Gender and Identity: A South African Perspective on Mary Wollstonecraft's Politics and Literature

By

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DECLARATION

The Registrar (Academic)
UNIVERSITY OF KWA-ZULU NATAL

Dear Sir

I, Shamila Ramsookbhai

REG. NO: 8523596
Hereby declare that the dissertation / thesis entitled
Gender and Identity: A South African Perspective on Mary Wollstonecraft's Politics and Literature

Is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or to another University.

S Ramsookbhai
Signature

22 April 2004
Date

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My mini-dissertation will examine Mary Wollstonecraft's work in the light of the events that unfolded in the eighteenth century. Working within the limitations of the mini-dissertation, I will attempt to examine her politics and literature within the context of the French Revolution and the subsequent debates on the rights of man. However, it is disappointing to note that many writers have chosen to ignore Wollstonecraft when documenting the political tracts of the eighteenth century. An example of this glaring omission is demonstrated in Peter Gay's *Age of Enlightenment* (1966). In Gay's chronology where he records a history of significant events as well as the texts produced during the period during the Age of Enlightenment, no mention is made of Wollstonecraft or any other female writer of the time.

In the South African context a most recent collection of essays, *South African Feminisms Writing, Theory, and Criticism 1990-1994* edited by Margaret. J. Daymond, makes no mention of the influence of Wollstonecraft. In an attempt to explain the nature of South African feminism, the various writers draw from the 20th century feminist movements particularly the American and French Feminists as well as question the relevance of theses feminist movements in developing a South African feminism. As Cecily Lockett (1996:4) points out in "Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa", the discourses of feminism available to South African literary feminists have been developed in America, England and France. Wollstonecraft is a pivotal figure in relation to each of those aspects of

the Euro American feminist tradition. The lack of any mention of Wollstonecraft in this collection by the writers begs the question: Is Wollstonecraft relevant to the South African feminist movement? I will assert that the reality of Wollstonecraft's arguments, despite being written 300 years ago have materialized in many aspects. Her views on economics, politics and education have been realized in South Africa. I will argue that in understanding her relevance, we must first understand the historical context of her work, particularly the French Revolution (1789). According to Gary Kelly (1992:21) the revolution made possible Wollstonecraft's identity as social critic and of professional writer. The French Revolution then provided the occasion for turning her 'mind' and career to Revolutionary feminism. My study will draw on the events of the Revolution and situate Wollstonecraft's work within the political framework of the period. I also feel that the study needs to be situated in a historical perspective as the principles of Liberty, Equality and Freedom have had a direct bearing in shaping the Constitution of South Africa.

In presenting a South African perspective on Wollstonecraft, I will attempt to show the relevance of her work. I will foreground the parallels between the social and economic system that Wollstonecraft criticized and our present social and economic system in South Africa, the focus being on woman and their responses. While some may question the relevance of this "white middle class woman's" writings to our democracy, I will argue that given the circumstances in her life and the historical context of her work, she is relevant to issues of gender and identity in South Africa. In this introductory chapter I will outline the

reception of Wollstonecraft, her key principles and her relevance to South Africa.

1.1.Reception of Mary Wollstonecraft

Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) lived and wrote with an intensity and vision born of personal experience yet informed by a larger social and aesthetic reality.[1] She was the subject of much contempt, resulting in being called among the many epithets, a "philosophical serpent." Given the historical period that influenced her work, she certainly deserved such an "accolade". Such terms of endearment were bestowed upon her due to her foray into a predominantly male arena. Laurie Finke (1987:7) points out that although *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was not everywhere viewed with such loathing, a woman philosopher in the eighteenth century could be dismissed as unnatural, a perversion of nature.

If the initial positive reception to her work was soon repressed in the general conservative backlash following the French Revolution, she remained an inspiration and a reference for many subsequent attempts to improve the lives of women and to claim their political rights.[2] The balance between the rational and the emotional is an ideal stressed by Wollstonecraft even at those moments when she is deploring the vulnerability created by the passions. The same desire to mediate extremes informs her account of the French Revolution, even as it is posited within the accepted gender codes.[3]

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[1] Parke, 1990:106.
[2] Bahar, 2000:1
[3] Simpson, 1993:110.

As a result Kelly (1992:1) aptly calls her a Revolutionary feminist, as she was an advocate of the rights or claims of women in a specific revolutionary situation. Thus one finds that although *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written during a time of social and political upheaval, Wollstonecraft's focus was on gender issues, particularly women's rights undergoing radical changes:

> 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, 1985:132)

According to S.Conger (1980:143), in his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1798), Godwin, anticipating and perhaps even shaping the judgment of the twentieth century, regrets that *A Vindication Rights of Woman* "is a very uneven performance, and eminently deficient in method and arrangement" but pleads for "the importance of its doctrines, and the eminence of genius it displays." Simpson (1993:110) points out that Wollstonecraft faced enormous difficulties in reaching a suitable readership and while the conservatives despised all method and reason, male radicals who approved it for themselves were seldom committed to the emancipation of women.

My area of research will locate Wollstonecraft within the context of the French Revolution (1789), as it is this event that provided the impetus for her

political writings. Besides presenting a study of her political works, which are *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), I will also examine her novella *The Wrongs of Woman or Maria* (1798).

I have chosen these four texts because they present two views of Wollstonecraft. From her political writings we can gauge a product of the Enlightenment, writing in a 'masculine' style so that she could comfortably fit into a niche created by her male counterparts and boldly present her views. In *Maria* we find the Wollstonecraft who could remove the mantle and language of the Enlightenment and present us with a tale of women who are victims of abuse and oppression.

What is strikingly clear is that the political writings present a theoretical perspective of one's rights but *Maria* depicts a world hostile to the realization of these Rights on behalf of the economically disadvantaged. In *Maria* we clearly see this delineation of class structure and the resultant oppression. One can argue that Wollstonecraft was a proto-Marxian as her political writings suggest a concern with the economy and its effects on the poor. Wollstonecraft can be considered as a precursor of Marxist feminist as she espouses the central tenet of all forms of Marxist and socialist feminism which is the belief that women's situation cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-economic context, and that any meaningful improvement in the lives of women requires that this context be changed.[4]

[4] Bryson, 1992:232.

According to David Simpson (1993:108), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is partly a Puritan self-help manual, and partly proto-communist in its remarks on property and on the effects of rank and privilege. For Kelly (1992: 108) "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a critique of 'woman' constructed for court culture and appropriated by the professional middle-class cultural revolution through education in the broad sense, including socialization and culture."

According to Saba Bahar (2000:48) although Wollstonecraft reaffirms the value of domesticity and motherhood, she nevertheless gives it an entirely new meaning by refusing to place wives and mothers under the tutelage of male preceptors or husbands and by insisting, as in the case of her heroine Maria, on their right to choose. However, I will argue that *Maria* does not depict this freedom of choice but rather presents a reality which women are still experiencing: being emotional prisoners of abusive marriages. While Wollstonecraft argues in her politics for the rights of men and women, her literature demonstrates the reality these rights confront: a world in which women are subservient to men.

Wollstonecraft's politics and literature indicate a concern with addressing woman's subservience albeit in two distinct forms. Political writings were thus far the domain of the male writer/philosopher. Wollstonecraft's foray into this predominantly masculine arena illustrates that a woman, contrary to popular belief was equally adept at accomplishing such a task. Janet Todd (1994:vii) points out that in certain fundamental respects it is possible to see all of Wollstonecraft's political works in dialogue with Edmund Burke's ideas and

rhetorical stance.

The political works were written between 1790 and 1794, a peculiar period in English culture which in its richness of theoretical writing and enthusiasm for political discussion, can be compared only with the turbulent mid-seventeenth century. It was a period in which neighbouring France followed seventeenth-century England in trying to act out political and social theories. It was through writing that Wollstonecraft aimed to intervene in both the French Revolution debate and the Cultural Revolution in her own country, to turn them in the direction of feminism for the Revolutionary decade.[5] According to Vivien Jones (1994:174), when woman radicals of this period wrote the history of the French Revolution, they wrote it as romance or Gothic narrative, seeking to redeem and redirect revolutionary violence through established 'feminine' plots of sentiment and sexuality. According to Kelly (1976:xiii) the French Revolution transformed the liberal creed of the eighteenth century into the militant faith of state-reformation. Amongst the chief prophets of this new gospel was Wollstonecraft. Like other women in other revolutions she found her individual fantasies given tangible and universal form by 'the real romanticism of the Revolution'

Before Wollstonecraft, there were works suggesting the reform of female manners or proposals for improving female education, but there was no single-minded criticism of the social and economic system, which created a double standard for excellence for male and female, and relegated woman to an inferior

[5] Kelly, 1992:1

status.[6]

According to Valerie Bryson (1992:17) in the early eighteenth century what is not yet found is any direct challenge to women's social and economic positions or to the sexual division of labour. There was no coherent political programme or demand that the rights of male citizens could be extended to women. The early feminists addressed themselves almost exclusively to women of the upper and middle classes and there was no attempt to link the situation of women to other disadvantaged groups in society. For them it was through education and the exercise of reason that women could be made independent of men, and it is not until the third quarter of the eighteenth century that feminism was to become associated with wider demands for change.

While the French Revolution was to usher in change which was to sweep through Europe, Wollstonecraft as a feminist, writer on education and politics as well as a novelist, believed that she could through her ideas and writings also ignite the fires of another revolution: the emancipation and empowerment of women. Ironically she was a member of a radical circle in the 1790's who were mostly men. She was an early exponent of feminist radicalism, which is evident in her writings. Many critics therefore consider Wollstonecraft as the first major feminist. Wollstonecraft's politics and literature reflects her primary concern with the state of woman's oppression and herein lies her appeal. Looking at all forms of oppression be it slavery, religious oppression or oppression of woman, she attempts to suggest solutions.

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[6] Brody, 1985:29.

In analyzing the role of woman in society, she was the first writer to examine the duality of women in the public and private sphere and argued for civil equality. Drawing on the debates surrounding the Revolution, particularly Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, I will argue that her work is relevant to a South African context as South Africa depicts the fruition of Wollstonecraft's ideals regarding woman's rights. Our Constitution bears testimony to this.

Wollstonecraft's relevance however, to contemporary political theory and its relation to feminism was initially marginalized. The Victorian feminist, Harriet Martineau states:

> Woman of the Wollstonecraft order do infinite mischief, and, for my part, I do not wish to have anything to do with them. She is neither a safe example, nor a successful champion of Woman and her Rights (in Mendus, 2000:14)

Martineau's opinion no doubt is a result of the stories of Wollstonecraft's affair with Gilbert Imlay, her two pregnancies out of wedlock, and her liberated marriage to Godwin that gave her a notoriety which made her work sink into near-oblivion for almost a century.[7] By the end of the nineteenth century, interest in Wollstonecraft's life and work had been revived and was openly

[7] Vlasopolos, 1980: 469.

celebrated, thanks in large part to the impact of the New Woman and the rise of a full-fledged suffrage movement. New editions of her work were published, sympathetic biographies were written, and a university thesis, charting her relation to the Enlightenment and socialism, was undertaken.[8] Todd (1988:103) points out that in 1947, for example, she was subjected to the vicious attentions of Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham in *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex.* "Writing at the moment when women were being translated from war workers into domestic and sexy objects, bolstered by the 'feminine mystique', the authors created out of Wollstonecraft's life a cautionary tale of penis envy and gender confusion, inevitably punctuated by suicide attempts" (in Todd, 1988:3). In this view it seems to have been both ironic and retributive that she died in the supremely feminine way of childbirth. Although I am not particularly interested in a Freudian interpretation of Wollstonecraft, I have found D. Hoeveler's essay *Reading the Wound: Wollstonecraft's Wrongs of Woman or Maria and Trauma Theory,* interesting and it will be discussed in Chapter 4.

A recent study by Bahar: *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy* (2002) offers an insightful interpretation of Wollstonecraft's work. Bahar's study re-affirms Wollstonecraft's relevance to contemporary feminist debates. Recent studies have highlighted Wollstonecraft's importance for the network of Radical Unitarians, for the women of the Langham Place Circle, as well as for the American women's suffrage movement, all of which were directly involved in the nineteenth century movement for women's rights. Although the membership

[8] Bahar, 2000:1.

of these groups was largely middle-class, there is some evidence of her relevance to women in the emerging socialist and working-class movements.

1.2.Key Principles

In 1790 Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* as a response to the goals brought forth by the French Revolution. Miriam Brody (1985:17) describes it as the first sustained argument for man's emancipation based on a cogent ethical system. Predictably the argument found its friends and enemies, depending on how enthusiastically or suspiciously the reader viewed the great social changes being undertaken in France. More surely than any of her female contemporaries, Wollstonecraft took the first step toward liberating herself from the crippling "strictures of feminine propriety: she identified the ideology that assigned women their social position and cultural definition; she then argued that it was both unnatural and wrong" (Poovey, 1984:48).

Wollstonecraft's work thus remains as a cornerstone in women's rights and laid the foundation for modern feminism, which sees education as the access to achieve greater economic, political, and social status. *A Vindication of the Rights* of *Woman* examines women's rights within a particular historical framework. The majority of the chapters address her relationship to Rousseau, Burke, the French Revolution, and definitions of Reason, Enlightenment, Freedom, and Liberalism. Judith Evans (1996:27) points out that Wollstonecraft rests her case on the following key assumptions: that Reason, the capacity of acquiring knowledge, of forming judgments and of choosing general maxims of moral conduct, is of the

same kind in women as in men; that reason is a necessary condition of virtue; that the emancipation of women towards equality demands the dominance of reason over the passions and as regards their relationship with men, of rational fellowship over love.

The revolutionary fervour also gained momentum in intellectual circles as writers now examined and wrote about social issues. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, women are challenged by Wollstonecraft to be part of this revolution and not to be regarded as helpless, charming adornments in the household. She advocates education for women to help them to achieve a sense of self-respect and a new self-image, an aspect that women today are trying to achieve. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* made Wollstonecraft a major figure in the French Revolution debate and the major voice of the feminist intervention in the bourgeois cultural revolution.[9] According to Todd (1994:xvii) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* even more than the *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft was caught up in the revolutionary excitement of progressive thought in England, clearly writing in the context of an actual revolution that indicated a possibility of real political change.

