

Writing Revolution: A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft

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Abstract: *The present essay throws light on Mary Wollstonecraft's writing of the (French) revolution in three of her seminal works, namely "A Vindication of the Rights of Men," "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," and "An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution". It is interesting to note how the writing of the revolution becomes, in the hands of a woman radical like Wollstonecraft, much more important than the Revolution itself. Because in writing so, she is not only defending her own pro-revolutionary stand and criticizing her opponents', but also trying to voice her other private/public concerns, speak for the rights of men and women, and establish herself as an earning professional.*

Key Words: *French Revolution, Vindication, Pamphlet War, Human Agency, Monarchy.*

Introduction

A drawn-out process culminating with the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, the French Revolution signaled to the world that "something extraordinary had taken place" (Furniss 59). It was "extraordinary" not simply because it marked the victory of the masses over the long-held monarchy in France, but because it unleashed certain radical and transforming energies that transcended the national boundaries of France to fundamentally restructure notions about political legitimacy, human agency, nature of the state, state of the people, and rights/duties of (wo)men in Europe in general, and Great Britain in particular. Commenting on this aspect of the Revolution, Eric Hobsbawm says, "...alone of all the contemporary revolutions, the French was ecumenical. Its armies set out to revolutionize the world; its ideas actually did so" (75). And it was writing that was to play the significant role of a lubricant in the free-floating, transnational circulation of such energies and discourses.

More interestingly it was the writing of the revolution – popularly known as "The Revolution Controversy" – in Britain that became more important than the Revolution itself; for different writers were attaching different meanings to the term "French Revolution". By doing so, they not only defended their own stand-points and criticized their opponents', but also tried to express their private/public concerns, "mobilize" the masse (Butler 7), and earn money, for publishing industry flourished in an unprecedented way, especially in the early 1790s. Also, since the revolution was being written even as it was unfolding, we find the same writers – Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Helen Maria Williams, in particular – revising, reassessing and re-writing the(ir) Revolution, once it began to spin out of control. Steven Blakemore sees this phenomena as what he terms as "Crisis in Representation": once the noble

idea of revolution “turned into rebellious flesh and blood, the same writers had to re-write the Revolution’s significance, revising its history and the previous texts that retrospectively suggested that the Revolution has been fatally misread” (14). Viewing from these perspectives, I intend to study Mary Wollstonecraft’s writing of the Revolution in her three non-fictional works, namely *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.

Analysis

Before we proceed to analyze her works, we need to take stock of what it was for a woman radical to write in the historical period in which Wollstonecraft rose to prominence. Writing in the time when, as Mary A. Waters says, literary culture was shifting from the practices of private patronage and coterie circulation to a new professionalism defined by contracts and remuneration, women writers could turn professional, and expect financial rewards(416). Moreover, thanks to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment’s emphasis on knowledge, liberty of conscience, innate human worth, and natural rights were extended to include some women. Resultantly, we find a large number of women writers such as Charlotte Smith, Anna Barbauld, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Wollstonecraft not only writing and therefore expressing their private/public concerns, but also earning remunerations, entering into contracts with the publishers, and engaging with politics, Revolution, and other issues of (inter)national importance – and thereby, entering into a terrain that was conventionally seen, both professionally and privately, as man’s.

This liberty was however not uncensored, for the conservative contemporaries were alarmed by these women’s trespass into the masculine realm of serious, and political writing, British popular prints staged, what Adriana Craciun calls, this “ gender panic” (15) as a violent, sometimes pornographic confrontation between revolutionary women and their opponents. Richard Polwhele’s *The Unsex’d Females* remains a notorious example of “the hysterical misogyny” (Craciun 28) of the 1790s attacks on radical women in general, and Mary Wollstonecraft in particular. By making politicized demarcations between appropriate and inappropriate female intellectual pursuits, it illustrates the fatal consequences of women acting on forbidden (read unnatural) intellectual, sexual, and most of all, political desires. In her reading of the decade, Mary Poovey has drawn attention to the ways in which the ideology of the “proper lady” shaped women writers’ representation of themselves as modest and retiring (despite the strength and efficacy of their public interventions) in such a way as to lead to a divided self, and to the deployment of an ambivalent rhetoric (41).

