

THE DUBIOUS UNIVERSALITY OF MODERN SUBJECT
An Appraisal of Mary Wollstonecraft's Seminal Work:
A Vindication of The Right of Woman

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Abstract

A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft is a seminal work in feminist philosophy and social critique that questions longheld beliefs about gender roles and the restrictions imposed on women in the eighteenth century. Her writing challenges social stereotypes that limit women to domesticity and dependence and promotes educational equality. The claim that women are rational beings deserving of the same opportunities for moral and intellectual growth as men is at the heart of Wollstonecraft's argument. But her statements' universality begs for examination. Her views, which reflect the prejudices and exclusions inherent in Enlightenment thinking, were influenced by the historical and cultural circumstances of her era, even if they served as a foundation for contemporary feminist thought. The experiences of middle class Europeans are frequently at the heart of the narrative. Other identities and viewpoints are frequently ignored in favour of focusing on the experiences of middle-class European women. The conflicts in Wollstonecraft's writing are assessed in this analysis, with special attention paid to the ramifications of her articulation of universal rights within a particular cultural context. It looks at how her support of reason and education unintentionally perpetuates racial and social hierarchies, casting doubt on how inclusive her idea of equality is. This study highlights *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*'s dual function as a product of its period and a revolutionary criticism of gender discrimination by placing it within larger discussions about contemporary subjectivity. In the end, Wollstonecraft's writings serve as a springboard for continuing discussions on equity and justice, encouraging readers to reevaluate the interpretations and adaptations of classic works. Her ideas for a more just society are still relevant and complex today, as seen by the way her arguments inspire and challenge people.

This essay acknowledges the fundamental contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to feminist theory and contemporary ideas of equality while critically evaluating the work's shortcomings and cultural peculiarities.

Keywords: feminism, gender, domesticity, universality, exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

In his philosophical treatise, 'Nicomachean Ethics', the Greek philosopher Aristotle, emphasizes the concept of rationality as an essential nature of human being. Immanuel Kant in his work, "Critique of pure reason" also considers the fundamental role of reason to human being. These quintessential philosophers of all ages contend that the ability to reason, think critically, and make rational choices, distinguishes humans from other beings. Reason plays a crucial role in various aspects of human life, including ethical decision-making, problem-solving, and understanding the world. If these assertions are true, then on what basis could any species or sex of human race at any particular epoch/age, be considered inferior/less rational than others? If reason and rationality are inherent parts of human soul, and which are indispensable to problem-solving, understanding the world, and in resolving ethical issues, what could be the idea or motive for subjugating any person endowed with these natural capacities? Could there be any justified claim for denying either sex the right for education through which these endowments are formed for a better and more rational human society? Some Theists may argue that why men are considered superior to women is that in the creation account, God carved woman out of man. However, looking closely at this, God just picked out 'a material entity' - *The Rib* from man, to form the woman, who became a living being only when God had put into her the animating force/principle - *the soul*. The rib is just a matter, never alone the essence of man. According to Thomas Aquinas, the soul is the essence of a human person. It is considered the substantial form of the body, providing the principle of life and the

capacities for intellectual activities¹. Aquinas argues that the human soul is the same in its essence for individuals, regardless of gender. Aristotle however, divided the soul into the rational and irrational soul. The irrational is sub-divided into the appetitive and vegetative parts, although the appetitive part obeys reason (the rational part)². Meanwhile, our pursuit at this point is to underscore the soul as the essence and principle of human life, from where rationality (capacity to reason and engage reality) emerges.

In this work, we would vehemently appraise as far as we are able, the call for justice of Mary Wollstonecraft in her masterpiece; “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, where she deeply voiced out her sentiments of injustice being played on women, especially in the modern world of 17th-19th centuries. Mary Wollstonecraft was disturbed on how women were treated with less dignity. How they were termed; “incapable of rationalizing”, thereby denying them the right for equal education as men. Rationality was understood as being a masculine attribute or feature, such that ‘rationality’ becomes equivalent to man’s inherent quality.