It is strange that at a time when political turbulence was destabilizing society, Wollstonecraft would want to assert woman's rights. While labeled as the founding mother of feminism, she has also been called a 'hyena in petticoats.' (Brody, 1985:7). At a time when Liberty, Equality and Fraternity became the motto in France, Wollstonecraft chose to write about the emancipation of

[9] Kelly, 1992:140.

women. Whereas Enlightenment philosophers argued that political authority is artificial and conventional they assumed that relations between the sexes and within the family are based on natural authority. Wollstonecraft argued against this assumption in favour of a conception of Reason as the sole authority in all matters and in all spheres.[10] Despite the fact that to a large extent she has been marginalized in South Africa, I will argue that her writings are valid for all women going beyond barricades of race and class.

1.3.The Relevance of Mary Wollstonecraft

The issue of woman's rights is presently the subject of ongoing debate, as religion, cultural practices etc are still imposed on woman rendering her immobile to assert her independence. Despite the fact that Wollstonecraft wrote in the 18th century her arguments are of relevance to the 21st century woman Her belief that woman should be liberated from patriarchal dominance is a battle that feminists today, irrespective of their theoretical perspectives, are still engaged in. Wollstonecraft's work appeals to me because of its universality. Despite the risk that universality can mean the elevation of one set of norms, I want to suggest that her arguments hold true for woman irrespective of race or class. Her appeal for the rights of woman cannot be confined within social boundaries or within a particular era but speaks for all of women. Wollstonecraft's portrayal of woman being exploited and abused, despite legislation being put in place to prevent such practices still reflects reality.

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[10] Gatens, 1977:113.

S.Cox (1990:91) contends since at least the time of Wollstonecraft's devastating attack on Burke's feminization of sensibility in *A Vindication of the Rights* of *Woman* (1792) "there has been a hypothesis that something called patriarchal hegemony has conspired to imprison women mentally and physically."

In assessing her relevance to the contemporary world, I propose to reflect on her arguments from within a South African context. As a woman in a post-apartheid South Africa, I am fortunate in that some of her arguments have come to fruition. In terms of labour legislation and gender empowerment I am now fortunate as I now have access to many advantages that were previously denied to women. However, as Wollstonecraft contends in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the economic disparity arising out of class structure can prevent the realization of rights. This is particularly true of South Africa. As Virginia Woolf states:

> She is alive and active, she argues and experiments, and we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living. (Woolf in Parke, 1980: 106)

My study of Wollstonecraft's politics and literature comprises five chapters. covering the following areas. Chapter One introduces the rationale behind the study. Chapter Two will outline Wollstonecraft's biographic details as to a large extent her intellectual development and philosophy was linked to her biography.

In this chapter my focus is on women and the politics in the eighteenth century as this is integral in shaping Wollstonecraft's politics and literature. Wollstonecraft's ideals and the nature of her feminism are discussed in relation the politics of the eighteenth century. The philosophers of the period espoused that women were incapable of the full development of Reason.

The politics of the Enlightenment and Reason will be discussed and its influence on feminist political theory. Wollstonecraft is placed within the Enlightenment tradition, as she believes in the power of Reason to reform sociopolitical life. Debates around the Enlightenment will be mentioned as Wollstonecraft both endorsed and challenged the Enlightenment tradition of individual Reason, Progress and Freedom. The ideology of the French Revolution will be examined as it has bearing on Wollstonecraft's politics. The role of the women during this period resulted in the formulation of feminist claims that was to be incorporated in Wollstonecraft's politics and fictionalized in her literature.

Chapter Three will focus on the Revolution controversy. Edmund Burke's *Reflections* will be discussed at length, as it is this text that precipitates Wollstonecraft's politics and literature. Burke's response and comments on the French Revolution and his defense of English conservatism displayed an 'ignorance' of the crisis in France. Burke's essay afforded Wollstonecraft the opportunity of engaging in a political debate that demonstrates not only her skill as a polemicist, but also her acute understanding of the politics of the period.

Wollstonecraft's response to Rousseau and certain arguments of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* will also be briefly discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Four will entail a study of *Maria*. While Wollstonecraft asserted 'a revolution in female manners' in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Maria* reflects the stark reality of these assertions. Wollstonecraft's intention in her literature is to depict the 'wrongs of different classes of women.' The literary text thus becomes a vehicle for exploring the viability of the politics. It is in *Maria* that we confront woman in an ambiguous relation to the eighteenth century Enlightenment ideal of man and Wollstonecraft's attempt to rewrite revolution and history in a sentimental novel.

The reality of abuse that faces the women in *Maria* will be discussed in relation to Wollstonecraft's arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights Of Woman*. While Wollstonecraft was to demand equality for the married woman in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* in *Maria* this equality proves to be non-existent. Chapter Five will conclude by underlining the relevance of Wollstonecraft's work, particularly her social reforms to South Africa.

CHAPTER 2

Wollstonecraft is one of the many writers who wrote at a time when the political and social turbulence of the French Revolution affected all aspects of European society.[11] Given the close kinship between her life and her politics, the subject matter of much of her writings and her own lived experience, it seems appropriate to at least indicate the links between her intellectual development and her biography. Susan Mendus (2000:16) suggests that in order to reconcile Wollstonecraft's life with her philosophy, we must understand exactly what her philosophy is and, most importantly, the background against which it was written. The theory which Wollstonecraft puts forward in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is that women, like men, are first and foremost rational creatures and that the possibility of moral goodness consists in the development of their rationality.

2.1.Mary Wollstonecraft: A Brief Biography

According to Moira Gatens (1977:115) Wollstoncraft's life was certainly a struggle and undeniably eventful. She lived through one of the most turbulent and politically unstable times in European history. She was vocal in the movement that sought to restore to "men" their natural rights and was adamant that women also possessed natural rights and natural equality. Much of what she wrote is concerned to expose and remedy the social and political injustices

[11] Brody, 1985: 8

experienced by women. However, her work as a whole displays a passionate rejection of oppression in general, regardless of its specific form.

In addition to ending the social order of "one of the most esteemed nations in Europe, the French Revolution exploded many political theories; it even caused some philosophers to wonder whether there was *any* discernible connection between ideas and real events" (Poovey, 1984: 82). Wollstonecraft was no exception. Claire Tomalin (1974:65) paints a bleak picture of Wollstonecraft who journeyed alone to France to escape the torments of her passion for Henry Fuseli. Here she watched a very dignified king of France ushered under guard through the streets of Paris. "For the first time in her life she found herself unable to sleep without a lighted candle, and her ideals of human perfectibility fell beneath the blade of the guillotine. It was also in Paris, and in the wake of Fuseli's rejection, that Wollstonecraft buried her theories about respectful esteem"(Tomalin, 1984:65).

Wollstonecraft was born in 1759, the eldest daughter in a family of seven children. She soon came to resent her father, who during her childhood, sank from would-be gentleman to a drunkard who treated his wife with contempt. The lack of kindly parental authority seems to have haunted her throughout her life. She railed against all forms of patriarchal power, whether of father over children or king over country.[12] Her family circumstances also provided an impetus to write A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Wollstonecraft was witness to the abuse her mother suffered at the hands of her father. She also

[12] Todd, 1991: viii.

resented her mother for her meekness under the treatment.[13] Meekness was of course a trait that Wollstonecraft certainly did not possess. This boldness is clearly demonstrated in her dedication to M.Talleyrand-Perigord in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where Wollstonecraft states:

> 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. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:89)

Wollstonecraft is referring to the Constitution that was put in place after the monarchy was toppled and the National Assembly came into being. Wollstonecraft frames her question so that "women's equal claim to reason is its logical presupposition and not the hypothesis it sets out to defend. Her quarrel with the French politician, as with the other men she takes to task, is not whether women are rational, but rather why this rationality is not allowed to flourish and grow."(Bahar: 2000:18)

However, Wollstonecraft's demand for justice was not felt in her home as her father often broke into a violent rage and abused her mother. The despotic

[13] Brody, 1985:12.

parenting that Wollstonecraft endured is depicted in *Maria* in the heroine's unsatisfactory childhood. One can only surmise that it was bleak home environment that led Wollstonecraft to find solace in her friends, her friendship with Fanny Blood being her longest attachment.

In 1778, in a bid for financial independence, Wollstonecraft left home and was initially employed as a companion to an elderly widow at Bath. It was during this period that she read Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, and the "sensibility and penetration" she discovered there helped her to define the distress she had felt for so long. "I am like a *lily* drooping," she postures in concluding a letter that mentions Rousseau.[14] She fulfilled a daughter's role and returned home when her mother took ill, nursing her mother till her death. She then moved in with Fanny Blood's impoverished family and helped them earn a living through sewing. The Bloods were in a lower social position than Wollstonecraft had been used to and Fanny's sister possibly became a prostitute and certainly entered the workhouse. Some of Wollstonecraft's experiences during this time might well have informed her depiction of lower-class suffering in *Maria.*

However, it was during this period in 1783 that she decided to become self sufficient, and with the assistance of Fanny Blood and her sisters she opened a school in Newington Green. Mary Poovey (1984:50) contends that even in her precarious position as a self-supporting workingwoman, Wollstonecraft remained, a child of the middle classes. As we will see in her work *A Vindication*

[14] Wollstonecraft in Poovey, 1984:53.

of the Rights of Men, she continued to identify with the middle-class ideal of self-reliance and with the bourgeois aspirations that had impelled her father to leave the silk trade for the more gentlemanly occupation of farming. However, I will argue that her concerns transcended the interests of her own class.

According to Miriam Brody (1985:14) it was while teaching at Newington Green that Wollstonecraft experienced intellectual growth as she came into contact with the liberal intellectuals and ministers who stimulated her zeal for independence. What had begun merely as a youthful rebellion against parental authority became slowly, under the influence of the liberal philosophers of Newington Green, a condemnation of all arbitrary power. Although the school was a failure, the experience she gained here was a stepping-stone and an intellectual foundation. In 1787 Wollstonecraft became a part of a circle of liberal and radical intellectuals: Henry Fuseli, the Swiss painter; Joseph Priestly, a chemist and radical in politics and theology; William Godwin, the political philosopher; the poet William Blake; and the peripatetic revolutionary, Thomas Paine.

As a member of an 'Academy' of philosophers, theologians, educationists, poets, painters, scientists, and critics, most of whom were men, she had good reason to feel that she had won herself a measure of equality and freedom.[15] Within the group of radical artists, writers, and philosophers who frequented Joseph Johnson's publishing house in St. Paul's Churchyard, Wollstonecraft found reassuring proof that it was possible to be a "self-made" man, but she also

[15] Kelly, 1979:275

encountered the more troubling but initially unrecognized problem that to be a 'self-made" woman involved altogether different obstacle.[16]

According to Poovey (1984:55), by 1788 Joseph Johnson had published two books for Wollstonecraft, which epitomizes the two poles of her emotional struggle. However, it would be a mistake to see philosophical concerns as the primary impetus behind her early writing. She wrote the first book *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) in order to meet personal debts. In this text Wollstonecraft advocated the ideal principles of self-control and submission that theoretically guaranteed a woman love. Encouraged by Johnson, she wrote *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), which is a melodramatic heightening of Wollstonecraft's own love for Fanny Blood. Kelly (1976:ix) states that in *Mary* Wollstonecraft confronts the problem of sensibility in fiction and life head on. Todd believes that *Mary*:

> Has value as an early effort at the creation of an alienated intellectual woman, the beginning of a line that would include the more substantial heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, women who tried to make their own way in the world and who expressed a complex misery at their situation and at the feminine images available to them. (Todd, 1991:x)

[16] Poovey, 1984: 56

Todd's description of fiction's heroines is also an apt description of Wollstonecraft's life as her way in the world was also one of misery. As a result of a failed relationship with Gilbert Imlay she attempted suicide but survived and married William Godwin in 1797.[17] However, the happiness she found with Godwin was short lived as in 1797, due to complications arising out of childbirth, she died. She was buried in St Pancras where she had been married five months before. Todd (1991:12) states that Godwin assuaged his grief by writing the *Memoirs* of his wife, which scandalized the nation with its robust acceptance of her irregular life, and by editing her *Posthumous Works*, including the unfinished *Maria* and *The Cave of Fancy*. For the former he made the same demand of the readers that he had made in his *Memoirs* on behalf of his wife's first novel, *Mary:* that they bring to the work warm-hearted sensitivity rather than 'fastidious' criticism.

Tomalin (1984:226) points out her death coincided with the falling off of many things she had believed in. She had embodied the spirit of the age faithfully, its political optimism, its faith in willpower, self-improvement and education. She had hoped that courage and good intentions might triumph over dead convention, and that the whole structure of society might be reformed and renewed by philosophers.

[17] Brody, 1985:15.

2.2.Wollstonecraft's Ideals

Zillah Eisenstein (1986:89) states that Wollstonecraft, although included in eighteenth-century radical circles in England, stood apart from the male radicals, in that she specifically wished to open up the new freedoms of bourgeois society to women. Wollstonecraft's brand of feminism was probably labeled as radical not because of her desire to uncover to the root cause of oppression but rather because of the fact that for the first time a woman wrote about woman's rights from a political, philosophical and feminist perspective. At a time when the rights of man were being propounded in France, Wollstonecraft chose to appropriate the language of Enlightenment for her own sex. This involved a tension since the language of Enlightenment was of a patriarchal nature as it was men who were at the core of the intellectualism that prevailed during this era, be it the field of the sciences or the arts.[18]

The appeal to Reason dominated not only the thinking of men but also of woman, as Wollstonecraft illustrates. Reason may have provided the impetus for her writing but one may also argue that the political period of the time was singularly responsible for providing the framework for Wollstonecraft's arguments. Bahar (2000:49) suggests that the 'public woman' that Wollstonecraft vindicates is, then, not necessarily in the public sphere, although she is clearly committed to civic action and participation. The public woman for Wollstonecraft was also a wife and mother who was equally adept in engaging in civic duties.

[18] Gay, 1963:67

As Poovey (1984:59) points out, the early stage of Wollstonecraft's life and writing is characterized by the persistence of two conflicting desires. On the one hand, she constantly craved the emotional rewards that propriety decreed were every woman's most important birthright: love, gratitude, and a sense of being necessary to someone else's happiness. Poovey (1984:59) further points out that Wollstonecraft was driven by a fierce determination to be independent, free not just from financial debts but, more significantly, from feeling itself, from hope, from the emotional demands that were also considered a part of 'female 'nature.