The case of Mary Wollstonecraft is, however, somewhat different, and it is not for nothing that she is considered the most radical woman writer in her thoughts and expressions. In fact, it can be said that her dissenting background, along with her association with the radical publisher, Joseph Johnson, and the intellectual sponsorship of Richard Price gives her the force,

power, and freedom to be radical the way she wants, or can maximum be as a female. Raised as an Anglican and never formally renouncing the affiliation, her association with Richard Price can be seen as intensifying her criticism of any alliance of temporal and spiritual powers such as that displayed in the Established Church. Taking her stand on the idea of God-given rights of men/women from birth as rational creatures, she also held the political arguments of the Dissenters and radicals that questioned monarchy, hereditary government, *Primogeniture*, and other “unnatural” arrangements. Be it her two optimistic and promising *Vindications*, or her later, and somewhat somber work, *Historical and Moral View*, the dissenting spirit gives force and strength to her arguments and rhetoric.

Appearing on 29 November 1790, twenty-eight days after Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* was the first of the flurry of the responses to Burke’s ferocious attack on Dr Price and the Revolution. Intended to criticize the ‘targeted’ opponent, the anti-revolutionary Burke – “to shew you to yourself, stripped of the gorgeous drapery in which you have enwrapped your tyrannical principles” (37) – the text addresses the Revolution from a pro-revolutionary perspective. Against Burke’s reverence for the accumulated wisdom of generations, and the antiquity of the British constitution, Wollstonecraft asserts her Enlightenment version of progressive history: the past does not contain knowledge and culture, but becomes a scene of superstition, oppression, and ignorance. Using the architectural imagery he so loved, she asks Burke, “Why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of gothic materials” (41). Like Price, she assumes that the imperfections of the system of political representation in Britain are a major defect of the British Constitution. She thus looks with interest to the alternative system being introduced in France, which “appear more promising” (61). Rejecting Burke’s contemptuous dismissal of the National Assembly because it included in its ranks men from the middle and lower orders, she proposes that “Time will shew, that this obscure throng knew more of the human heart and of legislation than the profligates of rank, emasculated by hereditary effeminacy” (40). For Wollstonecraft, in short, the Revolution becomes a “glorious chance” to obtain “more virtue and happiness than has hitherto blessed our globe” (48).

In the highly-competitive “Pamphlet War” of the 1790s, the writing of the Revolution, moreover, often involved not just an expression of one’s own views and even oneself, but also a response to or a commentary on the works/views of other writers/thinkers. Not surprisingly, we find Wollstonecraft’s writing of the Revolution criticizing the opponent’s – Burke’s – representation of it. To begin with, her very reply to Burke almost mirrors Burke’s treatment of Price. She presents Burke as a former reformer, grown old and confused, basically a good man but one corrupted by the patronage and praise of the English political establishment. Moreover, with her disdain for men choosing the trivially feminine over the androgynously intellectual, she attacks both Burke’s *Reflections* and his earlier book *A Philosophical enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he had made gentle beauty feminine, and the sublime masculine. The categories have nothing to do with sex, she sniffs, but are based on simplicity and truth. The

work in this way, says Janet Todd, confirms “her fear of representations” (165). Wollstonecraft is also particularly incensed at Burke’s melodramatic account of the October March which depicts market women as “furies” in “the abused shape of the vilest of women”. She punctures his melodramatic rhetoric by her plain statement: “Probably you mean women who gained a livelihood by selling vegetables or fish, who never had any advantages of the education” (30). In no less pungent terms, she also digs at Burke’s idealization of Mary Antoinette, whom she presents, in her work, as vulgar, frivolous and trivial – an “animal not of the highest order” (67).

The attack on Burke’s politics gets further force by Wollstonecraft’s critical dissection of his rhetorical style. She finds the overheated imagery and hyperbolic tone of Burke in *Reflections* to be as contemptible as his position on the French Revolution. The threat to readers that she therefore identifies is twofold. In as much as they are delighted by Burke’s “witty arguments and ornamental feelings,” they will not be able to cut through the rhetorical veneer to consider the idiocy of his arguments (8). Describing her work, she writes in the Advertisement, “Many pages... were the effusions of a moment” (3). This impression of spontaneity, as Caroline Franklin opines, was not only acceptable in political pamphlets, but becomes a “deliberate strategy” in the hands of Wollstonecraft to contrast her “honest indignation with the calculated oratory and rhetorical tricks of Burke” (91). Unlike ‘Sir’ - that sophisticated man of letters, Mr. Burke – Wollstonecraft presents herself as just and plain, an honest beginner: “I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments” (9). At the same time, she also presents herself as a serious thinker, a rationalist, “manly” in her force and reason, as against the “feminine,” the “effeminate” and the muddled idealist Burke.

