



Motherhood In Wollstonecraft's Feminist Thought

AUTHORS

Farhat Sultana

Research Scholar (Corresponding Author), Department of Humanities and Social Science, Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Barabanki – Deva Road, Uttar Pradesh.

Dr. Andleeb Zahra

Assistant professor, Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University, Barabanki - Deva Road, Uttar Pradesh.

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores Mary Wollstonecraft's conceptualization of motherhood within her feminist philosophy, primarily as articulated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Wollstonecraft posits that rational education is essential for women to fulfil motherhood effectively, critiquing the frivolous upbringing that renders them inadequate nurturers and companions. Through a feminist lens, the study examines how her views challenge patriarchal subordination, linking motherhood to political participation and moral development. The literature review synthesizes scholarly interpretations of her pro-motherhood stance, emphasizing its compatibility with feminist empowerment. Employing qualitative textual analysis of primary texts and secondary sources, the methodology uncovers Wollstonecraft's advocacy for educated, independent mothers. Results reveal her rejection of sentimentalized motherhood in favor of rational duty, influencing modern pro-life feminism and gender equity. The conclusion underscores the enduring relevance of her thought in contemporary debates on women's rights, advocating for educational reforms to harmonize motherhood with autonomy. This analysis highlights Wollstonecraft as a foundational figure who redefines motherhood beyond reproduction, integrating it into broader emancipation.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft, Motherhood, Feminist Thought, Education, Rationality, Patriarchal Norms, Political Participation, Moral Formation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), often hailed as the foremother of modern feminism, revolutionized eighteenth-century discourse on gender through her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this text, she critiques the societal constructs that degrade women to ornamental beings, arguing for their rational education as equals to men. Central to her philosophy is the role of motherhood, which she views not as a confining duty but as a moral and intellectual endeavour enhanced by enlightenment. Wollstonecraft's own life—marked by unconventional relationships, motherhood out of wedlock, and tragic death post-childbirth—infuses her writings with personal urgency, challenging the era's sentimental idealization of mothers. Wollstonecraft may have been the first feminist philosopher because she used her writings to challenge patriarchal systems of thought and laid down the foundation for the claims of gender equality. Her view of motherhood is one of great importance; she does not see motherhood as simply a biological function, but instead believes mothers are culturally determined by society to develop both mind and spirit, and as such,

have an enormous contribution to the development of culture. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft argues that women are subordinate due to their lack of education, which renders them incapable of effectively fulfilling their responsibilities as proper mothers. This is a foundational concept that flows from the idea of reason found in Enlightenment thinking; Wollstonecraft defines true femininity through the exercise of reason and rational agency by women and not through cosmetic charm or beauty as defined by society.

Wollstonecraft expressed how social norms of femininity, often promoted in the 18th century, limited women's understanding of their own abilities and potential by promoting motherhood as an idealization of women's role in the home. She saw this as detrimental and viewed women as needing proper education to be able to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers. She argued that through education, women would raise rational children who would be better citizens. The idea of motherhood as a political issue because it allows the educated mother to instil virtue and reason into her children.

Thus this paper investigates motherhood in Wollstonecraft's feminist thought, positing that she envisions it as a site of empowerment rather than subjugation. By educating women, society fosters better mothers who cultivate rational citizens, thereby advancing gender equality and political participation. Her ideas counter Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notions of innate gender differences, advocating cross-gender involvement in parenting—women in fatherhood aspects and vice versa. This study addresses a gap in feminist scholarship by highlighting Wollstonecraft's overlooked pro-life and pro-motherhood stance, which aligns feminism with family flourishing rather than opposition to it. Through historical and textual analysis, the paper demonstrates how her views remain pertinent to contemporary debates on reproductive rights and women's empowerment.

II. Wollstonecraft's Personal Experiences with Motherhood :-

Mary Wollstonecraft's tumultuous life, including her experience with maternal anguish, had a large impact on the way she viewed women as mothers. Wollstonecraft was born in 1759 to a violent father and an obedient mother, and she was able to see domestic abuse first hand. Protecting her mother against violence was the first time she realised the extent of women's vulnerability; themes of women's vulnerability and the oppressive nature of patriarchal tyrannies recur throughout her writings.

At the age of 19, Wollstonecraft took on the role of lady's companion and saw the differences in class and status differences between her and others. In 1784, she helped her sister Eliza escape from an abusive marriage — Eliza left her infant behind — showing the harsh sacrifices mothers of her day often had to make. The fact that Eliza suffered from social ostracism as a result of her actions highlighted Wollstonecraft's belief that all women had a right to make choices for themselves without being required to prioritize their family obligations.