Enlightenment philosophers were thus far men and, by appropriating the language of Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft was actually appropriating the language of men, men who believed that woman within the family unit was to be under this 'natural authority'. According to Kelly (1992:109), in order to carry this rhetorical task Wollstonecraft feminizes 'philosophy', polemics and the politics of a particular moment in the evolution of the French Revolutionary state and the British debate on the French Revolution. She incorporates the themes of earlier conduct books and educational writing but re-situates them in the context of the Revolutionary decade. By means of relentless sociological analysis she relates this feminism to the major political issues of the day.

Wollstonecraft's argument, as is evident in A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was that natural authority should be replaced by Reason. In her quest for establishing the nature of natural authority she refers to the Bible, the origin of natural authority:

> Probably the prevailing opinion that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses' poetical story; yet as very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam's ribs, ... that man from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to show that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:109)

Wollstonecraft quotes from the book of Genesis, which according to Eisenstein (1986:35) establishes woman's responsibility for the existence of sin in the world. Woman, by her fall, brought sin into the world. She is responsible for the evil in society by the law of nature and the law of God. Bahar (2000:15) asserts that in these comments Wollstonecraft echoes the concerns of other members of the Joseph Johnson circle who were interested in questioning the historical status of the Bible and especially the way these 'poetical stories' and their interpretations serve the interest of the priest craft who strive to control the rest of humanity.

Although Wollstonecraft states after this paragraph that she does not wish to invert the order of things, she is referring to the Bible, particularly the book of Genesis, and is questioning it regarding the creation of man. She is questioning

the authenticity of the Creation as she now refers to an aspect in the Bible as a 'poetical story.' Wollstonecraft is questioning two aspects on the creation of man and woman. Firstly that woman was created for man and that woman was created for man's convenience or pleasure. These two points are the foundation for Wollstonecraft's feminist argument and is the basis for her philosophizing in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*

2.3.Women and Politics in 18th century England

History has shown us that the trauma of a country in the midst of political and social upheaval is usually reflected in the arts. While the rule of a country is thrown into disarray, the artist, poet or writer cannot remain immune to the changes that occur in the form of War, Revolution or Reform. England in the 17th century was a period of transformation brought about by the Civil Wars which resulted in a fluctuating period of parliamentary rule and rule by the Monarchy. It was inevitable that the events of the Civil War and the Interregnum would politicize many women as well, as there is evidence of women demonstrating, rioting and petitioning parliament.[19]

In the eighteenth century the Revolutionary feminists of the 1790's advocated the rights and claims of women within an intense debate over a sudden and violent revolution, and within the longer revolution that founded the modern state in Britain.[20] There was indeed a strikingly widespread consensus that the principles of rational individualism were not applicable to

[19] Bryson, 1992:12.
[20] Kelly, 1992:2.

women, for it was held that by their very nature women were incapable of the full development of Reason. Thus we can find in the writings of Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu and above all Rousseau, the idea that women are essentially creatures of emotion and passion.[21] Rousseau's antifeminist arguments constituted a response to the many women writers who published critiques of the superficiality of education during the eighteenth century. These writers defended women's right to reason and to acquire advanced knowledge in the best Enlightenment tradition: "critiques of women's subordinate status provoked an awareness that the relations between the sexes were neither God-given nor determined exclusively by 'Nature,' but socially constructed, in other words, they understood the concept that we today call gender" (Offen 2000:32).

According to Valerie Bryson (1992:18) this was a period in which the stress or rationality and the questioning of traditional authority which began in seventeenth-century philosophy and was to reach its fullest expression. It was also a period dominated by the experiences of the American and French revolutions, and in which philosophical debates on the nature of freedom and human rationality were to take tangible form in the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of Man and Citizen (1789). What united the philosophers of this so-called Age of Reason or the Enlightenment were their optimism and their belief in progress through the onward march of human reason and knowledge. Reason replaced God or antiquity as the standard of right or wrong, and no institution or authority was

[21] Bryson, 1992:18.

to be exempt from its judgment.[22]

The Enlightenment affirmed that reason could rule the world and men change their obsolete forms of life if they acted on the basis of their liberated knowledge and capacities.[23] Karen Offen (2000:31) is of the belief that Enlightenment debate can thus be seen as a spawning ground for enquiry into the causes and constructions of women's subordination.

According to Gatens (1977:112), Reason and feeling is the governing dichotomy and the source of the major conflicts in Wollstonecraft's work and in her life. It is her concentration on this dichotomy and her obvious faith in the power of reason to reform sociopolitical life that places her firmly within the Enlightenment tradition. Anca Vlasopolos (1980:462) states that in a century in which philosophers and artists dissociated Reason and Sensibility and in which the upholders of Reason began to win important political victories, Wollstonecraft's awareness of audience shows astuteness. Wollstonecraft's view that Reason was the basis of rational citizenship, and that it involved the overcoming or control of love and passion also caused her problems at a more personal level. Although she recognized the existence of female sexuality, this was only to insist that it, like love, must be subordinated to reason, so that marriage and motherhood must be based on rational choice and duty.[24]

According to Herbert Marcuse (1941:253) beginning with the seventeenth century, philosophy had quite definitely absorbed the principles of the rising

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[22] Soboul, 1974:67.
[23] Marcuse, 1941:342.
[24] Bryson, 1992: 25.

middle class. Reason was the critical slogan of this class, with which it fought all who hampered its political and economic development. No clear-cut definition of Reason, and no single meaning for it, ran through these periods. Its meaning changed with the changing position of the middle class.

Man was to discover once again the dignity that he had lost. Liberty in every field, economic as well as political, was to stimulate his activity.[25] The men and women who wrote on socio-political issues in such a context were not the sages of more peaceful periods but engaged polemicists. They believed that their ideas might soon be put into practice; they also knew that their publishing might have political and social consequences for their personal lives.[26] In Wollstonecraft's lifetime both print culture and literature became the class property of the professional bourgeoisie and were used as instruments in a class-based cultural revolution.[27] However James Schmidt is of the opinion that:

> Enlightenment has also been criticized for its insensitivity to the tragic character of moral conflicts and for its naive assumption that all dilemmas have simple solutions. It has been argued that its attempt to construct a moral philosophy ended in failure, leaving us with either an impoverished moral vision that suppresses all values that cannot be reduced to

[25] Soboul, 1974:28.
[26] Todd, 1994: vii.
[27] Kelly, 1992:9

> instrumental efficiency or a corrupted moral discourse in which ethical evaluations are nothing more than a mask for individual preferences. Its racism and its sexism have not passed unnoticed. (Schmidt, 1996:1).

Anne Phillips (1996:6) points out that as a result of recent developments in feminist political theory, the humanism of the Enlightenment has come under general attack, not just for its over confident expectations of progress but also because of its abstractions and universalizing claims. Feminist theorists have a particularly embattled relation to the question of Enlightenment. Some feminists argue that the Enlightenment tradition of individual Reason, Progress, and Freedom is a precondition for the discourse of women's liberation, and for the political gains that women have won. Even feminists who have a qualified relation to the Enlightenment suggest that 'women have not yet had their enlightenment.'[28]

"Wollstonecraft's career virtually documents the way one woman moved from the status of unreflecting, passive object to that of a self conscious, articulate, and vindicating subject" (Poovey, 1984:48). In both her life and her art she explicitly raised the questions that late eighteenth-century intellectuals implicitly posed to the normative definition of woman: if a female's most salient characteristic is her emotional responsiveness, what role can a woman play in the

[28] Schott, 1996:472

society of reason and enlightenment that is being proclaimed by the philosophers?[29] Historians are divided about the historical implications of the Enlightenment for women for whom it was not a period of unequivocal progress. Among the many writers who attempted to address the role of women in the Enlightenment was Mary Astell, a precursor of Wollstonecraft.

In 1696 Mary Astell, in *An Essay in Defense of the Female Sex*, declared that 'souls are equal'. Mind should therefore be developed in woman as well as men if women were to gain salvation and also play their role in emergent professional middle-class culture.[30] In 1700 Astell made the connection between equality and democracy when she questioned why those who rejected the absolute sovereignty of a king accepted this as natural in a husband.[31] It is possibly because of this questioning that Dale Spender (1982:52) believes that to label *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as the first major feminist treatise is to do Astell a serious injustice as almost one hundred years before, she put forward a similar thesis.

According to Bryson (1992:17) in many ways, the middle years of the eighteenth century seem to represent a retreat from feminism, as arguments for women's rationality became less fashionable than belief in their innate weakness and dependence on men. The ideas of Astell and her contemporaries fell into disrepute, and the very names of these early feminists were forgotten. However, although Astell based her arguments on the liberal idea of rationality, unlike

[29] Poovey, 1984:48
[30] Kelly, 1992:18.
[31] Phillips, 1991:1.

Wollstonecraft she did not accept the liberal idea of political rights. Nevertheless, although there was no systematic analysis of women's situation, individual complaints about their lot continued, and the question of women's education never completely disappeared from the agenda. Many women continued to write and publish throughout the period, and the most famous of these were the 'bluestocking' group of 'salon intellectuals'.

Offen (2000:36) points out that although they expressly opposed feminist ideas and accepted a place secondary to men in the literary world, their very existence as a group of intellectual women, publicly discussing and publishing from the 1750s onwards, could be seen as a statement about women's ability and role in society: no longer a silenced majority, women could not be entirely excluded from public debate.

The most positive reading of this period is that the Enlightenment legitimized safeguards in theory, which were not secured in practice for nearly another century. Mary Schott (1996:473) points out that looking at the Age of Enlightenment in France, Claire Moses argues that the eighteenth century ended in repression. The uniform legal system enshrined the Rousseauan concept of the difference of women from men. The Civil Code, a product of the French revolution, recognized the rights of all citizens but excluded women from full citizenship. Therefore some women's status worsened in relation to men's status and some women's status worsened absolutely. Whereas earlier some noble women could escape the full harshness of patriarchal laws, these opportunities were now erased.

According to Tomalin (1984:165) the French Convention of 1793 rejected the Civil Code offered by the *Comite de Legislation*, which would have given married woman a great measure of equality and independence. Too many deputies asserted that that the female sex was naturally inferior to the male. This was the first real setback to the original philosophic ideal of the Revolution that all should be equal before the law but it accorded with deeply felt prejudices. Schott (1996:473) further points out that the eighteenth-century views of women were contradictory, providing both encouragements for the emergence of feminism and the weapons to gun it down. For example, the Civil Code served as a rallying point for women in enshrining the Rousseauan concept of the difference between women and men, in which women remained subordinate to men.[32] The course of the feminist movement in France during the Revolution was confused and, though it began hopefully enough, its outcome was disappointing. Much of the theoretical discussion of women's rights had come initially from men, in their capacity as legislators.[33]

According to Marcuse (1941:3) the ideas of the French Revolution thus appear in the very core of the idealistic systems, and, to a great extent, determine their conceptual structure. As the German idealists saw it, the French Revolution not only abolished feudal absolutism, replacing it with the economic and political system of the middle class, but it completed what the German Reformation had begun, emancipating the individual as a self-reliant master of his life.

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[32] See Schott's argument, 1996:243.
[33] Tomalin, 1984:153.

According to Karl Marx:

> The French Revolution was only "partial," "merely political," since it emancipated only a portion of civil society, the property owning bourgeoisie .It did not create a "universally human" emancipation. (Marx in Furet, 1988:5)

Marx's 'universal human' applies to both man and woman. The Revolution according to Marx did not emancipate the peasants and working class. However, women were actively involved in events leading to the Revolution.

2.4 .The French Revolution and Woman's Rights

Harriet Applewhite (1990:103) argues that during the spring and summer of 1792, women participated in a movement of political radicalization in revolutionary Paris. However, it was the working class women who became the Revolutionary women. They helped to legitimate and dramatically expand the newly achieved popular sovereignty and to challenge the assignment of women solely to the private sphere. The full extent of their involvement in the revolutionary movement is manifested in a series of key episodes: the women's march on Versailles in October 1789, women's participation in armed processions of the spring and summer 1792, the organized insurgency of women in the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women in May—October 1793, and

women's participation in the opening demonstrations of the insurrections of May 1795.[34]

The massive presence of women, their words and acts, made a historically significant difference in the dynamics and outcomes of events. At the most basic level women dramatically increased the numbers of those challenging the political status quo. However, Wollstonecraft presents an alternate view, suggesting in Book V, Chapter II of *A View of the French Revolution* a conspiracy theory undertaken by the Duke of Orleans. According to Wollstonecraft (1994:345), the Duke was incensed against the queen and saw an opportunity to gratify his revenge and ambition. The Duke saw it fit to put in motion a body of the most desperate women, some of whom were half famished for want of bread.

Wider issues of women's rights and representation were soon fiercely debated in pamphlets and the radical press, and in the women's political clubs that sprang up between 1789 and 1793. "The breadth, scope, and impact of women's engagement in the events of 1792, are remarkable. Radicalization meant in part a collective application of force that opened up the possibility for an expanded legal and constitutional definition of the rights and status of citizenship" (Bryson, 1992:21). Women's acts of power in the Revolution were very real. Women enlarged the demographic base of the democratic revolution; by the summer of 1792 the presence of women in a crowd, in a procession, intermingled with battalions of National Guardsmen, even when they were armed, made the use of countervailing force problematic.

[34] Landes, 1998:134.

According to Offen (2000:48) it appears from the accounts of historians that feminism as such was always marginal to the revolution although demands for improved female education were included in the first petitions to the National Assembly.As Joan Landes (1998:130) points out, the record of women's rights during the revolution is conditioned by the fact that women never wholly succeeded in undermining the new gendered boundaries of public and private life nor in redressing a central feature of the new polity: the standing of all women (irrespective of class or race) as secondary, passive subjects under law.

Feminism was not "born' in 1789, but the onset of revolution unleashed a spectacular eruption of well-formulated feminist claims. Offen (2000:50) contends that because of this outpouring the first five years of the French Revolution provide an unparalleled historical laboratory for studying European gender politics. From the convocation of the Estates General in 1789 (to address the serious financial and economic problems of realm) to the formation of the estates and a National Assembly in later summer, and throughout the sequential efforts to elaborate constitutions in 1790–91 and 1792–95, feminist claims were repeated and rebutted. And it was not only women who had entered the argument to assert the concerns of women.