Unfortunately, men of early modern era monopolized the concept of rationality yet universalized (generalized) it as the universal way of acquiring knowledge. By ‘men of our modern world’, I mean the good number of educated men of early modern era, including philosophers, logicians, mathematicians etc. These highly educated and rational men, seeing themselves as such, presented themselves as bearers of knowledge, wisdom, logical reasoning, and in fact, monopoly of intellectual capacity, who could pierce the rigour of logic, mathematics, philosophy and so on. Consequently, they mistaken rationality as a masculine feature. With this notion in mind, they saw women as less rational, thereby formulating the ideals of rationality with male paradigms in mind³. Having presented rationality as a male quality, they went further to attribute it to everyone, including numerous women who were denied the opportunity to study. This constituted a fallacy of generalization because having presented rationality as a male feature, presenting it again (in the strict sense of developed rational minds- philosophers, Logicians, mathematicians etc) as common trait in everyone is fallacious. This categorization was what Mary Wollstonecraft perceived as dubious. It is dubious because the skills to engage the intellect, and the philosophical tools of method and logic were basically deprived of women during the early modern period. Knowledge is power they say, but this power was denied of women by not allowing them to receive good education. This deprivation of education (which helps to sharpen human rationality) is what this work attempt to challenges⁴.

By way of clarity, I will begin by conceptual clarification, after which I will consider the nature of rationality. Following this, we consider whether human rationality could be developed. Why women are considered less rational. Some women intellectuals of early modern and late modern period contrasted. Whether the ability to rationalize is dubiously universalized?

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

DUBIOUS: Dubiousness refers to a state of being doubtful, misleading, uncertain or simply put, a questionable claim. For instance, when we describe something as dubious, it implies a lack of clarity,

¹ Cf. Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. 486.

² Tiffany, Harrington. 2016. The Significance of the Bipartite/Tripartite Division of the Psyche. *The Equilibrium: Vol 2*, 1. Retrieved on 3rd December 2023, from <http://essscholarship.org/uc/item/26s7n0q7/>

³ Lloyd, Genevieve. 1984. *The Man of Reason; Male and Female in Western Philosophy*. United State: University of Minnesota Press. 103.

⁴ Cf, Moshman, David. 1990. *Rationality as a Goal of Education. Educational Psychology papers and publications*. Retrieved on 1st December 2023, from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers/>

trustworthiness, thereby leading to skepticism or suspicion. This suggests that there are reasons to question the legitimacy, truth or equality of a particular thing or situation⁵.

UNIVERSALITY: The concept of universality implies the quality of involving or being shared by all people or things in the world, or in a particular group. It also denotes the quality of being true in, or appropriate for all situations⁶. However, in this work, we make use of the first application such that when we say 'universal or universality', we mean 'a quality being shared by all'.

MODERN SUBJECT: 'Modern Subject' as used in this work, is a collective phrase that encapsulates all humanity of the modern world. Both men and women of the civilized world. The modern ways of thinking, interpreting and approaching reality.

CONSIDERING THE NATURE OF RATIONALITY

To begin with, 'Rationality' is defined as a self-reflective, intentional, and appropriate coordination and use of genuine reasons in generating and justifying beliefs and behavior. Philosophically, rationality is a justifiable goal of education⁷. According to Robert Nozick, "Rationality is a crucial component of the self-image of the human species, not simply a tool for gaining knowledge or improving our lives and society. Understanding our rationality he continues, brings deeper in-sight into our nature and into whatever special status we possess"⁸.

Max Webber has also outlined four forms/types of rationality consisting of; Practical, Theoretical, Substantive and the Formal with which he demonstrates the polymorphous character of rationality⁹. These, Webber refers to anthropological traits of man. He argued against 19th century French anthropology, that man (humanity) did not acquire his rationality with the enlightenment and that individuals in all previous epochs were not incapable of rational action¹⁰. Here, Max Webber argues that the ability to exercise reason is a natural human trait. Hence, rationality is the quality of being guided by reason. For instance, a person who acts rationally has good reasons for what they do. This usually implies that they reflected on the possible effects or consequences of their action and the goal it is supposed to realize. Aristotle in his metaphysics also argues that "No one is able to attain to the truth adequately, while on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of things"¹¹. Here, we conclude that rationality in its nature, is an inherent trait in human beings.

WHETHER HUMAN RATIONALITY COULD BE DEVELOPED?

In Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, he suggests that humans are not born rational in the sense of possessing fully developed rational faculties. He therefore posits that rationality is a potentiality that unfolds over time through a process of growth and development¹². For him, humans are born with the capacity for rationality, but the actualization of this capacity requires experience, education and the cultivation of virtues. Rationality distinguishes humans from other things, but its realization is a dynamic

⁵ *Dubious meaning*. Retrieved on November 28th 2023, from <https://www.google.com/search?q=dubious+meaning/>

⁶ *Universality meaning*. Retrieved on November 28th 2023, from <http://www.google.com/search?q=universality+meaning/>.

⁷ Cf, Moshman, David. 1990. *Rationality as a Goal of Education*. *Educational Psychology papers and publications*. Retrieved on 1st December 2023, from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers/>

⁸ Nozick, Robert. 1993. *The Nature of Rationality*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. XII.

⁹ Webber, Max. 1980. Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analyses of Rationalization processes in History. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 85:5. 1151. (1145-1179).

¹⁰ Webber, Max. 1980. *Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analyses of Rationalization processes in History*. 1148.

¹¹ Metaphysics II, 993a27-993b2, as cited in Elliott, Sophia. 1999. *Feminist interpretations of Aristotle*. BMCR. O2:08. Retrieved on 26th November 2023 from <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1999/1999.02.08/>

¹² Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

process influenced by environmental factors and personal choices. Simply put, it is realized through the journey of life and intellectual development.

Moreover, we can see from Aristotle's perspective that though every human is rational, the development of this rationality continues over time, particularly through intellectual virtue (the rational and cognitive aspect of human excellence). Moreso, research has proven that education taken holistically, is the most trusted means of developing rationality. That is to say that 'rationality' is the goal of education¹³. This strict sense of rationality, 'Moshman' defined as the ability to represent higher-level metalogical components of reasoning, such as concepts of inferential validity and logical necessity¹⁴.

WHY WOMEN WERE CONSIDERED LESS RATIONAL

Historically speaking, societal norms and cultural attitudes have often restricted women from participating in certain academic disciplines, including philosophy. These restrictions were rooted in gender stereotypes and traditional beliefs about the role of women. This malady was heightened in the modern period (late modern period), when many women were not allowed to study philosophy, on ground of their less capacity to reason. The privilege of cultivating their intellect was therefore denied. Rationality is seen exclusively as a masculine feature. Because of this, women were seen as irrational and illogical creatures, unable to carry out rational thinking. They were seen and treated as mere objects of pleasure; hence, no attention was given to the formation or cultivation of their intellect (the rational soul). There is a common notion that women were created to feel rather than to reason¹⁵. The ability to reason or rationalize were believed to be possessed by men alone. Yes, off course, when women are not exposed to education, especially that of philosophy, their rational soul will not be developed as regards engaging in deep critical thinking and philosophical gymnastics.

Hence, the minds of women were enfeebled by false refinement of the rational soul. However, despite these mistreatments, only few notable women did manage to make strides in the field of philosophy. Though they made strides, but faced a lot of marginalization. Their philosophical/literary works were undervalued and overlooked¹⁶. Perhaps late modern philosophers were influenced by the ancient doctrine of humour which judged women inherently inferior to men based on physical strength, economic, religious reasons etc.

Mary Wollstonecraft, an 18th century English writer and philosopher, was born April 27th, 1759. And in her work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), passionately argued against these injustices meted on women, especially those of late modern period (19th-20th century), who were denied or rather restricted to the barest minimum, the privilege of education. To worsen it, even Mary Whitton Calkins, managed to complete the requirement for Ph. D. in philosophy, at Harvard University, but the University refused to award her the degree¹⁷. Mary Wollstonecraft once expressed that women are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species. She did however acknowledge that according to the law of nature, men are superior to women as regards physical or bodily strength. Buttressing this she writes;

¹³Cf, Moshman, David. 1990. *Rationality as a Goal of Education. Educational Psychology papers and publications*. Retrieved on 1st December 2023, from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers/>

¹⁴ Christoforides, Spanoudis, and Demetriou. 2016. As cited in Markovits, Henry. 2021. *The Development of Basic Human Rationality*. Retrieved on December 6th 2023, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368319036/>

¹⁵ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *A vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman Ltd. 132.

¹⁶ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 3.

¹⁷ Calkins, Whiton Mary. 2007. *GoodTherapy*. Retrieved on December 7th 2023, from <http://www.goodtherapy.org/famous-psychologists/mary-whiton-calkins.html/>

In the government of the physical world, it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. A degree of physical superiority cannot therefore be denied. And it is a noble prerogative. But not content with natural pre-eminence, men endeavor still to sink us lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment¹⁸.