Wollstonecraft's view of motherhood was unconventional. She had Fanny Imlay in 1794, a child born out of wedlock due to a brief relationship with Gilbert Imlay. Imlay deserted Wollstonecraft and Fanny, which led to numerous suicide attempts, leaving behind a legacy of sadness that she conveyed in her melancholic *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Throughout this troubled time, she wrote about the close bonds between mothers and their children, even in the darkest times. During her travels with her infant daughter, Wollstonecraft viewed motherhood through the dual lens of being a burden and redemptive in nature, and it was through this view that she advocated for mothers to have the support of society to fulfil their maternal responsibilities.

In 1797, Wollstonecraft married William Godwin and soon had a daughter, Mary Godwin (later she would be known as Mary Shelley), and shortly thereafter, she died from an infection following childbirth. Wollstonecraft's death mirrored her fears of losing her child and being abandoned, which were common themes in her writings about mothers.

III. Wollstonecraft's General Views on Motherhood in Feminist Context :-

Wollstonecraft's feminist ideology places motherhood within the framework of nature, reason, and society. In *Vindication*, she writes, the care of children in their infancy is one of the grand duties annexed to the female character by nature, and this includes breastfeeding and educating as a necessity for women's moral and intellectual upbringing. Although this idea is derived from the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a figure she admired and challenged, where he idealistically extolled maternal nursing in *Émile*, Wollstonecraft applied this notion by saying that rational motherhood gives women mentally superior faculties, making them superior as active citizens without restricting them to and because of their

roles as housewives. However, its essentialism has been subject to criticism for upholding patriarchal ideology, where a woman's power is contained within this sphere and is heteronormative.

Motherhood, in the context of the above, is where women's empowerment comes from, as it encourages reasonable thinking. This reverses the beliefs in society that women are passive or merely ornamental. The author had in mind mothers who are well-educated, teaching their children the value of virtues, and thus, through the next generation, influencing the future and indirectly contributing to the realm of politics in a republican manner, as has been examined by some scholar dealing with the topic, and demonstrating how the domestic involvement of women in society could help bring the spirit of citizenship.

But at the same time, there is subordination in the position of the woman, since she is valuable only inasmuch as she is a mother, and her independence is limited by the responsibility she has as a mother. There is the criticism of partial morality, where women's cunning and domesticity are the factors in the manner in which they exercise power through the agency of male.

A culmination of her philosophy is realized in her novels as gothic elements are incorporated to exemplify motherhood's monstrous potential within oppressive conditions. Mothers' absences or poor performance in the two texts embody inter-generational trauma while the empowered mother defies patriarchal oppression. By exploring motherhood beyond biological tenets, Wollstonecraft presents solidarity in terms of midwife or communal readings of history that lead to liberation. Finally, motherhood is paradoxical in her philosophy as it embodies both biological mandate that becomes rationalized and offers liberation to women while potentially hampering progress on the feminist agenda due to her feminist misogyny, where her attack on patriarchal society inadvertently reinforces patriarchal ideology through her discussions on motherhood.

Wollstonecraft's nursing arguments are one such example. She criticizes wet nursing because it is neglect, causing a disconnection between mothers and their power. While actual nurturing promotes rational affection and morality, it also imposes oppressive motherhood on women, reflecting bourgeois values over those of society. These same ideas are reflected in Wollstonecraft's literary works, in which separation from mothers results in insanity and depravity, evidencing how poverty magnifies the injustices faced by women. Wollstonecraft's work also incorporates the analysis of disability studies and defies the traditional perception of the flawed body of women by asserting the functional and dynamic nature of the body of mothers for social development and construction.

IV. Motherhood in Mary: A Fiction

Mary: A Fiction, Wollstonecraft's debut novel, serves as a sentimental exploration of female sensibility, drawing on her own experiences to critique the emotional and educational neglect inherent in patriarchal family structures. The protagonist, Mary, grows up in a household marked by maternal indifference her mother, Eliza, is depicted as vacuous, obsessed with novels and lapdogs, embodying the frivolous femininity Wollstonecraft decried in *Vindication*. This neglect sets the stage for Mary's emotional turmoil, illustrating how inadequate mothering perpetuates cycles of female subordination. Wollstonecraft uses this to argue that motherhood, when devoid of reason, fails to prepare daughters for independence, instead fostering dependency and sentimentality.