In France, the Marquis de Condorcet was an exception among the indifferent philosophers. He had written of women's rights in *Letters of a Bourgeois of Newhaven* in 1787. In 1790 Condorcet, a member of the French National Assembly wrote the article *On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship*, to draw attention to the violation of the principle of equality of rights

in the exclusion of half the population from citizenship.[35] His aim was to move his fellow revolutionaries to adopt a more enlightened attitude towards women. Vogel (1988:21) points out that in less than ten pages the article scrutinizes and demolishes the then prevailing views on the proper role and sphere of women in civil society. Condorcet recognizes that the position of women is unique in comparison with that of other oppressed groups in that the violation of their rights has so far gone largely unnoticed. He was one of the few philosophers to take part in the revolutionary assemblies and he argued that:

> Now the rights of men result only from this, that men are beings with sensibility, capable of acquiring moral ideas, and of reasoning on these ideas. So women, having these same qualities, have necessarily equal rights. Either no individual of the human race has genuine rights, or else all have the same; and he who votes against the right of another, whatever the religion, colour, or sex of that other, has henceforth abjured his own. (Condorcet in Offen, 2000:56)

Condorcet did not argue that men and women were exactly alike; indeed much in his argument refers to the distinctiveness of the sexes. His point, echoing earlier Enlightenment discussion, was about the social construction of

[35] Todd, 1994:xvii.

gender: "It is not nature, it is education, and it is the manner of social life, which is the cause of this difference."[36] He squarely confronted and refuted objections based on "public utility," including the issues of women's influence and the issue of political activism diverting them from their assigned tasks. He concluded with a call to extend the vote to all women property holders.[37] David Simpson (1993:74) points out that Condorcet found even the American constitution inadequate because of its commitment to ideas about "identity of interests" rather than to "equality of rights".

Tomalin (1984:104) states that Condorcet's arguments remain the classic feminist ones but they did not reach England, as Wollstonecraft was either ignorant of his work or preferred not to mention it. However, I have discovered that Wollstonecraft was familiar with his work as she mentions Condorcet's work in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as "the most philosophical".[38] Spender (1982:123) also feels that Tomalins assessment is surprising, as given that Wollstonecraft was a member of a lively circle in which ideas from France were constantly discussed, she did know of his work. Condorcet insisted that women were capable of reason and should be educated accordingly, that they had therefore the same political rights as men, and that to deny this was an unacceptable tyranny.[39] Wollstonecraft seems to have elaborated on Condorcet's theory, particularly on education in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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[36] Condorcet in Offen, 2000:56.
[37] Offen, 2000:56.
[38] Wollstonecraft, 1994:317
[39] Bryson, 1992:19

Even apart from Condorcet, the early work of the *Comite de Legislation* had been inspired by a wish to give woman equality before the law. Women were to have the same property rights as men and an equal voice in family matters.[40] According to Bryson (1992:19) the German Jacobin, Theodor von Hippel, similarly rejected the idea that women's exclusion from civil and political rights could be justified in terms of a biologically given nature; it was men, he claimed, who had made women what they were, and he demanded that men and women be given equal rights and education for citizenship rather than their traditional sex roles. Bryson (1992:19) further states that von Hippel argued that enlightened men who had to act to liberate women, for they themselves had been rendered incapable of independent political action. Evans (1996:19) argues that politically, the rationalist argument, which is represented here by Condorcet, Wollstonecraft and von Hippel, aims at the inclusion of women in the 'Rights of Man.' These authors recognize that the prevailing beliefs about women, if left unchallenged threaten to undermine the major presumptions of modern political thinking. Nothing less is at stake than the general validity of the principles associated with natural right, moral autonomy and democratic legitimacy.[41]

2.5.Suppression of Women's Rights

Gatens (1977:119) proposes that at certain points the Enlightenment discourse threatens to fall back on its dark Aristotelian and Thomistic past. Different cultures, and so perhaps different sexes, progress at a differential rate.

[40] Tomalin, 1984:153.
[41] Evans, 1996:20

This form of argument was certainly used by the newly formed French Republic to justify the exclusion of women from political participation.

Between 1792 and 1793, the Revolution entered its most radical phase. In August 1792, Louis XVI was deposed and a revolutionary republic established. Mass arrests of royalist sympathizers followed, many of who were among the hundreds of prisoners slaughtered when mobs entered the prisons during the "September Massacres." The newly established National Convention initiated treason proceedings against Louis, and he was executed in January 1793. By the summer of 1793, the Jacobins had crushed the Girondist opposition, and the Committee on Public Safety inaugurated the Reign of Terror against suspected opponents.[42] .

Susan Bell (1973:232) states that the end of the eighteenth century the French Revolution promised mankind individual human liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Women, who might have expected to be included in this rousing slogan, were initially disappointed. Neither politicians nor the rank and file of the revolutionaries seriously included women in their claims for the rights of man. Especially before the Jacobin repression of October 1793 banning women from club membership, some women and men demanded political rights for women and women participated in the articulate, mobilized "citizenry." Militant female citizens demanded the right to bear arms, in self-defense or against the nation's enemies, and the right to sanction laws.[43]

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[42] Schmidt, 1996:11.
[43] Landes, 1988:133-134.

Simpson (1993:115) also notes that before the suppression of the woman's clubs by the Jacobins, there had been a high level of political activity by women and an active public discussion of women's rights. Before the end of 1793 the feminist movement was crushed and demands were silenced. In an anti-feminist reaction the women's clubs were closed and the most prominent writers and spokeswomen imprisoned or put to death.[44] According to Tomalin (1984:163) only Condorcet hidden in an upstairs room near the Sorbonne, continued to write on the subject of equal education and equal rights for women until the very last days of his life. Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1793), outlines his view on the status of women:

> Among the causes of the progress of the human mind ... we must number the complete annihilation of the prejudices that have brought about an inequality of rights between the sexes, an inequality fatal even to the party in whose favour it works ... This inequality has its origin solely in an abuse of strength, and all the late sophistical attempts that have been made to excuse it are vain. (Condorcet in Todd, 1994:xviii)

Kelly (1992:154) argues that the Jacobin Revolution of 1793 was treated by Helen Maria Williams, a contemporary writer and others as a masculization of

[44] Bryson, 1992:22.

the Revolution, breaking up families and destroying domestic affections and wrongly excluding women from participation in the Revolution. However, according to Hufton (1973:269), a contemporary feminist, Madame de Coicy, concerned to draw the attention of middle-class and aristocratic women to their subservient position in the household, emphasized the equality achieved within the working class home of the mother of the family because of her important participation in the family economy.

Eighteenth-century feminists claimed a "natural' equality of the sexes prior to all social and political organization, and demanded, accordingly, full equality of the sexes in organized society. They highlighted women's disadvantaged legal and economic situation in institutionalized marriage and called for an acknowledgment of women's rights as women. They criticized women's inadequate education and lack of economic alternatives to marriage, and despite these disadvantages the importance of their influence and societal role.[45]

Such arguments led in several directions, one leading to Wollstonecraft. According to Bryson (1992:21), although the articulation of feminist demands in the French revolution was short-lived, it did have an impact on the public imagination that was to affect popular reaction to feminism in other nations. The feeling was that the French were bad, revolution was bad, and the French revolution had led to feminism, therefore 'feminism must be bad'. Bryson (1992:21) further points out that it is therefore important to remember that liberal feminism could be seen as a revolutionary ideology in the most literal sense if we

[45] Offen, 2000:32.

are to understand the reception given to Wollstonecraft's ideas in England. For despite her own revulsion from the extremism and violence of the revolution, viewed through the smoke of the Bastille, Wollstonecraft loomed like a 'bloodstained Amazon, the high priestess of loose-tongued liberty'.[46]This liberty was to be expressed when she entered the debates on the French Revolution.

[46] Bryson, 1992:21.

While Wollstonecraft's personal life was to provide material for *Maria*, her intellectual stimulation was further developed as she was an apprentice to Joseph Johnson, and was fortunate to have access to books and pamphlets. As a reviewer for his new periodical, *The Analytical Review*, it provided her with the opportunity to begin in earnest the ambitious project of converting the sentimental heroine into a self made intellectual.[47] Exposure to the political tracts and pamphlets of this period nurtured this developing intellectualism.

One such pamphlet was Dr Richard Price's *On the Love of Country*. Price was parliamentary reform advocate who was an enthusiastic supporter of the French and American Revolutions. The minister of a Dissenting Chapel, a liberal intellectual, and fellow of the Royal Society, honoured in Scotland and the new United States, Price was a staunch advocate of political and economic reforms and was in contact with many leading philosophers of the time.[48] H. Brailsford (1949:12) is of the opinion that "Dr Price's sermon is worth a glance, not merely because it was the goad which provoked Edmund Burke to eloquent fury, but still more because it is a document which records for us the mood in which even the older and graver progressives of his generation greeted the French Revolution."

[47] Poovey, 1984:56.
[48] Todd, 1994: ix

3.1.The Revolution Controversy

On the Love of Country was delivered on the 4th of November 1789 at a meetinghouse of the Old Jewry. Price expressed moral and religious sentiments as well as political opinions but the main focus was on the Revolution in France. Price talked about one "being a citizen of the world, about universal benevolence and the doctrine of perfectibility which justified one's tampering with the social order as if it were a series of cogs and wheels which could be put right with the skills of a mechanic" (Brody, 1985:16). His address followed the fall of the Bastille where Price congratulated the French National Assembly on 'the Revolution in that country.'[49] Price compared to the English Revolution to the French Revolution:

> We are met to thank God for that event in this country to which the name of THE REVOLUTION has been given; and which, for more than a century, it has been usual for the friends of freedom, and more especially Protestant Dissenters, under the title of the REVOLUTION SOCIETY, to celebrate with expressions of joy and exultation ... By a bloodless victory, the fetters which despotism had been long preparing for us were broken; the rights of the people were asserted, a tyrant expelled ... we were

[49] Brailsford, 1913:65

emancipated ... (Price in Butler, 1984:28)

Price opposed hereditary power, accepted civil authority as a trust from the people, and imagined a spreading liberty that would replace kings with the rule of law, and priests with the rule of reason and conscience. Price praised the Revolution in France as an extension of the Glorious Revolution and therefore a model for reforms that would emancipate the Nonconformists in England.[50] However, conservatives in England did not agree with Price and the first response rebutting Price's argument was Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Simpson (1993:6) points out that if we look back at the debates of the 1790's we find everywhere the figure or image of Burke, as the hero of the right and the demon of the left. Todd (1994:x) states that Burke aimed to denounce Price, to attack the French revolutionaries and their principles, and to defend the British constitution and the notion of prescriptive right.[51]

Burke's answer to Price's speech was a careful denial of the doctrine of perfectibility and the rights of man, prophesying terror and chaos for France.

> This famous sermon of the Old Jewry breathes nothing but this spirit through all the political part. Plots, massacres, assassinations, seem to some people a trivial price for obtaining a revolution. Cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat

[50] Kelly, 1992:85.
[51] Todd, 1994:x.

> and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination, grown torpid with the lazy enjoyment of of public prosperity. The preacher found them all in the French Revolution. (Burke, 1937:202)

Burke's extended defense of English conservatism was actually a public response to the revolutionary events in France: the proclamation of a National Assembly in June of 1789, the fall of the Bastille on 14 July, and the march on Versailles on 5 and 6 October. Poovey (1984:57) believes that Burke's condemnation of these events is unqualified. Calling the French Revolution "the most astonishing event in human history," he sees in it a direct threat to English political and social stability.

Schmidt (1996:21) is of the opinion that for Burke, the Revolution was a mistake, the consequence of a terrible foolishness that ought, and perhaps could, have been avoided. "If the French aristocracy and clergy on whom Burke lavishes, had somehow been able to hold out, if the legions of politically naive writers and philosophers had somehow been kept out of the National Assembly, perhaps disaster could have been avoided"(Simpson, 1996:21). Burke felt that the English Revolution was good because it aimed at the preservation of the past, the reinforcement of continuity and tradition. In contrast, the French Revolution was an attempt to break all links between past and present. It was thus a totally novel

form of social change, an overthrow of natural order whose inevitable result would be a return to 'Barbarism'.[52]

3.2. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*

Burke's 'ignorance' of the crisis in France prompted responses, the earliest published essay being Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). In spite of the fact that she was now an established if not obscure member of the literary world, she was still basically a 'woman writer' specializing in 'women's' subjects such as education and fiction, rather than a writer and 'genius'. The French Revolution, or rather Burke's reflections on it, changed all that, and provided the occasion for her to acquire both a public name and character.[53]

Poovey (1984:63) argues that despite Wollstonecraft's brief insight into the stake that women as a group have in this revolution, she refuses in *Vindication of the Rights of Men* to identify herself consistently with women or even to be sympathetic to the submissiveness they have been forced to assume. "Instead of systematically castigating tyrants, she heaps scorn on those who submit: the women who bow to male virtues, the rich who give in to impulses, the clergy who grovel before patrons, the poor who acquiesce to their landlord"(Poovey, 1984:63). Gatens (1977:116) agrees that the social and political status of women is not central to the concerns of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men.* Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft is careful to insist that women, no less than men, are parties to the social compact. :

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[52] Kilgour, 1995:24.
[53] Kelly, 1979:276

> Reading your Reflections warily over, it has continually and forcibly struck me, that had you been a Frenchman, you would have been, in spite of your respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolutionist [and would have displayed] a benevolent respect for the rights of men. (Wollstonecraft, 1994:44)

Poovey (1984:60) suggests that Wollstonecraft does not consistently work out the psychological model implicit in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, nor does she yet recognize its relationship to the paradigm of feminine propriety. Jones (1994:176) asserts that in it, she exposes the constitutional implications of Burke's 'debauched' imagination, and makes clear how thoroughly she understood the collusion between sexual ideologies and general modes of power. Like Burke, she relates her arguments on these topics to broad issues of the time: the nature and relationship of reason and imagination, whether or not 'civilization' means progress, divine validation of social and political organization and conflict of 'rights' and 'duties' but she interprets these issues in her own way, to show equal mastery of them. [54] The seeds of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are sown in this answer to Burke, as surely as the rights of man must imply the rights of woman.[55] However, William Duff, writing at the time, felt that Wollstonecraft had overstepped the "natural and proper bounds" of

[54] Kelly, 1992:88.
[55] Brody, 1994:16.

female nature by entering the lists to do battle with men in the fields of literature and learning. (Duff in Battersby, 1989:113)

Poovey (1984:58) states that we soon discover in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* the same tensions that had thus far marked Wollstonecraft's life. On the one hand she unleashes the emotionalism with which she feels most at home; on the other she invokes reason, which she believes to be a necessary control for feeling. Then, on the one hand she claims independence, especially from the roles assigned to women, but on the other she resorts to the characteristically feminine posture of seeking shelter within the protective hierarchy of a paternal order.