This accounts for her celebration of reason, virtue, and consistency of sound principles. But, it nevertheless, does not mean that she outlaws feeling. Attempting instead to distinguish between genuine and false feelings, she holds that to be touched with sympathy for the Revolution is a sign of humanity, while to lament, as Burke does, for the fate of the French clergy and monarchy is a sign of false sensibility. And because Revolution promises the overturning of the cramping institution of monarchy, and the re-affirmation of the natural “Rights of men” – those “rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures” (14) – it is to be looked forward to.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) may not be actually about the French Revolution, but the revolution it envisages – “Revolution in female manners” - doesn’t sound less radical than that achieved in either the American or the French Revolutions. In *Memoirs*, Godwin describes Wollstonecraft’s intention behind the work as a desire to bring about a revolutionary change:

She considered herself as standing forth in defence of one half of the human species, laboring under a yoke which, through all the records of time, had degraded them from the station of rational beings, and almost sunk them to the level of the brutes... the rich as

alternately under the despotism of a father, and a husband; and the middling and the poorer classes shut out from the acquisition of bread with independence... (74).

And, it is with the intention to ameliorate the condition of women and ensure their existence as rational creatures, that she writes the second *Vindication*. This work too is infused with the revolutionary excitement and optimism of progressive thought in England. Though with its religious and moral emphasis, it appears less concerned with the political upliftment of women, Wollstonecraft's use of it as a "political intervention" (Janet Todd 179) becomes clear in the *Dedication* to the French politician Talleyrand, who was helping to extend the principles of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man". In it, she specifically asks him to reconsider his rejection of equal secondary education for both sexes in his plan for public education in the new republic. Later in the text, she goes on to demand political rights for women: "Women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government" (217).

We can't help agreeing with Janet Todd's assertion that the text "can be seen as an attempt to steer it [French Revolution] in a more radical feminist direction" (63). In fact, by repeatedly asserting the common beliefs of the early 1790s, that with a few "simple principles" – the perfectibility of human nature, the equality of individuals, and the natural rights of each to determine his/her own destiny – the ignorance and other oppressive forces of the society would be obliterated, Wollstonecraft links feminism to the general struggle for political and social reform. In doing so, she argues that the abstract rights of women are inextricably linked with the abstract rights of men, and that the tyranny of man, husband, king must all cease, in the name of reason, a reason that is woman's as well as man's. Furthermore, she establishes crucial relations between rights and virtues, arguing that women must have the former in order to acquire the latter. By doing so, she insists on the need of women's independent civil status, regardless of the marital or maternal one.

In her writing of the "REVOLUTION" in female manners", she rejects, as in the earlier *Vindication*, representations and writings of other writers. Here, she repudiates the male constructions of women in both real and literary world. Presenting herself as a "philosopher", and a "moralist" (103), she dissects the socially-cherished idealized construction of woman as 'naturally' weak, submissive, docile, innocent, and a "feeling" woman to present her ideal of a self-supporting (middle-class) intellectual. She calls for women to be educated not as a "preparation for life" but for "advancing gradually towards perfection" (155). This, however, does not mean that she denounces motherhood and the domestic sphere. In fact, she approves of motherhood as a meaningful and dignified civic role in a republic where society would recognize and reinforce the domestic cultivation of virtue. This implies that she intends to give women the right to take decision for themselves; after all, they too need to have existence as rational creatures.

Recognizing how crucial literacy representations of women are in “making” them (Saba Bahar 14), she objects to “those books, which tend... to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue” (87). Rousseau’s chapter on female education in *Emile*, like the republican Milton’s portrayal of Adam and Eve, complacently depicted feminine traits of submissiveness and weakness as natural rather than culturally produced. She reacts sharply to Rousseau’s characterization of Sophia as “a coquettish slave... a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man” (91) and calls it “grossly unnatural” (90). She then goes on to demonstrate how with his *Paradise Lost*, and his portrait of Eve as a “fair defect”, Milton, unfairly justifies women’s subservience to male authority in secular and civil matters. In fact, the ‘reason’ of her displeasure with literary representations of Eves (of Milton and Fuseli) is that they are denied the freedom of *becoming* virtuous through the exercise of reason in favour of *being* innocent and pleasing, but ultimately faithless and disorderly. And it is this blindness of the male radical tradition towards the oppression of women that Wollstonecraft principally seeks to correct.

