

Study Material

English Honours

Sem V CC 11

Course Instructor: Rudrani Dasgupta Chaudhuri

Introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (Part 2)

The French Revolution

The French Revolution was a watershed event in modern European history that began in 1789 and ended in the late 1790s with the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte. During this period, French citizens razed and redesigned their country's political landscape, uprooting centuries-old institutions such as absolute monarchy and the feudal system. The upheaval was caused by widespread discontent with the French monarchy and the poor economic policies of King Louis XVI, who met his death by guillotine, as did his wife Marie Antoinette. Although it failed to achieve all of its goals and at times degenerated into a chaotic bloodbath, the French Revolution played a critical role in shaping modern nations by showing the world the power inherent in the will of the people.

Following the Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War, the French government was deeply in debt. It attempted to restore its financial status through unpopular taxation schemes, which were heavily regressive. Leading up to the Revolution, years of bad harvests worsened by deregulation of the grain industry and fifty consecutive days of below-freezing temperatures in the winter of 1788/1789 inflamed popular resentment of the privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy and the Catholic clergy of the established church. Demands for change were formulated in terms of Enlightenment ideals on democracy, and contributed to the convocation of the Estates General in May 1789. During the first year of the Revolution,

members of the Third Estate (commoners) took control; the Bastille was attacked in July; the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was passed in August; and the Women's March on Versailles forced the royal court back to Paris in October. A central event of the first stage, in August 1789, was the abolition of feudalism and the old rules and privileges left over from the *Ancien Régime*.

The next few years featured political struggles between various liberal assemblies and supporters of the monarchy intent on thwarting major reforms, promoted by the Jacobins, led to the Insurrection of 10 August 1792 and the arrest of Louis XVI and the royal family. The Republic was proclaimed in 22 September after the first French elections and the victory at Valmy. Its goal was to unify France and to introduce the same taxes and democratic elections for more citizens. It opposed prerogatives. In a momentous event that led to international condemnation and an internal struggle in the Convention between the Girondins and Montagnards, Louis XVI was executed in January 1793.

External threats closely shaped the course of the Revolution. The French Revolutionary Wars unleashed a wave of global conflicts that extended from the Caribbean to the Middle East. Internally, popular agitation by the Sans-culottes radicalised the Revolution significantly, followed by the Insurrection at the end of May, and the rise of Maximilien Robespierre. A *levée en masse*, an army of volunteers to beat the external and internal enemy, culminated in a federalist revolt in the South and the West. The dictatorship imposed by the Committee of Public Safety established price controls on food and soap, introduced a secular Republican calendar, de-established the Catholic church (dechristianised society). During what was called the Reign of Terror, counter-revolutionaries were expelled, arrested or executed; and the borders of the new republic were secured from its enemies.

After the Fall of Robespierre and Thermidorian Reaction, an executive council known as the Directory assumed control of the French state in 1795. They suspended elections, repudiated debts (creating financial instability in the process), persecuted the Catholic clergy, and made significant military conquests on the Italian Peninsula. Dogged by charges of corruption, the Directory collapsed in a coup led by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. Napoleon, who ended and became the hero of the Revolution, established the Consulate and later the First French Empire.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

On August 4, 1789 the National Constituent Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*), a statement of democratic principles grounded in the philosophical and political ideas of Enlightenment thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The document proclaimed the Assembly's commitment to replace the *ancien régime* with a system based on equal opportunity, freedom of speech, popular sovereignty and representative government.

The Declaration is introduced by a preamble describing the fundamental characteristics of the rights which are qualified as being "natural, unalienable and sacred" and consisting of "simple and incontestable principles" on which citizens could base their demands. In the second article, "the natural and imprescriptible rights of man" are defined as "liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression". It called for the destruction of aristocratic privileges by proclaiming an end to feudalism and to exemptions from taxation, freedom and equal rights for all "Men", and access to public office based on talent. The monarchy was restricted, and all citizens were to have the right to take part in the legislative process. Freedom of speech and press were declared, and arbitrary arrests outlawed.

The Declaration also asserted the principles of popular sovereignty, in contrast to the divine right of kings that characterized the French monarchy, and social equality among citizens, "All the citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally admissible to all public dignities, places, and employments, according to their capacity and without distinction other than that of their virtues and of their talents," eliminating the special rights of the nobility and clergy.