Burke's prejudice also extends to the role of the Church. He is of the opinion that the Church and Government should exist along parallel lines and not interfere in each other's role.

> Supposing, that however, that something like moderation were visible in this political sermon; yet politics and the pulpit are terms that have little agreement. No sound ought to be heard in the church but the healing voice of Christian charity...Wholly unacquainted with the world in which they are so fond of meddling, and inexperienced in all its affairs, on which they pronounce with so much confidence, they have nothing of politics but the passions they excite.

(Burke, 1937:152)

Wollstonecraft displays her skill as a polemicist and an astute sense for her audience as she concedes almost every objection Burke makes to Price: that he abused the pulpit in delivering a political speech, that his "zeal may have earned him further than sound reason can justify" even that his political opinions are "Utopian reveries."[56] Wollstonecraft states:

> I agree with you, Sir, that the pulpit is not the place for political discussions though it might be more excusable to enter on such a subject, when the day was set apart merely to commemorate a political revolution and no stated duty was encroached upon. (Wollstonecraft, 1994:16l)

Thomas Paine also responded to Burke's *Reflections* in his *The Rights of Man* (1791). Paine had spent half his time in Paris, being acquainted with Condorcet and his work as well as familiar with the philosopher's vehement advocacy of the idea of equal education and civil status for women.[57] However, in *The Rights of Man*, Paine's argument is about the rights of humanity rather than only about man as woman. This is discussed within the framework of the French Revolution. Brailsford (1913:63) observes that Paine "cleared the cobweb

[56] Wollstonecraft, 1994:17
[57] Tomalin, 1974:102.

argument of legality by which his antagonist had sought to confine posterity with the settlement of 1688".[58]

According to Simpson (1993:88) Paine was much more threatening, though he was relatively unpopular among the middle class dissenting reformers who feared his atheism (real or apparent) and did not share his acute critique of the rhetoric of patriotism. Poovey (1984:62) argues that Wollestonecrafts attack on self-indulgence and submission is pre-eminently a bourgeois assault made in the name of individual effort and proven merit, against aristocratic privilege and passivity.

We may speculate that the personal invective that Burke provoked, not only from Wollstonecraft but also from other bourgeois radicals like Paine emanated partly from their sense of class betrayal. That Burke, the defender of the American Revolution, a member of the bourgeoisie himself, could turn so completely against liberal principles inspired others besides Wollstonecraft to accuse him of hypocrisy, special interest, and selling out:

"The sentiment displayed by Burke and his kind is riddled with hypocrisy. The romanticism of his conception of a hierarchically ordered political system is belied by the profligacy and corruption of the rich, the degradation of the poor and their appalling conditions of life"(Gatens, 1977:115). It is reason and not sentiment that should dictate the terms of political life and what any person's rational capacities will show is, as Wollstonecraft contends in *A Vindication of the*

[58] Paine's (1995:97) opinion is that Burke was ignorant of the springs and principles of the French Revolution, did not attend to the distinction between *men* and *principles*; and therefore he did not see that a revolt may take place against the despotism of the latter, while there lies no change of despotism against the former.

> The birthright of man, to give you, Sir, a short definition of this disputed right, is such a degree of liberty, civil and religious, as is compatible with the liberty of every other individual with whom he is united in a social compact, and the continued existence of that compact. (Wollstonecraft, 1994: 7)

As Kelly (1979:289) contends: "Burke's lauding of tradition and hereditary rights as well as his dogmatic insistence on the conservation of existing rigid political relations are all treated by Wollstonecraft as evidence of his lack of Reason." While Burke was critical of the methods used to liberate France, Wollstonecraft found that the concepts expressed by the French Revolution were to be used for the emancipation of women. According to Kelly (1979:276), by replying to Burke and expressing her 'genius' on the grandest, most universal issue of the day, and doing so successfully, she liberated herself from the psychological limitations imposed by society and education on these of her sex.

This argument for defending liberalism in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* took the form of a vigorous and angry rebuttal. She defended those principles dear to the hearts of London's liberal reformers. Wollstonecraft championed the new philosophy according to which civil and religious liberties were part of

one's birthright.[59] She asks:

> Will Mr Burke be at the trouble to inform us, how far we are to go back to discover the rights of men, since the light of reason is such a fallacious guide that none but fools trust to its cold investigation? (Wollstonecraft, 1994:9)

It would seem that Burke in the *Reflections* believes that civil and religious liberties already existed in England.

> Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to everything they want everything. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. (Burke, 1937:197)

[59] Brody, 1985:16

Burke's argument runs along parallel lines as he constantly compares the English system of government with that of the newly elected one in France. In order to stress the difference between the system of governments, Burke draws on the history of England to emphasize England's development that avoided having to resort to a bloody revolution. Wollstonecraft rereads the history of the British constitution as a history of struggle between the landed classes and the monarchy, leading the supremacy of the former, embodied in the state as Parliament and the established Church-the two institutions Burke defends in the *Reflections*. The result of this struggle, she argues, was the subordination of the poor.[60] Burke however, states:

> If you are desirous of knowing the spirit of our constitution, and the policy which predominated in that great period which has secured it to this hour, pray look for both in our histories, in our records, in our acts of parliament, and journals of parliament, and not in the sermons of the Old Jewry, and the after-dinner toasts of the Revolution Society. In the former you will find other ideas and another language. Such a claim is as ill suited to our temper and wishes as it is unsupported by any appearance of authority. The very idea of the fabrication of a new

[60] Kelly, 1992:91.

government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror. (Burke, 1937:170)

In 1790 Burke seem more concerned about the lawyers and financial speculators he sees to be in control of French political life: "His frequently expressed hostility toward "Jew brokers" and "money jobbers", "usurers" and "Jews" renders his argument rather more consistently anti-Semitic than anti-philosophical" (Simpson, 1993:57). Wollstonecraft's arguments and rebuttals in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* offers an interpretation of the French Revolution that has much in common with the more recent progressive historians.

3.3. *A View of the French Revolution*

Albert Soboul (1974:28) argues that French society had remained fundamentally aristocratic; it was based on privilege of birth and wealth from land. But this traditional social structure was now being undermined by the evolution of the economy that was giving added importance to personal wealth and was enhancing the power of the middle class. Despite the social conflicts that existed between the popular masses and the bourgeoisie, it was against the aristocracy that the people rose in protest. Artisans, journeymen, and shopkeepers alike had their grievances against the *Ancien Regime,* and they hated the nobility. This fundamental antagonism was strengthened by the fact that many urban workers had been born of peasant stock and maintained their links with the countryside. They detested the nobility for their privileges, their landed

wealth, and for the dues that they levied.[61] Wollstonecraft states in *A View of the French Revolution* that:

> The nobles and the clergy immediately rallied round the standard of privileges, insisting that France would be ruined, if their *rights* were touched: and so true were they now to their insulated interest, that all the committees into which the *notables* were divided, excepting that of which *monsieur* was president, determined against allowing the *tiers-etat* that increase of power necessary to enable than to be useful. (Wollstonecraft, 1994:316)

Various factors in France contributed to a 'revolutionary situation' that collectively coincided to cause a flare up that resulted in the French Revolution of 1789, the major impetus being the French government's finances. In the 1770's and 1780's evidence accumulated that the French State faced political and economic bankruptcy. The public debt had risen to catastrophic proportions under Louis XVI, with the result that servicing the debt was consuming 300 million livres each year or more than half the King's revenue. In a prosperous country, the State was on the brink of bankruptcy.[62] Soboul (1974:96) points out that financial distress was the most important of the immediate causes of the

[61] Soboul, 1974:56
[62] Soboul, 1974: 96

Revolution. Louis XIV showed signs of making reform a reality. Among the new Louis' first appointments was the philosopher Anne Robert Jacques Turgot as Controller-General of Finance. Once in power, Turgot developed a programme of economic reform that confirmed the other philosopher's faith in him, but aroused the opposition of vested interests. Looking to liberate trade within France, he proposed that internal tariffs and guild regulations be abolished. To make things worse, he also advocated tax revisions that would have spread the tax burden equally through all levels of society, and he proposed that Protestants be granted full civil rights. Turgot did not last long. Appointed in August 1774, he was summarily dismissed in May 1776.[63]

Eric Hobsbawm (1966:55) points out that the new forces knew fairly precisely what they wanted. Turgot, the physiocrat economist, stood for an efficient exploitation of the land, for free enterprise and trade, for a standardized, efficient administration of a single homogeneous national territory, and the abolition of all restrictions and social inequalities which stood in the way of the development of national resources and rational, equitable administration and taxation. Wollstonecraft's argument in her View *of the French Revolution* is that:

> On the eve of the American war, the enlightened administration of the comptroller general Turgot, a man formed in this school, afforded Frances glimpse of freedom ... this most excellent man, suffering his

[63] Gay, 1966.167.

> office, which he so worthily filled. Disappointed in his noble plan of freeing France from the fangs *of* despotism ... he has nevertheless greatly contributed to produce that revolution in opinion, which, perhaps, alone can overturn the empire of *tyranny*. (Wollstonecraft 1994:291)

Unlike Wollstonecraft, Burke, it seems is oblivious to the fact that what made the mass of the people into a political force in 1788 and 1789 was the seriousness of the economic crisis, which was making their lives more and more difficult. In most towns, the riots of 1789 had their origins in the misery of the people, and their first effect was to bring about a reduction in bread prices. According to Applewhite (1990:65) the link between woman and subsistence necessitated women's intervention in the Revolution. In all periods of food crisis, women of the people passed into the front ranks. Historians have concluded that women intervened in the Revolution only when this problem surfaced, leaving strictly political questions to their male companions. Wollstonecraft points out in *A View of the Revolution* that:

> A scarcity of bread, the common grievance of the revolution aggravated the vague fears of the parisians, [sic] and made the people desperate, that it was not difficult to persuade them to undertake any

> enterprise; and the torrent of resentment and enthusiasm required only to be directed to a point to carry every thing before it. Liberty was the constant watchword; though few knew in what it consisted (Wollstonecraft, 1994: 342)

Historians report that the crises in *Ancien Regime* France were essentially agricultural crises, usually resulting from a succession of harvests that were either mediocre or involved an actual shortage. In such circumstances cereals rose in price most markedly, many peasants who produced little or no grain were forced to buy on the market, their purchasing power fell, and in this way the agricultural crisis had direct repercussions on industrial production. Hobsbawm (1962:60) points out that in 1788 the crisis in agriculture was the most serious of the whole century: in the winter months food shortage made itself felt and begging became widespread as more and more people faced unemployment. Such people, starving and unable to find work, were one of the elements in the Revolutionary crowds. Burke ignores these revolutionary catalysts focusing rather on the plight of the monarchy, insisting that France's *Ancien Regime* had been an extreme version of the system, which England had reformed:"He was particularly astute in making this system of privileges of rank checked by duties, of the status quo of king and Church, appear peculiarly English and worthy of patriotic devotion. Conversely he made it seem 'French' to believe in radical ideas" (Todd, 1985:12).

However, Burke seems to have forgotten the execution of Charles I to appease the masses. As Francois Furet (1988:45) points out, Marx believed that the English Revolution was in 1648 rather than 1688. It was a revolution led by the bourgeoisie, like the French Revolution. Burke however, does not refer to 1648 nor the events which occurred in 1648 but prefers the example of the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The capture of the Bastille, which has rightly made July 14th into the French National day, ratified the fall of despotism and was hailed all over the world as the beginning of liberation.[64] According to Paine (1993:98), every place has its Bastille, and every Bastille its despot. By the end of August of the same year most of the French aristocracy's traditional feudal privileges had been wiped out and a bold "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" had passed into law.

With the French Revolution, discussion of the question "What is enlightenment?" came to a close. How one understood the Enlightenment came to be determined by the stance one took toward the Revolution. For critics of the Revolution, the Enlightenment was a process that undermined the traditional patterns of belief on which political authority rested and thus reduced politics to a brutal battle between despotism and anarchy.[65] Burke is of the opinion that freedom would have been achieved in France if the following were adhered to:

> I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had

[64] Hobsbawm, 1962,60
[65] Schmidt, 1996:15

> been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners. (Burke, 1937:149)

Burke's desire for an ordered and disciplined 'revolution' or reform was incompatible with the realities of French society. Change could no longer be contained within peace and order or civil and social manners. According to Soboul (1974:110) the French Revolution was a 'broadly middle-class and democratic revolution' and not a 'narrowly bourgeois and conservative revolution' like the thoroughly respectable English Revolution of 1688. That it was so was due to the support of the popular classes, who were inspired by their hatred of privilege and roused by hunger to free themselves from the burdens of feudalism. The Revolution was indeed a bourgeois revolution, but it was carried through with popular support and particularly with the support of the peasants. Wollstonecraft states of Burke in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*:

> But, among all your plausible arguments, and witty illustrations, your contempt for the poor always appears conspicuous, and rouses my indignation.

(Wollstonecraft, 1994:56) [66]

Burke's opinion of the peasants is openly sarcastic:

> The peasants, in all probability, are the descendants of these ancient proprietors, Romans or Gauls. ... There they find that men are equal; and the earth, the kind and equal mother of all, ought not to be monopolized to foster the pride and luxury of any men, who by nature are no better than themselves, and who, if they do not labour for their bread, are worse. (Burke, 1937:353)

In *A View of the French Revolution*, Wollstonecraft's discussion of the prehistory of the Revolution uses history not in the cautionary way of Burke but to make the point that the past has conditioned the present and that revolutionary Terror has grown from the monarchy.[67] Burke's description of a member of the Monarchy is:

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the

[66] Carlyle (1900:223) also states: "Starvation has been known among the French Commonalty before this; known and familiar. Did we not see them, in the year 1775, presenting, in sallow faces, in wretchedness and raggedness, their Petition of Grievances; and, for answer, getting a brand-new Gallows forty feet high?"

[67] Todd, 1994:xxviii.

> queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in, glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy...But the age of chivalry is gone. (Burke, 1937:213)

Burke made part of his argument through sentimentalized pictures of sexual and familial relationships, especially of the French queen Marie Antoinette as mother and lady, worthy object of chivalric notion. These pictures were particularly galling to Wollstonecraft, who had seen little to admire either in families or in aristocratic society.[68]

According to Simpson (1993:117) "the rhetoric of chivalry was one of the guiding motifs of the *Reflections* that ingeniously appealed to gendered norms and anxieties about gender. The notorious image of aristocratic chastity under threat in the molested and "almost naked" Marie Antoinette was accompanied by accounts of lower class women liberated into brutality and sexual self-indulgence." Wollstonecraft does not conceal this contempt she felt for a fellow woman as she states in *A Vindication of the Rights Of Men*:

> The lively predilection likewise, of the queen for her

[68] Todd, 1994:xi.

> native country and love for her brother Joseph, to whom she repeatedly sent considerable sums, purloined from the public, tended greatly to inspire the most ineffable contempt for royalty, now stript [sic] of the frippery which had concealed it's deformity: and the sovereign disgust excited by her ruinous vices, completely destroying all reverence for that majesty, to which power alone lent dignity, contempt soon produced hatred. (Wollstonecraft, 1994:302)

3.4.Wollstonecraft and Rousseau

Burke is not only critical of the men who make up the government but also attacks the philosophers who had provided an impetus for the unfolding events of the French Revolution. But while Burke denounces the philosophers, Paine believes that the only signs, which appeared of the spirit of Liberty during those periods, are to be found in the writings of the French philosophers.[69] Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* can be considered as one of the many texts that provided an awakening of man's moral and social obligations. Published in 1762, *The Social Contract* was to provide a philosophical foundation for the French Revolution.

[69] See Paine, 1995:145

Rousseau was to also become the focus of Wollstonecraft's arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, even more than *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft was caught up in the revolutionary excitement of progressive thought in England, clearly writing in the context of an actual revolution that indicated a possibility of real political change. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* she had addressed a reactionary Burke; in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she primarily took issue with a philosopher whose views were intimately bound up with the French Revolution: Rousseau.[70] Kelly (1976:viii) argues that Wollstonecraft and the English Jacobins fashioned the structure of both their philosophy and their fiction on Rousseau.

The Social Contract (1762) is Rousseau's ideal solution to inequality among men on a collective level. However, Rousseau's 'universal citizenship' was one that was reliant on gender inequality as in *Emile* there is no equality between man and woman.As Diane Coole points out:

> Were Rousseau to have written *The Social Contract* alone, the most obvious conclusion would be that women must participate as citizens if the required generality of will is to manifest itself, otherwise the result would be an expression of, among other things, a particularly male interest. Yet in *Emile* we learn that participatory citizenship is to be a specifically male

[70] Todd, 1994:xviii.

> prerogative and that Sophy's education is to be quite at variance with that of her future spouse since it is designed to equip her for a very different role. (Coole, 1988: 106)

Eva Figes (1972:110) notes that as far as Rousseau himself was concerned his attitude to women, his conviction that they should be trained for the pleasure of man, is particularly ironic and "illogical in view of his egalitarian political principles." Rousseau's ideal of womanhood is that woman in spite of all her sexual charms, must be essentially homespun, because once the initial business of charming and falling in love is over her duties are exclusively domestic. In *Emile* Rousseau states:

> For this reason the education of the women should be always relative to the men. 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, and what they should be taught in their infancy. (Rousseau in Wollstonecraft, 1985:175)

Wollstonecraft's reaction is:

> What nonsense! When will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes, which pride and sensuality have thus spread over the subject? If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality... (Wollstonecraft, 1985:108)

She argues explicitly, in the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the work in which she made her dramatic break with Rousseau, against the prejudice of giving 'a sex to mind'. She quotes at length those passages from *Emile* in which Rousseau infers from women's natural, physical weakness a limited capacity for knowledge bounded by practical concerns.[71] Rousseau's democratic radicalism had marked him out from the other philosophers of the Enlightenment, and it is partly because she shared his passion for liberty and justice in other spheres that Wollstonecraft was so enraged by his views on women:

> I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners, from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak

[71] Evans, 1996:28

> characters, than they would otherwise have been; and consequently, more useless members of society. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:103)

Laurie Finke (1987:171) points out that Ralph Wardle has noted that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft alludes to more works by other authors than in any of her other books, and although she refers to a few works by women, the majority of the texts she discusses are by men. She refers not only to authorities on women's education, Rousseau, Talleyrand, Knox, Dr. James Fordyce, Dr. John Gregory but also to works on political theory, linguistics, philosophy, and literature. In Chapter Five, entitled "Animadversions on Some of the Writers Who Have Rendered Women objects of Pity, Bordering on Contempt," she responds specifically to different writers section by section. Section One is devoted entirely to Rousseau. She quotes Rousseau and then responds and rebuts his argument immediately. Besides her response to Rousseau, her response in Section Three is also worthy of comment. Wolstonecraft remarks that:

> Such paternal solicitude pervades Dr. Gregory's *Legacy to his Daughters*, that I enter on the task of criticism with affectionate respect; but as this little volume has many attractions to recommend it to the notice of the most respectable part of my sex, I cannot

> silently pass over arguments that so speciously support opinions, which I think, have had the most baneful effect on the morals and manners of the female world. (Wollstonecraft: 1985:196)

However, after reading and examining a section of Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, one would suggest that Wollstonecraft failed to regard the context in which the work was written. An extract from Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, 1774 states:

> You must expect that the advices which I shall give you will be very imperfect, as there are many nameless delicacies, in female manners, of which none but a woman can judge. You will have one advantage by attending to what I am going to leave with you; you will hear, at least for once in your lives, the genuine sentiments of a man who has no interest in flattering or deceiving you (Gregory in Jones, 1990:45)

Gregory makes it known to his daughters that he is writing from the perspective of a father to his daughters. Therefore the content is to guide their daughters through life rather than to have a baneful effect. A father writing to a daughter

will differ from a man writing about women. Wollstonecraft in grouping Gregory's writing with Rousseau's has failed to see this difference. However, she is firm in her rejection of Rousseau as she states:

> The mother who wishes to give true dignity of character to her daughter must, regardless of the sneers of ignorance, proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to that which Rousseau has recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence ... for his eloquence renders absurdities plausible. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:127)

Wollstonecraft's alternative is that women should also be considered as agents of reform. She advocates education for women to help them to achieve a sense of self-respect and a new self-image as she states regarding women's education that:

> They might also study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broader basis; for the reading of history will scarely be more useful than the perusal of romances, if read as mere biography ... (Wollstonecraft, 1985:261)

Bryson (1992:22) suggests that it is the radical nature of Rousseau's views on politics, which give a revolutionary edge to her insistence that girls and boys should be educated alike. Wollstonecraft suggestion that women should study what was typically a man's domain such as politics, leads Coole (1988:127) to believe that Wollstonecraft's agenda for women's emancipation is a typically liberal one: "education; civil rights; an opportunity to compete for access to occupations; political rights." Of these, education is perhaps the most important, and it was as an educational tract that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* won popularity. It would seem that Wollstonecraft besides being labeled a radical feminist is now also considered as being a liberal feminist as well.

In demanding the rights of women, Wollstonecraft did not wish to eliminate the maternal nature of women, but rather felt that civil and political rights belong to all of mankind. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is Wollstonecraft's utopian vision of what woman's place should be in a perfected society. Her feminism, in this respect, is inseparable from the philosophies of egalitarianism that made her a staunch supporter of the ideals of the French Revolution.[72] According to Brody ((1985:18) so much a part of the French community did Wollstonecraft feel that she had dedicated the *Vindication* to Tallyrand, hoping, in vain, to influence legislation before the French Assembly on women's education. Wollstonecraft applies these demands of the bourgeois revolution of reason, personal independence, and individual freedom to women

[72] Finke, 1987: 156

on the same basis that they were extended to men.[73]

The unfinished novel *Maria* can be read as a further interrogation of these issues as in *Maria,* Wollstonecraft was to incorporate elements of the Revolution controversy and the rights of woman. The novel, a literary form that Wollstonecraft viewed with much derision was to become the means of expressing her politics and foregrounding her ambivalent relation to Rousseau.

[73]Eisenstein, 1986:91

CHAPTER 4

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is an examination of feminist political theory, examining the rights of women within the turbulence of the French Revolution and within the debates of Enlightenment. While *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was to examine the public and domestic sphere of women, the politics of this text, was fictionalized in *Maria.* While Wollstonecraft proposed a 'revolution in female manners' in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* in *Maria* her intention is explicit:

> In writing this novel, I have rather endeavoured to pourtray [sic] passions than manners. In many instances I could have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object, *the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society.* (Wollstonecraft 1991:59) [My emphasis]

4.1. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Maria*

Finke (1987:163) points out as Wollstonecraft appropriates and experiments with various kinds of masculine rhetorical poses in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she demonstrates just how difficult it is for a woman to get outside of the language of men, to create a language capable of expressing feminine desire and

experience. In her major literary work on women, *Maria,* Wollstonecraft became aware of this fact. "If *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was Wollstonecraft's eulogy to the powers of reason, *Maria* is her diatribe against the bondage of passion" (Gatens, 1977:123). Yet in both cases the reason and the passion are peculiarly masculine. The figure of woman stands in an ambiguous relation to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideal of man.

Bahar (2000:441) states that the philosophical and political principles expressed in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* as well as the concerns and anxieties articulated in a private letter, are given a particularly cogent expression in Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel *Maria.* The novel thereby fulfils the promise made in the 'Advertisement' of the second *Vindication* to write a subsequent volume on the 'laws relative to women'. The heroine's misery is recounted in an inset confessional tale addressed to her unborn daughter and becomes a convincing illustration of how women's education fails to prepare them for an independent existence and how married women's legal status deprives them of civic responsibility.

Wollstonecraft's concern to find a useful place for the married middle-class woman in eighteenth century England was not a reaction based solely on the patriarchal ideology of the time found in the literature, advice manuals, and religious doctrines. She was also reacting to the changing nature of work in women's lives.[74] According to Jones (1994:174), in her fiction, "Wollstonecraft is concerned to write revolution and rewrite history by refashioning the inherited

[74] Eisenstein, 1986:96.

form of eighteenth century sentimental romance and with it female subjectivity". The ideological and cultural role of the novel was a major theme in her feminism, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* and the title indicates its relationship to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Catherine Parke (1990:107) construes

> Wollstonecraft as a Rousseauan romantic heroine of sensibility who both as an artist and as political intelligence, is then defined primarily by her physical and emotional capacity for feeling. It is true that she did believe firmly in feeling as a ground of action. But she also recognized the hazards and liabilities, especially for women, of using the romance of sensibility to give their lives significant form. (Parke, 1990:107)

For the feminist critic, the problem may resolve itself as one of style. For Wollstonecraft, the solution lay in fiction that gave her access not only (paradoxically) to her own situation as a woman but also to literature. According to Mary Jacobus (1979:15) *Maria* inverts both the title and the assumptions of her earlier essay in order to show how, if sense excludes women, sensibility confines them, yet offers a radical challenge to patriarchy; a challenge which it must repress.

Mary Kilgour (1995:75) contends that like Godwin's work, *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* uses a double title to suggest the identification of an individual person and the social situation that has shaped that person: "Wollstonecraft's goal as a reformer is to help release women from an entrapment in false systems of representation which, perpetuated by custom and prejudice, impede their individuality." Kelly (1992:114) states that *Maria* appropriates traits of the novels of manners, sentiment and emulation reviewed by Wollstonecraft in the *Analytical Review*. Wollstonecraft's exposure to such novels where social, cultural, political and economic issues were represented in terms of familial, social and institutional constraints and was to influence the development of her politics and literature.

4.2. The Married Woman

The French Revolution and its ideals for man were to resurface in *Maria*. While the fall of the Bastille was to usher in a liberated France, Maria states:

> Marriage had *bastilled* me for life. I discovered in myself a capacity for the enjoyment of the various pleasures existence affords; yet, fettered by the partial laws of society, this fair globe was to me a universal blank. (Wollstonecraft 1991:115) [My emphasis]

Gatens (1977:124) believes that the motivation behind the writing of *Maria* is as a

result of her relationship with Gilbert Imlay. Within two years of the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* Wollstonecraft had a passionate affair with Imlay who from most accounts was an opportunist, an entrepreneur and a womanizer. Wollstonecraft had borne a child by him and was abandoned by him. This precipitated her first suicide attempt. Many commentators have seen this episode as evidence of a damning inconsistency between Wollstonecraft's rational recommendations for heterosexual relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her irrational behaviour with Imlay.

Kelly (1992:209) contends that the significance of Maria's situation is filled out by the English Jacobin novelists' device of using names to reinforce the political implications. Maria's name could allude to another female prisoner in history, such as Mary Queen of Scots Marie Roland, who was a victim of her own sensibility and Revolutionary anti-feminism; Maria could also stand for her author. The name of Maria's helper and companion, Jemima, ironically echoes that of Job's daughter, who was supposed to share her father's inheritance.

Maria is set in Gothic fashion in a madhouse, to which Maria, a sensitive and romantic soul, has been confined through the machinations of George Venables, the wicked husband she once loved but later tried to escape. With his act he has neatly parted her from baby daughter and fortune, providing on the way a forceful symbol of male power and female weakness. The only consolation that Maria has is the bond of friendship she forms with her keeper Jemima and fellow prisoner Henry Darnford.

The weakness is psychological as well as social, for, cocooned in the asylum, Maria falls in love again and glories in the female emotionality that helped bring her to the madhouse. For Todd (1980:209) her story tells of a progress in sensibility that is not the least of woman's wrongs. The opening is extremely obscure, as at the end of the first paragraph we still don't know where the narrative is taking place:

> Abodes of horror have frequently been described, and castles, filled with specters and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wondering mind. But, formed of such stuffs dreams are made of, what were they to the mansion of despair, in one corner of which Maria sat, endeavouring to recall her scattered thoughts. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:61)

The reader is both located and disoriented by the opening. Wollstonecraft creates a suspense that draws us into the narrative and identifies us with the heroine, Maria who, we learn gradually, has been kidnapped, to find herself in a madhouse. According to Todd (1980:209) "the heroine is first discovered in the novel limp with sorrow, occasionally toughening herself against the hysteria and childlike passivity her Gothic predicament suggests. When in the asylum she focuses on her husband's cruelty, she comes closest to abjuring passivity and

achieving some fortitude of mind." When she regards only herself and her sensations, she becomes inept. Darnford provides her with books and besides Drydens *Fables* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she reads Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*. It is in these literary texts that Maria initially finds solace as she subsequently falls in love with Darnford who is possibly a "Paine": "My political sentiments now underwent a total change and dazzled by the hospitality of the Americans, I determined [sic] to take up my abode with freedom." (Wollstonecraft, 1991:75)

4.3.Rousseau and *Maria*

According to Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman:*

> These are the women who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists, who, knowing little of human nature, work up stale tales, and describe meretricious scenes, all retained in a sentimental jargon, which equally tend to corrupt the taste, and draw the heart aside from its daily duties. (Wollstonecraft, 1985: 306)

We have noted that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an extended critique of Rousseau's claim that men and women are by nature different. Against Rousseau, Wollstonecraft argues that both men and women are essentially rational creatures, that virtue or moral goodness is the same for both,

and that both are entitled to equal political rights and educational opportunities. One thus finds that Wollstonecraft constantly quotes and rejects Rousseau's arguments. However, in *Maria*, the heroine reads Rousseau's *Heloise*. Ironically while Rousseau is rejected in the *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *Maria* Rousseau's writing now provides the only world inhabiting for the protagonist.