As far as the style of the second *Vindication* is concerned, it too like the first one, serves the purpose of presenting/projecting Wollstonecraft’s arguments as genuine, heart-felt and passionate. Distrusting, and therefore, rejecting Burkean artificial/pompous rhetoric, her supposedly poorly-organized and repetitive style serves her end: in the first place, it hints at the deplorable situation of women’s education; secondly, since this sort of vehement, unrevised, and spontaneous style was accepted in polemics, it offsets the jargonized language of the sophisticated ‘men of letter’, and in doing so, she covers the real nature of the publishing of the book¹. As such, it remains a polemical tract published by a lower middle-class female writer under constant economic pressure(s) – not the product of the economically-privileged eighteenth century or of the modern academic publishing conventions.

In this text, too, Wollstonecraft presents herself as a no-nonsense “rationalist” “philosopher” who is dismayed by the effeminacy, which she sees as the “unnatural” state of anyone – of not just women but also aristocrats, who pursue pleasure and abandon work. In her analysis of the text, Amy Smith argues that since almost all the writers in the “Word War” suffered from what can be termed “Anxiety of Reception” and wanted large leadership of their texts, Wollstonecraft in *Rights of Woman* can be seen as consciously attempting to engage with both men and women readers, and that her book, with her proposed “Revolution in the female manners” is intended not just for women (558). Even when she addresses women, she sometimes speaks sternly from a distance, and at others rallies them in sisterly solidarity. Her use of pronouns also varies from second to third to first person plural. Such changes along with the changes in her tone, tempo, and rhythm contribute to a lack of fluency and smoothness. But, as Caroline Franklin opines, she was more interested in “effecting change through writing than [wrongly] proving she could write

¹ *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, though not as rushed as *The Rights of Men*, was printed under similar economic pressures (she had to support herself and her two sisters) and technological constraints, over which Wollstonecraft expressed considerable regret.

correctly and elegantly” (103). After all, why to prove/project that she is learned, or well-educated, when as a woman she can't be?

The open-hearted euphoria and optimism that for radicals characterized the early years of the French Revolution was, however, not to remain for long, for massacres soured their opinions and expectations. The September massacre (2-6 September 1792), the execution of Louis XVI (21 January 1793), the declaration of war by France on Great Britain (1 February 1793), the rise in power of Robespierre and Jacobins, and the subsequent Terror not only dented the 'noble' idea of revolution, but forced the radical writers to re-consider, revise, and re-write their early conceptions of revolution. Steven Blakemore's analysis of the re-writing of the French Revolution shows three writers – Thomas Paine, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Wollstonecraft – as “principal participants” in the ongoing revision of the French Revolution, not only because of their contemporary prominence, and their previous pro-revolutionary writings, but because they were living in the revolutionary France during the Terror (18). The crisis in representations, then, was, for them, intensely personal: in 1793, Paine and Williams were arrested and imprisoned, and Wollstonecraft, at times, feared for her life. The crisis, however, was also one of faith: whether to still have faith in revolutionary principles and the concept of Revolution, or abandon it.

Hence, it is important to emphasize that while they criticized and rewrote problematic aspects of the Revolution, none of them renounced it in totality, as James Mackintosh had done a decade after the publication of *Vindiciae Gallicae*. It can, in fact, be said that through thematic repetitions they were able to maintain faith in a true, albeit betrayed, revolution. At the same time, however, their revisions constituted an allusive critique of their earlier representations.

Written about the events of 1789 from the perspective of 1793, the bloodiest phase of the Revolution, *An Historical and Moral view of the French Revolution* records Wollstonecraft's own struggle to hold on to radical principles: analyzing the 'violent' Revolution in order to discover how it has gone wrong and what lessons can be learned from it. At the same, she can be seen as writing “to exploit the British interest in French events since she needed money” (Todd xxvi). In this way, we find the coming together of the private and public motivations that go in the process of writing even on the supposedly historical and therefore (im)/ (a) personal events.