Mary Wollstonecraft had no gender issue about men considering themselves superior to men in terms of physical strength. Her pain was that even the opportunity to develop their reasoning faculty was almost denied them. This has rendered women to live in perpetual childhood, depending totally on the dictate of others. That is, they live at the appetitive level of the soul. Mary argues that rationality is common to both sexes and therefore, both can be subjected to any education whatsoever including philosophical studies. The only difference is in their level of reasoning because women were not given the same opportunity given to men to cultivate their intellect, instead were left in their vegetative and appetitive soul levels. She therefore advocates that women should also be educated, especially in philosophy. She pointed out that women are part of humanity and are therefore placed on this earth to unfold their faculties¹⁹.

Moreso, Wollstonecraft argued for women's education and equal rights in her book; "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", which was her mature work on woman's place in society, calling for women and men to be educated equally²⁰. She believed in the rationality of women, and advocated for co-education to break gender inequalities. She attributes the cause of this deplorable state of women to a false system of education, which perceives women as alluring mistresses rather than affectionate wives and rational mothers. Understanding of sex had also been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the modern period, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition²¹.

Furthermore, to support Mary Wollstonecraft, it is good to note here that in during the early modern philosophy, Cartesian philosophy had a profound impact on women who managed to publish their works considering the challenges involved. Cartesian metaphysics, on the concept of 'mind without gender', greatly inspired seventeenth century women to assert their intellectual equality with men²². Descartes' work 'His Discourse on the method of rightly conducting one's reason', taught women, even those who never receive institutional education in philosophy, that all human beings possess reason or common sense, that is, a natural ability to distinguish between truth and error. From this trajectory, Cavendish, Astell, Masham and Cockburn pointed out that if women were intellectually slow, it is because society had prevented them from sharpening their minds by denying them proper education²³.

Moreso, Aristotle's consistent assertion in his metaphysics, Biology and Ethics, that the difference between males and females is neither essential nor radical; rather, men and women are in all respects the same. They differ only accidentally due to the material nature of their sex organs. A difference which represents an opposition only within their genus, 'animal'²⁴. This goes on to support M. Deslaurier's argument that:

¹⁸ Wollstonecraft, Mary 1994. *A Vindication of the Rights of women*. 72.

¹⁹ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *A Vindication of the Rights of women*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman Ltd 72.

²⁰ Meg, Matthias. 2023. *Mary Wollstonecraft; Biography*. Retrieved on 14th December 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism/>

²¹ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *A Vindication of the Rights of women*. 71.

²² Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 4.

²³ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 5.

²⁴ Elliott, Sophia. 1999. *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*. BMCR 02.08. Retrieved on November 27th 2023, from <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1999/1999.02.08/>

Just as no stone can be more perfectly a stone than another, as regards the essence stone, nor one piece of wood more perfectly wood than another piece, so one cannot be more perfectly man than another, and consequently the male will not be more perfect than the female as regards their formal substance, because the one and the other are included under the specie man, and that in which the one and the other differs from the other is an accident and is not of the essence²⁵.

According to Marguerite, this is the argument that men and women have the same form because they have the same human (rational) soul, with the implication that if men are more than women, then women too must be more than men.

Marie de Gournay in the *Egalite*, also considers the equality of men and women in which she asserts that men and women are one in the sense of being identical, thus;

The human animal is neither man nor woman, to be precise, the sexes having been made not simply, but *secundum quid*, as the school says, which is to say for the sole purpose of reproduction. The unique form, and only differentia, of this animal consists in the human (rational) soul. And if we may laugh while we are at it, the saying that teaches us that nothing resembles the male cat on the windowsill so much as the female cat would not be out of place. Man and woman are so much one, that if man is more than woman, then women is more than man²⁶.