> Rousseau alone the true Prometheus of sentiment possessed the fire of genius necessary to pourtray [sic], the truth of which goes directly to the heart. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:71)

While *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is a philosophical examination and discussion of women's rights, *Maria* is a practical rendering of this theory. Thus while Wollstonecraft argues on a certain aspect in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the same argument is not a reality in *Maria*. Wollstonecraft was aware of the fact that one could write about the liberation of women and women's rights but the reality of it did not materialize as men had to first re-evaluate their perceptions of women. This difference between these two texts regarding the theorizing and practical rendering of her argument is most clearly seen on the aspect of marriage. Wollstonecraft states in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

> I will go still further, and advance, without dreaming of a paradox, that an unhappy marriage is often very

> advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:114)

It is difficult to see the consistency between Wollstonecraft's life and her argument here. Brody (1985:9) points out in her introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that Wollstonecraft's father frequently broke into a violent rage, tyrannical and abused her mother. One wonders as how in such circumstances could one be 'the best mother'? In *Maria*, it is clearly evident that the protagonist is not in a position to be the best mother and was never even given the opportunity of being a 'mother' as her child was abducted. The novel opens with Maria imprisoned in a mental institution. Her keeper is Jemima, with whom she establishes a close friendship. Irrespective of the class difference, both women share a common outcome, as they both are victims of unjust treatment at the hands of men. As Wollstonecraft (1991:109) asserts: 'Men who are inferior to their fellow men, are almost anxious to establish their superiority over women.'

Todd (1980:224) states "it is at this time, living with Jemima and Darnford, appreciating the one and learning the limits of the other that Maria really begins to understand the nature of infatuation and appreciate the joys of affection and friendship." Her experience in the asylum with Jemima initiates this change, fostered now by her disappointing life with her lover. In time she comes to echo *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, opposing friendship and affection to sexual and romantic infatuation.

Like *Mary, A Fiction, Maria* is a third-person novel, but it encloses lengthy first-person narratives. Bahar (2000:53) points out that as for narration, Wollstonecraft abandons the overt epistolary form for a framed narrative, which incorporates different memoirs. Instead of the feminine, spontaneous, unmethodical and sentimental letter which Wollstonecraft objects to, in her review of Helen Maria Williams's *Letters from France* and which she uses to different ends in her *Letters written in Sweden*, (1796) she borrows from the formal experiments of William Godwin and other Jacobin novelists, relying on the didactic and political possibilities of a retrospective confessional. The cleavage between the narrator and the heroine of the memoir allows the former to use the experience of the latter to articulate political truths common to other women.

In *Maria* Wollstonecraft introduced the character of Jemima, a poor, lower class woman, to pair with the beautiful, bold, compassionate, and self-destructive heroine Maria. Bahar (2000:172) states that by her example and the story she tells of her life, Jemima gives Maria an opportunity to think beyond herself and about the plight of woman. We learn that Jemima was a prostitute and her narrative mirrors and echoes Maria's plight, inviting the reader to draw parallels. On more than one occasion, they share a similar experience. An avaricious stepmother throws both women out of their father's home. Both are confronted with the limits of their female solidarity. Jemima tells how she is responsible for the death of a young, pregnant girl. The brightest period in this grim life occurs when Jemima finds refuge as the kept mistress of a "licentious but cultivated gentleman," in whose house she learns some book knowledge and

refinement of manner and speech. Such acquirements, however, serve only to embitter her when, on his death, she is ejected by his relatives and forced again to become a beggar and washerwoman. Jemima states:

> The day my mother died, the ninth after my birth, I was consigned to the care of the cheapest nurse ... Poverty and the habit of seeing children die off her hands, had so hardened her heart, that the office of a mother did not awaken the tenderness of a woman; nor were the feminine caresses which seem a part of rearing a child, ever bestowed on me. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:80)

Maria's own story, narrated last in the sequence of tales, suggests how women, taught to be unnatural, cannot distinguish art from life, the creations of their own imaginations from the 'real world' around them. Her narrative gives us both an explanatory cause of her incarceration, and also shows how the prison is a repetition of her life so far. Her past and present are thus linked by both causality and analogy, suggesting how female development is trapped in a vicious circle. Maria states:

> But, born a woman and born to suffer, in endeavouring to repress my own emotions, I feel that

> the evils they are subject to endure, degrade them so far below their oppressors, as almost to justify their tyranny; leading at the same time superficial reasoners [sic] to term that weakness the cause, which is only the consequence of short -sighted despotism. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:133)

Maria makes tangible the reality of the arguments of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Politics has been 'sentimentalised' in this literary form. For Kilgour (1995:21) her highly sentimental story is an example of how women are culturally conditioned in such a way that love for them is always romantic fiction. Todd (1980:208) points out that Maria and Jemima fall neatly into the humorous eighteenth-century dichotomy of reason and sensibility. Since the age decreed reason for the man and sensibility for the lady, the sentimental Maria is in many aspects the very model of femaleness, while the controlled and hard Jemima is branded an unsexed woman, a monster. The motive of the book, however, is the impurity of these characterizations; Maria's melting sensibility is vulnerable, Jemima's rational hardness brittle. "As the two women implicitly approach each other through the static narratives and the fragments of the text, they come to suggest the political bonding and psychological wholeness their explicit stories deny" (Todd, 1980:208).

Despite the fact that Maria and Jemima are from two different stations in life, they are united by the oppression and abuse they both experience. Maria

reflects the central concern of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

> I heave sigh after sigh; yet my heart is still oppressed.
> For what am I reserved? Why was I not born a man,
> or why was I born at all? (Wollstonecraft, 1991:105)

4.4.Freud and Wollstonecraft

While Todd considers *Maria* as a work on friendship, Hoeveler presents a Freudian interpretation. Hoeveler (1999:391) suggests that the original childhood traumas inflicted on Wollstonecraft were the financial failure of her father, the emotional withdrawal of her mother, and the blatant favoritism shown by both to her brother. But the second wounding, the "adult" version of the same trauma, the sexual rejection by Imlay and his desertion of Wollstonecraft and their baby daughter, Fanny, for a dancer was even more psychologically devastating. It was a trauma so severe that she was compelled to reenact it over and over again in her fiction, mingling and transmuting her fiction with the imagery of women's bodies, tortured, beaten, and murdered.

Hoeveler (1999:392) further states that, as Freud has noted, trauma reveals itself in the imagery patterns of excessive and obsessive repetitions, and these are all too easy to recognize in *Maria. Maria* presents another version of the sexually frightened persecuted victimized heroine, a woman unable to find a suitable male soulmate because social and financial corruption doom her from the outset to the status of an exchange object. Hoeveler (1992:395) suggests that Jemima's

narrative is an embarrassingly painful series of insults and affronts, beginning with maternal rejection, maternal death, paternal neglect and physical abuse, emotional woundings, and then another illegitimate pregnancy resulting from rape, and the entire cycle is slated to begin again. One can only imagine Wollstonecraft's response to Freud, as Freud asserted in his essay on *Femininity* that it seems women have made a few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization.[75]

Kilgour (1995:91) offers an alternative to Hoeveler's interpretation, noting that Wollstonecraft draws upon the conventions of the female gothic, which replaces father–son relations with mother–daughter ones, relations that are obviously not Oedipal but have their own complicated dynamics of identification and rivalry. Wollstonecraft states in *View of the French Revolution*:

> What moral lesson, for example, can be drawn from the story of Oedipus, the favourite subject of such a number of tragedies? The gods impel him on, and led imperiously by blind fate, though perfectly innocent, he is fearfully punished, with all his hapless race, for a crime in which his will had no part. (Wollstonecraft, 1994:334)

[75] See Freud's Introductory notes on Psychoanalysis in Strachey (Ed): 1973:166.

In Wollstonecraft's works in general the figure of the mother plays a significant role. Women's ability to be mothers is the one mark of sexual difference she admits in her egalitarian system. Moreover, motherhood gives her an image for female authority, as it requires the exercise of reason and the ability to take responsibility for dependents. In the present state of things, however, women's conditioning often makes them inadequate mothers. Many of Wollstonecraft's characters have either weak or neglectful mothers. Kelly (1992:214) notes that Maria herself made the classic mistake of the oppressed woman in patriarchal society: she married to escape a family divided by gender and corrupted by false class values, but found marriage a prison.

4.5.The Abused Woman

The picture painted for the reader is that of a marriage where love is non-existent. It is a marriage of oppression. Maria is initially in an emotional prison. She is 'bastilled'. She then becomes physically imprisoned in her own home and finally institutionalized. Her escape however, is short-lived as despite all the wrongs of Venables, she is accused of violating her marriage. Kelly (1992:209) points out that in *Maria* the heroine develops a feminist social critique from her own experience; she then uses this critique in dialogue, to empower herself and intervene in 'things as they are'. She out-argues her dissipated husband, helps other women see the general character of their individual oppression, and philosophizes with her lover Darnford. Maria's plea is an echo of *A Vindication of*

the Rights of Woman[76]:

> I appeal to the justice and humanity of the jury, a body of men, whose private judgment must be allowed to modify laws, that must be unjust, because definite rules can never apply to indefinite circumstances. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:144)

However, one would suggest that Maria is not able to out-argue her husband as the judge rejects her argument on the basis that women should not plead their feelings. An apt title for the novella could have been *The Wrongs of Man or Maria* as it is the men who contribute to women's suffering. The judge himself is an accomplice to Maria's pain as he upholds Venables argument. Despite the lies presented against Maria, the judge chooses to ignore Maria's argument as he re-affirms the age-old notion that it is woman's duty to love and obey her husband, irrespective of the husband's treatment of his wife. The judgment of Maria is also important as it expresses the views that sound resoundingly Burkean. :

> We did not want French principles in public or private life and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was

[76] see Wollstonecraft, 1985:89.

> opening a floodgate for immorality. What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? It was her duty to love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could for herself. (Wollstonecraft 1991:145)

The judgment alludes to the fact that the rights of women are linked explicitly to political events in France. In questioning the validity of the judgment, one invariably questions one's attitude regarding the rights of women. This is indicative of Wollstonecraft's attempt to depict that, irrespective of a woman's station in life, all women share the same fate of subservience to men. The one form of subservience, which is that a woman should accede to a man's sexual advances, that a man has right to a woman's body and that woman was created for man's pleasure is evident in the stories or incidents of women who have been seduced. Maria, herself is a victim of sexual exploitation. Her husband attempts to 'lend' her sexual favours in return for a loan. According to the narrator:

> He [Venables] assured him [Mr.S-] that every woman had her price, and, with gross indecency, hinted, that he should be glad to have the duty of a husband taken off his hands. These he termed *liberal sentiments*

> ... and concluded with requesting him to lend him five hundred pounds for a month or six weeks. (Wollstonecraft 1991:120)

Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that:

> It does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice, and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity that is wanting in the world! (Wollstonecraft, 1985:165)

This statement aptly describes the situation of Maria and Jemima's situation. They both have been ruined. Wollstonecraft's reference to Mary Magdalene (the prostitute in the New Testament) is indicative of her stance regarding the tarnished woman. As already mentioned, *Maria* demonstrates that what is argued in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* cannot become a reality due to men's prejudice and their control of property and law. Therefore the asylum has now become a remedy for abuse. One would suggest that *Maria* is a

deliberate contradiction and negation of the reformist optimism of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

While the different characters' stories depict the isolation of individual identity, their narration has the effect of bridging that isolation as, through story telling, the characters influence each other, and ultimately the reader. Hearing Darnford's story, Maria identifies with him and pities his suffering. If Jemima's story influences Maria, the growing love between Maria and Darnford has its effect on her; touched by their love, she is able to open herself up to them and voluntarily began an account of herself. The intertwining of the discrete stories provides a model for the formation within the madhouse of an alternative society made up of the outcasts who are joined by sentiment. The love between Maria and Darnford begins with reading, and is consummated by the exchanging of their stories.[77] Although Maria has tolerated all forms of abuse, it is only at this stage that she decides that she will leave her husband.

There are other women in *Maria* who are also taken advantage of sexually. Jemima, her keeper, was the result of her father seducing her mother. Wollstonecraft points out in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* regarding seduction that:

> Yet when a man seduces a woman, it should, I think, be termed a left-handed marriage, and the man should be legally obliged to maintain the woman and

[77] Kilgour, 1995:85.