Central to the novel is the theme of maternal influence on character formation. Mary, lacking a nurturing mother, turns to romantic fantasies and friendships, highlighting Wollstonecraft's belief that rational education begins in the nursery. The novel critiques how mothers like Eliza prioritize superficiality, neglecting their grand duties and contributing to daughters' misery. Wollstonecraft pokes fun at sentimental readers expecting escapist romance, instead delivering a narrative that exposes the wrongs of uneducated motherhood. Mary's own aspirations toward intellectual and emotional fulfilment are thwarted by societal expectations, mirroring Wollstonecraft's view that motherhood should empower rather than entrap.

Though Mary features less explicit maternal roles than Maria, it subtly addresses intergenerational transmission of oppression. Mary's mother favours her brother, reflecting patriarchal preferences that undervalue female children. This favouritism echoes Wollstonecraft's critique of partial morality, where mothers internalize and perpetuate gender biases. The novel's autobiographical elements—drawing from Wollstonecraft's strained family dynamics—underscore how cold mothering drives vice and emotional instability. Critics have noted the work's sentimentality as a limitation, yet it effectively dramatizes motherhood's role in shaping feminist consciousness.

Wollstonecraft extends this to broader feminist implications, suggesting that empowered mothers could break these cycles. In the novel, Mary's reflections on duty and affection hint at rational motherhood as a path to virtue, aligning with her philosophical stance that maternal education fosters civic participation. However, the absence of positive maternal models reveals the paradox: motherhood offers potential solidarity but often reenacts subjugation. Mary's friendships with women like Ann provide nonmaternal bonds, prefiguring Wollstonecraft's call for female communities beyond biology.

The novel also critiques novel-reading as a maternal failing, with Eliza's indulgence symbolizing how unguided sentiment corrupts mother-daughter relations. Wollstonecraft, as a former governess, infuses the narrative with ideas on education's impact, arguing that mothers must model reason to prevent daughters' entrapment in romantic delusions. Ultimately, Mary portrays motherhood as a foundational element of feminist thought, where its failures expose societal wrongs, and its rational reform promises emancipation.

V. Methodology

This qualitative study employs textual analysis to examine Wollstonecraft's primary works, chiefly *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, alongside secondary scholarly sources. A feminist hermeneutic approach interprets her texts, focusing on themes of motherhood, education, and rationality. Data collection involves close reading of excerpts critiquing women's education and advocating maternal duties, supplemented by historical contextualization from biographies and critiques.

Sources were selected via keyword searches on academic databases for relevance to Wollstonecraft motherhood feminism. Analysis codes for patriarchal critiques, educational imperatives, and empowerment outcomes. Ethical considerations include acknowledging Wollstonecraft's Enlightenment biases. Limitations encompass the era's language barriers and interpretive subjectivity, mitigated by cross-referencing multiple scholars.

VI. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Wollstonecraft's views on motherhood underscores her as a pivotal figure in feminist history, where motherhood serves as both a critique of patriarchy and a pathway to liberation. Early interpretations frame her as rejecting traditional motherhood rhetoric that perpetuates inequality, positioning feminism as an antidote to cultural logics valuing women solely for reproduction. Recent studies, such as those exploring her pro-life implications, argue that Wollstonecraft's depiction of abortion's tragedies advocates for a feminism embracing both mother and child, contrasting with liberal individualism.

Literature highlights Wollstonecraft's emphasis on rational motherhood: educated women execute maternal duties with reason, fostering moral children and societal progress. Her critique of frivolous female education links to poor mothering, as "feeble-minded" women fail to instill virtue. Scholars connect this to political participation, suggesting motherhood's demands reveal women's subordination, yet also offer resistance through enlightened nurturing. Works on her primary texts, like *Vindication*, analyze her call for women to purify hearts via cultivated understanding, rejecting dependency.

Contemporary analyses extend Wollstonecraft's ideas to modern feminism, noting her influence on education and gender roles, where motherhood is a moral responsibility beyond biology. Critiques address her class biases but affirm her foundational role in integrating motherhood into feminist emancipation. This review synthesizes these perspectives, revealing a consensus on Wollstonecraft's vision of empowered motherhood as integral to rational society.