SOME WOMEN INTELLECTUALS OF THE EARLY MODERN AND LATE MODERN ERA CONTRASTED

The early modern philosophy spans the 17th and 18th centuries, though believed to have begun with Rene Descartes (1596-1650), and generally extended through the enlightenment period. Late modern philosophy on the other hand, emerged and lasted through 19th and 20th century. Distinctions however exist between these two philosophical systems, including historical context, philosophical themes and the evolving societal role of women. Here, we aim to consider the philosophical legacies (if any) of women who lived within these epochs, and consider also the factors that enhanced or militated such achievement. As we have pointed out earlier, the cultural system of the early modern period (17th – 18th centuries), gave elite women access to education, thereby restricting much women access to philosophical education. Some women philosophers of this epoch include Cavendish, Conway, Astell and Masham, who wrote during the mid to late seventeenth century, a period that Sterling Lamprecht describes as ‘the Cartesian period in English philosophy’²⁷. The freedom to philosophical education available to women of early modern period was highly due to Descartes’ influence; His style of writing made his works accessible even to those who had received no institutional education in philosophy²⁸. The seventeenth century feminist writers according to Margaret Atherton, were motivated by Descartes’ conception of reason. Seeing the effect of this privilege, Mary Astell affirmed that a formal academic training and the study of Cartesian method could improve women’s natural reason. Generally speaking, women of the early modern period enjoyed less opportunity to education, especially that of philosophy. Only women from elite family had that privilege. This laid the foundation for the later attacks that a few educated women launched against the society for denying women the right to education.

²⁵ Marguerite, Deslauriers. 2019. *Marie de Gournay and Aristotle on the Unity of the Sexes. Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women’s Philosophical Thought*. Ed. Eileen O’Neill, Marcy Lascano. Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland. 286.

²⁶ Marguerite, Deslauriers. 2019. *Marie de Gournay and Aristotle on the Unity of the Sexes. Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women’s Philosophical Thought*. Ed. Eileen O’Neill, Marcy Lascano. Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland. 283.

²⁷ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 4.

²⁸ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 5.

Now, taking the key figure in this paper for example, Mary Wollstonecraft was an early modern woman philosopher and writer who contributed so much to the academia during her time though the academic atmosphere was not rosy for her and colleagues. Her works includes; 'Thoughts on the Education of Daughters' (1786), 'Mary, a Fiction' (1788), 'Original Stories from Real Life' (1788), 'A Vindication of the Rights of Men' (1790), 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792), 'An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution' (1796), and other letters. Mary's influence was greatly felt both by her generation and future generations about the roles of women in society. She gave women a sense of equality and personal dignity that was based on their intellect and abilities, not just their beauty²⁹.

Another notable women writer of this epoch includes; Mary Astell, who wrote a very enriching work on 'marriage' - "An institution of Heaven, the only Honorable way of continuing Mankind, and far be it from us to think there could have been a better than infinite Wisdom has found out for us"³⁰. Margaret Atherton, Cavendish, Anne Conway, Masham and other women had their voices heard during the early modern period, through their philosophical writings. These early modern women philosophers generally focused on advocating for women's rights and challenging prevailing notions of women's inferiority.

In the late modern period however, women philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) delved into existentialism and political philosophy, exploring existential questions like 'freedom, individuality, and the nature of power'. They engaged with broader philosophical movements and grappled issues beyond gender, contributing to existentialism, phenomenology and analytic philosophy. Women of this epoch had more opportunities for philosophical education compared to their counterparts in the early modern period. Let us just familiarize ourselves with few of their names; Edith Estein (1891-1942), Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), Sussane Langer (1895-1985), Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001), Mary Midgley (1919-2018), Philippa Foot (1920-2010), Mary Warnock (1924-2019), Carol Gilligan (born 1936), Martha Nussbaum (born 1947), Elizabeth Fricher (born 1956), Susan Haack (born 1945), Julia Kristeva (born 1941), to mention but a few.

Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir for instance, was a French writer, political activist, feminist, social theorist and Atheist who studied with Paul Sartre and was influenced by his idea of existentialism. In her seminal work on feminism, "The Second Sex" (1949), De Beauvoir passionately laments over how women are being treated like slaves. In it she explores the condition of women in society, addressing the ways in which women have historically been defined in relation to man. They are regarded as 'the other', considered secondary to men and identities shaped by societal expectations³¹. Generally speaking, late modern women philosophers since they had access and privilege of education, especially that of philosophy, engaged broader fields of philosophy than early modern women philosophers. Carol Gilligan for instance, is known for her groundwork in Ethics³². Martha Nussbaum also impacted much political philosophy and Ethics. Elizabeth Fricker too had published book on Epistemology, particularly 'on testimonial justice'. Susan Haack herself had engaged with philosophy of logic³³. Having placed early modern and late modern women side by side, we have seen how late modern women enjoyed more intellectual privileges and achievement because of the conducive nature of their society which encouraged women education. Education in the early modern were accessible only to few women from the Elite family.