> her children, unless adultery, a natural divorcement, abrogated the law. And this law should remain in force as long as the weakness of woman caused the word seduction to be used as an excuse for their frailty and want of principle. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:164)

Jemima, like her mother is also a victim of seduction; when she was sixteen she was seduced by a Methodist who made her pregnant. Venables made a servant pregnant. Maria's landlady was seduced and an anonymous girl who is pregnant is turned out of her home. Sexual exploitation is thus the thread that links them all in their misery. Jemima states:

> How often have I heard ... in conversation, and read in books, that every person willing to work may find employment? It is the vague assertion, I believe, of insensible indolence, when it relates to men; but, with respect to women, I am sure of its fallacy, unless they will submit to the most menial bodily labour; and even to be employed at hard labour is out reach of many, *whose reputation misfortune or folly has tainted.* (Wollstonecraft 1991:88) [My emphasis]

One finds that the women are tainted and have to bear the wrath of society while the men continue totally unaffected by their actions. Jemima's mother dies in a garret while her father remained in his place. The Methodist's wife, who states that Jemima had wheedled her husband from her, regards Jemima as the guilty party. Although the man was in the wrong, it is the woman who has to bear the blame, a reality that is still applicable today. Wollstonecraft analyses women's rights in two forms. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she addresses woman's rights in the form of a polemic, while in *Maria* she has portrayed women's rights in the form of a fiction that expresses a level of solidarity and compassion with women's suffering that is absent from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.*

According to Elaine Moers (1985:124) where Wollstonecraft did make a sizable contribution to imaginative literature, it was not with the intellectual but with the passionate heroine, the woman in love, the fully sexual being. In *Maria*, the reader is absorbed in the pathos that surrounds women as a result of oppression that is driven by class and economics. Jemima's opinion of a gentleman who assists her is:

> He was an advocate for unequivocal sincerity; and had often, in my presence, descanted on the evils, which arise in society from the despotim [sic] of rank and riches. (Wollstonecraft, 1991:87)

Wollstonecraft states in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

> ... The whole system of British politics, if system it may courteously called, [consisted] in multiplying dependents and [contrived] taxes, which grind the poor to pamper the rich. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:256)

Poverty arising out of class disparity is central to Wollstonecraft's politics and this concern with addressing this social illness was to continue in *Maria*. It seems to me that Bahar (2000:46) is mistaken in her claim that to read Maria's narratives purely as illustrations and denunciations of the "misery and oppression, peculiar to *woman*, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" is to forget that they are embedded in the fictional universe and narrative construct of a novel, a genre which Wollstonecraft had criticized in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. On the contrary the novella clearly demonstrates a partisan attitude to the suffering of women most clearly in the case of the working class woman, Jemima.

CHAPTER 5-CONCLUSION

Wellek and Warren (1949:95) state: "a writer inevitably expresses his experiences and total conception of life, but it would be manifestly untrue to say that he expresses the whole of life, or even the whole of a given time, completely and exhaustively." However, it is possible that Wollstonecraft was able to achieve 'the whole of a given time'. Her politics and literature bear testimony to this fact. Wollstonecraft incurred much wrath and disdain in participating in the philosophical debates of the eighteenth century. The social and aesthetic reality that shaped her writing was provided by the revolutionary fervour at the time. In engaging in the debates of Reason and voicing her opinion on political and social issues as Todd (1985:31) points out, Wollstonecraft insisted that basic attitudes and principles which subordinated women must be repudiated before a real change in a woman's condition could be gained permanently.

According to Vlasopolos (1980:465) a central concern in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the improvement of domestic welfare, infant survival, and effective education of children, arguments that strike a note of modernity, which makes *A Vindication* speak to readers two centuries later. According to Gatens (1977:120) "Wollstonecraft's recommendations, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, concerning the improvement of woman's character, and so society in general, range from an abstract appeal to men that they allow their reason to show them the importance of chastity and intersexual friendship, to the provision of practical guidelines for the institution of national coeducation." Wollstonecraft's arguments are mirrored in many aspects of South Africa as her

goals on a number of social issues ranging from education to the family have materialized in a number of situations.

5.1.Wollstonecraft and Motherhood

Wollstonecraft's A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Maria* establishes a crucial relation between rights and virtues, arguing that women need the former in order to acquire the latter. Although her arguments clearly depend on underlying assumptions about gendered roles, she nevertheless differs from her contemporaries by insisting on women's independent civil status, regardless of marital and maternal status.[78] Bahar (2000:41) suggests that although her utopian vision of society may well be contingent on gender differences in occupations, she nevertheless makes the housewife her husband's equal and argues for women's independent civil existence regardless of marital status.[79] While the American and the French feminists do not focus on marital or maternal status, the image of woman being also a wife and a mother abound in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft states:

> The wife, in the present state of things, who is faithful to her husband, and neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife, and has no right to that of a citizen. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:259)

[78] Bahar, 2000:47
[79] Bahar, 2000:41

The act of mothering is therefore for Wollstonecraft an integral aspect in being a citizen. For Wollstonecraft the married woman is first and foremost a mother. The maternal nature of woman was to be echoed in the sentiments of Simone de Beauvoir (1969:220) who states in *The Second Sex* that it is maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural 'calling', since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species.[80] Gardiner (1982:179) states that female identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond and explores literary identification through the primacy of this relationship. Daymond (1996:xxvii) notes in her Introductory essay in *South African Feminisms Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994*, that "as a critical metaphor the maternal relationship extending from a particular cultural positioning within the family to that operating in society and thence to writing, has emerged as crucial to many essays in the collection."

According to Kilgour (1995:91) generally in Wollstonecraft's works, the figure of the mother plays a significant role. Women's ability to be mothers is the one mark of sexual difference she admits in her egalitarian system. Moreover, motherhood gives her an image for female authority, as it requires the exercise of reason and the ability to take responsibility for dependents. In the present state of things, however, women's conditioning often makes them inadequate mothers. Porter (1982:48) suggests that *Maria* succumbs to Wollstonecraft's concept of female fulfillment glorified in the domestic mother.

[80] De Beauvoir, 1969:220.

Motherhood can be seen as occupying a central tenet in both Wollstonecraft's politics and literature and it is this brand of Wollstonecraft's feminism which is closer to Womanism, the term coined by Alice Walker as an alternative to feminism, that is of relevance to the South African feminist context. As Daymond (1986:xxvii) points out that 'motherhood as a politicized subject-position has been vital and has been a major self-image invoked by African women when speaking of their militant participation in organized opposition to apartheid'.

Bryson (1992:41) argues that a further problem arises from the implication that the male world of politics and paid employment is a source of fulfillment and republican virtue in a way that women's domestic sphere is not, so that women can only realize their human potential when they enter the public sphere. Despite Wollstonecraft's emphasis on maternity and domesticity, it is important to note that she does not limit women's role to the domestic sphere as she suggests that they become doctors and legislators. Brody (1983:58) states that unlike her contemporaries, Wollstonecraft laboured to argue that men must reform themselves before women could be reformed. Unlike those who came after her, Wollstonecraft argued men and women must control their sexuality, rather than that women had none at all to control. Unlike the theorists of family life who followed, she argued that domestic work is civil work, subject to the same principles worthy of the same right to be performed by educated citizens.

Wollstonecraft's model of the family is not the refuge from the competitive toil and duress of the marketplace as such a model grew out of the romanticized

depiction of the domestic sphere in the nineteenth century. Bahar (2000:43) argues that Wollstonecraft for all of her sympathies for Romantic sentiment must be sharply distinguished from those after her who eulogized the angel by the hearth. " In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 'husband and wife are impelled toward a joint performance of duty subordinating for the mutual benefit of their eventual happiness and for their dependent children any wayward sentiments which, unsupported by reason, do not serve this social end"(Brody, 1983:50).

5.2.Woman and Economic Independence

According to Eisenstein (1986:101), in *Maria*, marriage is described as an insufferable bondage and in private correspondence she refers to it as matrimonial despotism. However one may contend that Maria's marriage is abusive. Wollstonecraft wanted to remove the relations of dependence of woman on man in both marriage and motherhood. Wollstonecraft states in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman:*

> But to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want individually the protection of civil laws; *she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death*; for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? (Wollstonecraft, 1985:259) [My emphasis]

Wollstonecraft's assertion that a woman must be economically independent is a reality that few women have realized. This economic independence was re-affirmed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*:

> Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own. (Woolf, 1992:354)

However, Wollstonecraft was very much aware that while one could argue for woman's emancipation and assert that a woman has equal rights, very often this reality did not materialize. The cerebral radicalism of her literary politics had to undergo a passionate transformation in her novella, *Maria* in order to depict the plight of woman. Economic independence can be a difficult task to accomplish especially if there are no employment opportunities available. This is reality that many South Africans face. Nevertheless the Government is committed to the economic empowerment of women and has established the 'Flagship Programme: Developmental Programmes for Unemployed Woman

with children under Five Years.' This aims to provide economic and developmental opportunities and services to unemployed women with children under the age of five years, living in deep rural areas and previously disadvantaged informal settlements. Dikeni (2002:510) reports that sixteen projects have been designed to create income that is distributed among the participating women. These programmes are also part of the Government's overall strategy in poverty eradication, the success of which remains questionable. Wollstonecraft does not propose any form of poverty alleviation in her texts but rather expresses admiration for the poor stating in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman:*

> With respect to virtue, to use the word in a comprehensive sense, I have seen most in low life. Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered abroad. (Wollstonecraft, 1985:171)

While male vices may have scattered families, Wollstonecraft's remark sounds ominously familiar, especially applicable to the apartheid era when the African man working in the mines was separated from his wife and had to live in hostels away from home and his family. The woman single handedly had to bring up her children. Wollstonecraft therefore displays in her political texts

social concerns and radically proposes reforms. Finke (1987:175) is of the opinion that *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* not only articulates a revolutionary critique of society, but also shows how difficult revolution is. However, South Africa has demonstrated that unlike other countries were violent revolutions had to bring about an end to oppressive rule, this can be achieved by a series of reforms. Whether economic and gender equality can be achieved by the same means is another issue.

While Wollstonecraft (1985:306) derided "woman who are amused by the reveries of the stupid novelists" it is the form of the novel that lends a penetrating interpretation of her politics. What is clear is that her arguments on property and on the economy came to the fore. *Maria* and her argument is clear: in order for woman to be emancipated she must be economically independent.

5.3.Victims of Abuse

Jemima's account of abuse and Maria's tyrannical husband sound all too familiar. Vlasopolos (1980:465) argues that in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft adopts a pleading tone to soften the resistance of her male readers and a stern tone in condemning the foolishness of her sex: "She subtly awakens men's fears about women's dominance over them in a state of inequality and alleviates those fears in her visions of a freed humanity." This argument is echoed in South Africa as the *Women's Charter for Effective Equality* states:

> This Charter gives expression to the common

> experiences, visions and aspirations of South African women. We are breaking our silence. We call for respect and recognition of our human dignity and for a genuine change in our status and material conditions in a future South Africa. (WNC1994: 11)

This call was given legal expression in the Constitution of South Africa that affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom. Despite the Constitution women are still subjected to discrimination, exploitation and violence. The Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP) is a part of the joint agreement between the Department of Social Development and the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention on the establishment of one stop centers for women and children who are victims of abuse, especially domestic violence. Two such centers are already operating as pilot projects in the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga.[81]

Besides Government, businesses are also sponsoring campaigns in creating awareness of abuse. The First National Bank (FNB) Sixteen Day Campaign was a massive media exposure aimed at preventing abuse to women and children. However, despite these intensive campaigns, women are still victims of abuse, especially the married woman. It is for this reason that Domestic Violence Act was passed affording woman some form of protection. The Advice Desk for Abused Woman was initiated by the efforts of Anshu Padaychee and

[81] Dikeni, 2002:511.

Navaneetham Pillay.[82] The Desk is a call centre providing not only emotional support for women but also providing shelter for chronic cases of abuse.

5.4.The Relevance of Wollstonecraft

A major aim of Wollstonecraft's writings is to insist that the natural rights of men are human rights. Therefore women, no less than men, are entitled to political equality and representation. Wollstonecraft's politics and literature is a focus on these issues. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft addressed primarily a middle class audience. In *Maria* the working class (Jemima) and the middle class (Maria) forge a friendship, the unifying thread linking these two women, being oppression. Coole (1988:129) asserts that Wollstonecraft's experience and aspirations focus almost exclusively on middle-class women: "The vocational pursuits that are to re-educate and free women are clearly not those of industrial toil, and if bourgeois women are to practice the former, it seems that it can be only at the expense of their proletarian counterparts." Wollstonecraft states in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that:

> For when a woman in the lower rank of life makes her husband's and children's clothes, she does her duty, this is her part of the family business; but when women work only to dress better than they could otherwise afford, it is worse than sheer loss of time.

[82] Pillay is a "legislator" currently sitting on The Hague.

(Wollstonecraft, 1985:170)

Wollstonecraft's concern with the middle-class woman derived from the fact that woman were losing their economically productive role as industrial capitalism undermined the household-based domestic economy. Thus Eisenstein (1988:9) can conclude provocatively that the development of the middle-class woman, whose distinctive characteristic was her purported idleness and her real economic dependence, is what gave rise to feminism.

However, according to Simpson's (1993: 108) more nuanced interpretation, Wollstonecraft does not think that woman of the middle ranks can make a revolution, but she does seek to persuade them to respond and contribute to any revolutionary tendencies that might be apparent. Like the male radical bourgeois ideologists, she addresses primarily a middle-class audience. Unaffected by the prerogatives of rank and freed from the immediate necessities of life, middle-class women should be capable of affirming their identity through personal achievement and merit. However, as Bahar (2000:38) notes the same changing economic and political conditions that allow middle-class men to actualize their potential deny this possibility to women of the same class.

In insisting upon the differentiation of men and women's contribution to politics, Wollstonecraft may be interpreted, not as renouncing or qualifying her *feminism,* but as raising a question, which is of the first importance for modem feminism. That question is "Why is the home itself not part of the political domain?' As we have seen, philosophers such as Rousseau, who urged that

men's and woman's natures were different, also, distinguished between two spheres-a political and private sphere.[83] We have seen Wollstonecraft's work directly challenging these views and demanding justice.

Bryson (1992:23) states that the systematic articulation of these demands was however still very much in the future, and Wollstonecraft was much more concerned to establish the principle than to elaborate a detailed programme for change: "She was writing at a time when although industrialization was opening up new employment, this was, particularly for women, at very low wages and in appalling conditions, while in the middle ranks of society women's economic dependence on men had grown".

According to Gatens (1977:125) any attempt to introduce women into the body politic necessarily raises the question of how these natural human needs are to be satisfied. The social reduction of woman to her function of satisfying these needs makes it conceptually impossible to consider her social possibilities without also considering, as a social problem, the question of the reproduction and management of the natural base of cultural life. Wollstonecraft's insistence that women had an independent right to education, employment, property and the protection of the civil law has materialized in South Africa for some women but the economic disparities that exist prevent the majority of women from achieving these goals.

[83] Mendus, 2000:24

Wollstonecraft's politics and literature are relevant to the issues of gender and identity in South Africa. Her concerns with social reforms may be obsolete as a number of her arguments have been realized and to a large extent she has been marginalized in South African feminisms. However, in developing South African feminism Wollstonecraft represents a valuable critical resource that shows the challenges facing those who seek to realize the rights of women in an unequal and stratified society.

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