In her Preface, she foregrounds how the Revolution poses a problem of interpretation. An adequate understanding of it, she says, “requires a mind, not only unsophisticated by old prejudices, and the inveterate habits of degeneracy; but an amelioration of temper, produced by the exercise of the most enlarged principles of humanity” and a protection from “the erroneous inferences of sensibility” (286). One therefore, according to her, needs to rationally and un sentimentally view and interpret the Revolution which is seen as a dramatic spectacle containing violent, atrocious scenes, which but can and should be seen as a precursor to a regenerated world.

This is, however, not to overlook the disappointment that is contained even in the apparently optimistic and forward-looking statements made by Wollstonecraft:

Since... we cannot 'out the damned spot', it becomes necessary to observe, whilst despotism and superstition exist, the convulsions, which the regeneration of man occasions, will always bring forward the vices they have engendered, to devour their parent... Why dwell circumstantially on the excesses that revolt humanity, and dim the luster of the picture, on which the eye has gazed with the rapture, often obliged to look up to heaven to forget the misery endured on earth (126).

Since "we cannot 'out the demand spot'", these circumstantial "excesses" in the form of revolutionary violence remain forever to "dim" her/our ideological "pictures" of the Revolution. The metaphors also reveal the discrepancy between the Revolution's reality, and Mary Wollstonecraft's "spotless" vision of it that "the eye has gazed with rapture". One also senses almost a Burkean fear of political chaos or a control by the vulgar and the stupid. This becomes clear in her treatment of some of the French events, the March to Versailles in particular. Whereas in *The Rights of Men*, we find her reacting sharply to Burke's description of market women as "furies from hell", here her own account of them as "mob" and "ramble" is not very different in kind. But what displeases her the most is the response of the National Assembly to this rising: it failed to reassert its authority by properly investigating it and punishing the offenders: "it is in reality from this epocha... that the commencement of the reign of anarchy may be fairly dated" (212). Also noteworthy is her employment of the biological imagery of death and disease. Wollstonecraft's version of *Macbeth* with its associated themes of the guilty regicide, and the 'bloody hands' also indicates her revision of the Revolution of 1789.

It is however her (successful) attempts to reconcile with her revolutionary principles, despite the Terror, that makes the text, "one of the most profound discussions of revolutionary politics to emerge out of the Revolution Controversy" (Furniss 69). One way she does this is to differentiate the noble theoretical principles that originally animated the Revolution from the disastrous way they were put into practice. She traces the origins of most of the Revolution's ills in the degeneracy of the French national character. By rejecting the assumptions about the intrinsic degeneracy of the human nature, she suggests that "the frivolity of the French character" has arisen from the particular conditions prevailing in France: the corrupting influence of the *ancient regime*. The central paradox, then, is that while the Revolution was made necessary by the degeneration of the national character under the *ancient regime*, the degenerate nature of the national character made it unlikely that the French would be able successfully to carry out a Revolution. This perspective, for Wollstonecraft, disentangles all the complexities surrounding the French Revolution.

Therefore, the French Revolution, in simple terms, becomes an historical act provoked by an immoral political regime: the aristocratic regime of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.

Subjected to that regime's broken promises and insults, individuals like Mirabeau as well as groups of patriotic soldiers and Parisian women are driven to defend themselves, first in peaceful and then in more forceful ways. While clearly stating her preference for gradual and peaceful reform over forceful revolutions in which both the virtuous and the vicious are bound to suffer, Wollstonecraft does not hesitate to declare her belief that historically speaking, reform is not always possible. Sometimes, people may have to resort to force to defend themselves, just as the Parisians did when they brought the King and Queen from Versailles to the city, thereby "leveling the aristocracy... with the ground" (444). Although morally dangerous, such a revolutionary act need not be irreparably harmful to virtue.

Conclusion

One can therefore easily conclude by saying that the French Revolution was not just an historical event in political map of France; it became, more or less, a protean term, open to a number of interpretations. And when the literary figures – especially the ones involved in the Pamphlet War – took it up as the subject for their works, they were not writing uncontroversial and factual history. In fact, "Writing Revolution" becomes a number of things, at one and the same time: writing of the French Revolution; writing of oneself, and one's private/public concerns; writing in a revolutionary way; writing in order to be an independent, self reliant, earning professional.

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