²⁹ Hatcher, Charis and Notari Debbie. 2023. *Mary Wollstonecraft/ Biography, Books and Analysis*. Retrieved on 14th December 2023, from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/mary-wollstonecraft-works-achievements-influence/>

³⁰ Broad, Jacqueline. 2015. *The Philosophy of Mary Astell: An Early Modern Theory of Virtue*. 126-148.

³¹ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 21.

³² Duignan, Brian. 2023. *Biography of Carol Gilligan*. Retrieved on 14th December 2023, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carol-Gilligan>

³³ Haack, Susan. 1978. *Philosophy of Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 23.

WETHER THE ABILITY TO RATIONALIZE (PHILOSOPHIZE) WAS DUBIOUSLY UNIVERSALIZED IN THE MODERN ERA?

Let us begin here by reflecting on the words of Simone de Beauvoir- A French writer, political activist, feminist and social theorist, She writes;

Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being. Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she, simply what man decrees, thus she is called 'the sex', which means that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex, absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not man with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essentialism. He is the absolute, she is the 'other'³⁴.

From the above assertion, we can see that women are defined by men. With no form of autonomy, they appear to men merely as sexual beings. They exist only with reference to men. No freedom to exercise their reasons but align themselves to the decrees of men. What a slavery? What a culture? What a society? Where is the place and social standing of women in our modern world, Mary Wollstonecraft cried out. The male sex has become the paradigm and mirror for evaluating and looking at humanity, such that any privilege that men receive, is perceived as being received by both sexes. Advancements in art, literature and philosophy (critical exercise of reason), was the major task of humanity during the early modern period. And since the culture of the era relegated women education, men then became the mirror through which society is seen because of their educational training, especially that of philosophy. Because of this, women were perpetually subjected to blind obedience to their counterparts, through denial of their right to education. Mary argued further saying; "Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience"³⁵. Rational use of the intellect should not be universalized because women were not allowed to exercise their reason through education. They have been formed to perpetually depend on the superior faculty of men.

Mary Wollstonecraft was deeply displeased with the uncertain and misleading generalization of intellectual capabilities in the early modern period, as if everyone was exposed to cultivation and logical use of the thinking faculty. Such conception of the society was dubious because women found themselves denied of the right to education. They had remained in their infantile stage of cognitive/rational development. Remaining ever childish in reasoning, unable to make sound and rational decision, women were considered irrational and consequently placed outside the scope of the modern man. Cavendish succinctly captured the point being made here in her remark that; "through the careless neglects of the masculine sex to the effeminate" women had become like worms that only live in the dull earth of ignorance³⁶. Cockburn also reaffirmed this when she ascribes women's ignorance to their disadvantages in a society that discourages women intellectuals. These were the states of affairs in the society during the early modern era. Women were denied education, most especially philosophical studies.

According to Aristotle and the scholastics, it is true every human person is rational, but this thinking faculty has to be formed in a certain way in order to perform more critical and cognitive functions. This training and formation of the mind is best achieved through education. Whereas majority of the women of the modern age were denied education. Even the few that were opportune to receive education were subsumed under male philosophers and thinkers of the same era. Reason is presented only from the perspective of men. Men are seen as monopoly of rationality or the right or logical way of thinking. In a

³⁴Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 16.

³⁵ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *The Vindication of the Rights of women*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman Ltd. 90.

³⁶ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 5.

word, rationality was 'Masculinized'. That is to say, it was made a male feature such that the term rational thinking/exercise became synonymous to man. This was the prevalent ratio-current of the modern period. They saw rationality only from the perspective of men and neglected its holistic-sex consideration. Perhaps, this came from false interpretation of 'The ideals of Cartesian Reason' in which 'rigorous though' are celebrated as ideal character traits for men, whereas traits associated with women were looked down upon³⁷.

Mary argued that "Men indeed appear to act unphilosophical when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them in a state of perpetual childhood³⁸. Women were merely seen as objects of pleasure with no social status in the field of knowledge. Rousseau alludes to this when he says that 'because of imperfect cultivation of the mind which women did not receive, they only attain knowledge of evil³⁹.