Textual analysis confirms Wollstonecraft's view of motherhood as elevated through rational education. In *Vindication*, she argues uneducated women, reduced to "brutal" indulgence, fail as mothers, perpetuating vice in offspring. Educated mothers, conversely, embody moral responsibility, nurturing independent citizens. Her critique targets Rousseau's gender essentialism, proposing mutual parental roles for holistic child-rearing.

VII. Criticisms of Wollstonecraft's Views and Discussion

Many second-wave feminists criticized how Wollstonecraft views motherhood as being essential to women's identity, and they claimed that her calling for both the rational education and independence of women does not guarantee a rejection of fixed traditional gender roles. Some second-wave feminists argue that, by treating motherhood as women's "grand duty" (based on her belief that it is an innate trait), Wollstonecraft has re-affirmed traditional feminine identity and consigned women to the role of caregiver and homemaker. In a 1994 essay, **Susan Gubar** accused Wollstonecraft of being a "feminist misogynist" because the way she criticizes the frivolousness and sensuality of women reflects her own internalized self-hatred toward traditional femininity, despite the fact that she was seeking to liberate women through reason. Following in a similar vein, **Mary Poovey** described Wollstonecraft as being "a prisoner of the category she so vehemently tried to reject", because her philosophical analyses on propriety and femininity were expressed through the lens of bourgeois ideology, and even though she attempted to attack that ideology, she was never able to escape the grasp of that ideological framework. **Mitzi Myers** points out that the core of Wollstonecraft's manifesto is still based on a idealized vision of bourgeois motherhood, and it is merely a modernized version of the normative late-18th-century female role; thus, it supports the view that women's roles as mothers and caretakers are more important than women's freedoms and embodied sexuality. Critics assert that Wollstonecraft limited women to the role of homemaker based on the biological duties of motherhood, such as nurturing and breastfeeding, in her vision of the educated mother producing virtuous citizens. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on women's biological duties to their children is also in conflict with her vision of a rationalised world devoid of gender and with her vision of women being free to aspire beyond being only mothers. While scholars today are aware of Wollstonecraft's attempts to reconcile these tensions between the various facets of her philosophy, they continue to discuss the reasons for these tensions.

VIII. Legacy and Modern Interpretations

Wollstonecraft's thought endures, influencing feminist waves. Her maternal feminism inspires pro-family advocacy, as in materialist policies. Contemporary scholars reinterpret her, balancing essentialism with empowerment. Her life informs discussions on single motherhood and rights.

IX. Conclusion

Through Wollstonecraft's feminist perspective, motherhood becomes an empowering vocation rooted in reason and reliant on women's education and their ability to live as equals to men. By eradicating the false notion of patriarchy, Wollstonecraft promotes the role of mothers as "moral builders of the nation", which is reflected in how modern feminism has integrated the importance of family and basic rights for mothers. The findings of this research provide evidence of Wollstonecraft's continued influence today, calling on policymakers to ensure that all women have access to gender-inclusive educational opportunities to fully empower them. Future research should compare Wollstonecraft's ideas to those held by feminists around the globe to emphasize the vital role motherhood plays in building equity. The way she viewed motherhood—as being reasoned, dutiful and empowering—continues to resonate with feminist activists, stating "The more we strengthen the female mind...the sooner we will be free from the tyranny of blind obedience". The many quotes of Wollstonecraft provide ample opportunity for continued reinterpretation of the idea of feminism.

This feminist view of motherhood by Mary Wollstonecraft is the first major combination of both rational views given in the Enlightenment and hyper-feminist views advocating for women to be educated. As such, this way of thinking continues to influence the way that we currently think about women and motherhood, along with how society evolves through its ability to combat issues from childhood development to parenting methods and family values. Essentially, Wollstonecraft sees motherhood as a rational and duty-oriented position that allows women to have an empowered role in the family when education and intellectual freedom are provided for women. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she stated that, "if you strengthen the female mind by enlarging it then blind obedience will disappear; for as long as tyrants and sensualists seek blind obedience, they are right when they endeavor to keep women in darkness. For the tyrants want slaves and the sensualist a plaything." This statement is the crux of her belief that educated mothers (who are freed from societal restrictions or restrictions placed by others) can raise strong virtuous, rational citizens, and help to elevate the moral and political climate of society.

In this paper, we have also examined the historical perspective of motherhood in 18th century England as a romanticized yet constraining institution influenced by the poor and bourgeois of England, compounded by the Revolution. We will also look at the direct influence of things like Wollstonecraft's abusive father, along with her experience with being a little different in the way she raised her children.

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