The Declaration recognized many rights as belonging to citizens (who could only be male). This was despite the fact that after The March on Versailles on 5 October 1789, women presented the Women's Petition to the National Assembly in which they proposed a decree giving women equal rights. In 1790, Nicolas de Condorcet and Etta Palm d'Aelders unsuccessfully called on the National Assembly to extend civil and political rights to women. Condorcet declared that "he who votes against the right of another, whatever the religion, color, or sex of that other, has

henceforth abjured his own". **The French Revolution did not lead to a recognition of women's rights** and this prompted Olympe de Gouges to publish the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen in September 1791.

Wollstonecraft on Enlightenment philosophy and the ideals of the French Revolution

In November 1789, Wollstonecraft's friend and mentor, the Dissenter clergyman Richard Price, gave a sermon in celebration of the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which he praised the French Revolution and encouraged the English not to be satisfied with what they had achieved 100 years ago, but to keep fighting for their rights. One year later exactly, Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he denounced Price and the actions of the French Assembly. Burke had himself been a moderate republican, at least insofar as he supported American independence. But the 'proceedings in France', in particular the arrests of the king and queen by commoners, worried him deeply. He feared both for the political stability of England, were the revolutionary spirit to catch on, and for the loss of certain values that he held dear and that could survive only if there was an aristocracy: chivalry, sensibility, dignity. Without the 'decent drapery of life', he said, we would lose all reason to value each other, and particularly women, because without this drapery, 'a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order' (Burke 1968: 171). The publication of Burke's book gave rise to several replies from within dissenting and republican circles. The first of these was Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in the same month as Burke's book. A few months later came Catherine Macaulay's *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, on Revolution in France*, and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. The latter is the only one that is still widely read.

Price was then old and sick (he died a year later). His friends felt it was their duty to stand up for him, and Wollstonecraft was the first to do so. Her book is clearly a defence of her friend: 'In reprobating Dr Price's opinions', she tells Burke, 'you might have spared the man' (Wollstonecraft 1999/1790: 17). But she nonetheless presented a clear and convincing exposition

of the argument for universal rights, and at the same time rebuked the value system so dear to Burke, that of 'sensibility'. The concept of 'sensibility' very much belongs to the eighteenth century – the wearing of one's emotions on the surface, the ability to be moved to tears by a beautiful flower or poem. 'Theatrical attitudes Wollstonecraft calls it, and 'the manie of the day' (ibid.: 6), a fake sort of compassion that really ought not to trump the concern that is due to fellow humans. The look of impotence on the king's face, or of fear on the queen's, should not weigh against the fact that people were starving, she argued. Her arguments in the first *Vindication* prepare the grounds for those of the second, in which she claims that a concern for sensibility is to blame for many of the prejudices that hold women down. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is possibly the clearest example of why her work is so valuable. As well as being a classic of Enlightenment philosophy, it is probably the earliest sustained philosophical argument for gender equality in English.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, writers exchanged views often via correspondence and the publication of pamphlets, which included translations between the main European languages. These writers also seemed to be engaged in similar philosophical pursuits. These pursuits were in part theoretical – debates on the nature and role of reason, both as what makes us essentially human and as a tool for acquiring knowledge; and in part practical – the application of the principles of the Enlightenment to the pursuit of better political arrangements. Wollstonecraft's work played a significant part in both. By arguing that reason cannot be truly universal if it is gendered, she rectified some inconsistencies in thinkers such as Kant and Rousseau, who defended a similar vision of a universal reason while at the same time claiming that female reason was different in quality as well as quantity. But her part in the practical side of the Enlightenment is perhaps more significant. While Rousseau, Kant and others were busy preparing the intellectual ground for the liberation of French men from the oppression of the monarchy, Wollstonecraft was concerned with freeing the other half of the French nation, and indeed, of any nation, from the oppression of men. While Hobbes and Locke had tried to redefine what it meant to be a subject in a state, Wollstonecraft was pointing out that no state could be either just or properly functioning that excluded from citizenship half of its adult inhabitants, and that citizenship did not cease to exist inside the home. She was by no means the first person to point this out, but because she was part of a group of radical political thinkers, and

because she wrote and published as much as any of her male peers, her thoughts were perhaps more significant, and in any case more influential. Wollstonecraft's works, even though they presented ideas that were rare, if not unique in that time, were not isolated: they were part of a debate, making use of concepts and arguments that were recognized. Her works were, in fact, a significant part of an ongoing dialogue on rights, freedom and equality.