Considering the state of injustice to which women were subjected: denial of education and seen as mere sensual objects, Mary Wollstonecraft interpreted the so called universalized modern man as dubious. It is very dubious and misleading because men and women of the modern world do not enjoy the same privilege. Whereas men monopolized knowledge, sharpness of mind and bodily strength, women were enslaved by cramping their understanding and sharpening their senses⁴⁰. All writers from on the subject of women education and manners from Rousseau to Dr Gregory, gave contributions to render women more artificial, weak characters, and useless members of the society.

CRITICAL REMARK/EVALUATION

It is common knowledge that all humanity were created concomitantly with rational soul. This implies that every single specie under this genus shares in this natural endowment. Therefore, human rationality has no gender. The human soul is the principle of human life and according Thomas Aquinas, it is composed of three faculties comprising; the intellectual faculty, the sensitive faculty and the vegetative faculty⁴¹. These faculties are indispensable to any human person.

The Summa Theologiae, claims that human faculty is the primary motivator behind all human actions⁴². All human activities are therefore driven by these faculties which remain the defining difference between humans and other animals. It is thus relevant here to assert that 'human person' is equivalent to 'rational being', that is to say; has a natural capacity to reason (rationality). However, one's rationality does not attain full development at birth but develops throughout life, depending on one's exposure to factors that could enhance rational development. Research has shown that education remains the best means of informing and developing the intellect⁴³.

³⁷ Broad, Jacqueline. 2003. *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century*. USA: Cambridge University Press. 10.

³⁸ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *The Vindication of the Rights of women*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman Ltd. 85.

³⁹ 1994. *The Vindication of the Rights of women*. 86.

⁴⁰ Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1994. *The Vindication of the Rights of women*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman Ltd. 88.

⁴¹ Nghibi, Judith. 2022. The Faculties of the Human Person: Metaphysical Perspectives. *International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*: Vol, 9. 3. 1.

⁴² Cf. Aquinas, Thomas. 2002. *The Treatise on Human Nature*. As cited in Nghibi, Judith. 2022. The Faculties of the Human Person: Metaphysical Perspectives. *International Journal of Recent Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*: Vol, 9. 3. 1.

⁴³ Cf, Moshman, David. 1990. *Rationality as a Goal of Education. Educational Psychology papers and publications*. Retrieved on 1st December 2023, from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers/>

Meanwhile, looking at Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development for instance⁴⁴, we shall see how a good and responsible child's formation could create within the child a sense of autonomy, initiative, industry, identity and generativity, enabling an individual to be self-dependent and critical in engaging reality. We shall also see how deficient formation or training may lead to negative outcomes like mistrust, isolation, stagnation and inferiority. When we liken this to the subject of our enquiry, most women of early modern era suffered intellectual dormancy. A few women from elite family were privileged to receive education. Women of this era were generally denied formal education which resulted in low level of rational development among them. Consequently, their society considered them inferior minds and unable of rational and critical engagement. They were considered as "the other", objects of pleasure and irresistibly dependent on men. Male sex became the measure of rationality

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we have been able to look at the concept and nature of rationality, and have established it as an inherent trait of every human being. We also have come to know that though human being is born with rational mind/soul, this rational soul/mind must be developed through education in order to carry out some creative critical thinking, problem solving and engaging reality. Unfortunately, we saw how women who lived in early modern period had limited access to education. How they were treated with less dignity, as objects of pleasure, and as beings unable to critically engage reality.

Furthermore, we likewise saw how the philosophical figure used in this work; "Mary Wollstonecraft" an eighteenth-century writer and philosopher, and who was an eye witness of this women educational disenfranchisement during this early modern period, passionately reacted and criticized her own society and condemned her mentality toward education. She pointed out how women were relegated to the margins of the society by denying them human right of developing their rational minds. She submitted that since every human person both men and women is naturally endowed with rationality, it would not be just to limit the development and critical application of this faculty to a single gender. She therefore advocated that an equal right of education should be accorded to all human persons, regardless of gender.

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⁴⁴ Cherry, Kendra. 2022. *Erikson's Stages of Development: A closer look at the eight Psychosocial Stages*. Retrieved on 17th December 2023, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/erik-eriksons-stage-of-psychosocial-development/>

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