women have been taught from the very beginning to focus on charm, beauty, and obedience instead of cognition, intellect, and ethical strength. Moreover, the women have been misguided from their true essence of existence and have been forced to satiate the desires of men who no longer help them to grow their wings of ambitions and happiness. The writer also supported women to pursue education and build careers in a variety of fields, including medical and business, and earn their own living. She explicitly talks about improving girls’ education as that purported for boys and concentrates on equipping them with skills to be appealing partners to men, rather than nurturing thinkers who could sustain themselves independently. Wollstonecraft (1792) states, “Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in” (p. 22). In these lines the writer has discussed the significant notion, asserting that women are equally honourable of receiving a rational as well as domestic education system that includes co-educational schools. Whereas, she further describes the education of both genders, which is quintessential so, to prevent any misconception and to construct a developed nation and also a fair and just society the cooperation of both sexes are highly significant. Additionally, she was very critical of the women of her time, insisting that they should abandon their reliance on men and pursue the same educational rights as men, despite it being restricted to them. In the text, Wollstonecraft presented a groundbreaking case for women’s equality in certain aspects, whereas she also censured how marriage became a tool to repress women and denounces their dependence on men. Wollstonecraft was an eminent writer of her time period, advocating for

the rights of women. Ultimately, there is still a significant journey ahead before women's rights are fully realized.

Conclusion

Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" reveals a powerful convergence of personal testimony, moral reasoning, and legal consciousness. It challenges systemic injustice. Wollstonecraft exposes gender inequality prevalent in 18th-century Britain, reflecting on the condition of women who were devoid of equal opportunities as men have and also have been considered the weaker section of society only dependent on men. But she also suggested various opinions where this gender discrimination can be dismantled, and a balanced society and nation can be developed. The text does more than protest oppression; and demands reform and underscores the necessity of institutional change. The law emerges as both a tool of oppression and a potential instrument of justice. Literature, in turn, humanizes abstract rights, giving voice to the oppressed and marginalized people and urging ethical engagement from the reader. By fusing personal experience with political critique, these authors expand our understanding of human dignity and freedom. Their works highlight how literature is quite a powerful weapon, and can influence legal reform, shape public opinion, and catalyze social transformation. In this way, the intersection of law and literature is not merely academic—it is essential for cultivating empathy, questioning power, and striving for a more just world. These texts remain enduring calls for equality, justice and dignity by proving that the written word is not merely a word but can be a force of liberation.

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