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## FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN WOLLSTONECRAFT'S THOUGHTS OF THE EDUCATION OF DAUGHTERS

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**Abstract:-** “I am going to be the first of a new genius. I am not born to trend in the beaten track – the peculiar bent of my nature pushes me on.”

Mary Wollstonecraft in letter to Everina: 1774.

This brief note discusses that *Mary Wollstonecraft* was born into the Age of Enlightenment, but was also considered a first generation romantic writer. The paper will focus on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts of the Education of Daughters*. It will lay emphasis on how can be seen as a first feminist work of the writer. The ideas set forth in this book are eminently commendable and remarkable only because it was unusual in the eighteenth century for women, especially the young and unmarried, to have any ideas to which to give expression. It is an attempt to illustrate the negative effects of the system of instruction available to young girls in the eighteenth century. In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft offered neither a direct attack on nor a complete revision of women's education— she did not even challenge woman's 'place' in society. In fact, she encouraged women to become better mothers and wives. Stretching the theories, perspectives, and composition of courtesy manuals of her day, Wollstonecraft's pattern of argument remained “faithful to old principles” while extending those principles to women as well as improving on the roles women were expected to fulfill. Through casuistic stretching, Wollstonecraft reasoned from the familiar to the new, challenged through association and extension, and secured a position of credibility in an age when credibility for women was scarce.

**Tags:** role, rights, patriarchal, household, marriage, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*.

**Keywords:-**Wollstonecraft's ,Education Of Daughters ,Enlightenment ,

### INTRODUCTION

*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* is the first published work of Mary Wollstonecraft published in 1787 by her friend Joseph Johnson. The ideas set forth in this book are eminently commendable and remarkable only because it was unusual in the eighteenth century for women, especially the young and unmarried, to have any ideas to which to give expression.

*Thought* is a conduct book that offers advice on female education. It is an attempt to illustrate the negative effects of the system of instruction available to young girls in the eighteenth century. Wollstonecraft began to sketch the path to a greater equality for women, to challenge the prevailing forms of reasoning of her era, and to take the position of a public voice that violated the norms for women and the forms for argument accepted by society at that time.

*Thoughts* is divided into numerous sub-topics; the nursery; moral discipline; exterior accomplishments; artificial manners; dress; the fine arts; reading; boarding schools; the temper; the unfortunate situation of females, fashionably educated, and left without a fortune; love; matrimony; desultory thoughts; the benefits that arise from disappointments; on the treatment of servants; the observance of Sunday; the misfortune of fluctuating principles; benevolence; card-playing; the theatre; and public places. Throughout her treatment of each of these subjects, Wollstonecraft offered advice to parents as well as young girls on the ways to educate young children most effectively. As she addressed each of these various topics, Wollstonecraft challenged many of the popular modes of thought and offered alternative methods of education for girls.

In arguing for a more complete education for young girls, Wollstonecraft stressed the importance of environment and

of education as a process rather than a product. While Wollstonecraft accepted that most women would be wives and mothers, she argued that they should be taught to think for themselves, to think critically, and to learn from their experiences. In describing a young girl's education, Wollstonecraft asserted:

... try to teach them to combine their ideas. It is of more use than can be conceived, for a child to learn to compare things that are similar in some respects, and different in others. I wish them to be taught to think. (TED 22)

Wollstonecraft also suggested that young girls become economically wise. To this end, she suggested, they should be given a "certain allowance" for the purchase of clothes. This allowance, however, was not so that they could give more attention to their appearance; Wollstonecraft felt they should give less attention to their dress. The allowance would afford these young women "a practical lesson of economy" that could teach them to be more responsible and economically sophisticated (TED 140).

*Thoughts*, not only stresses the importance of a proper education for women but also stresses the importance of sound moral principles. Wollstonecraft explained that "I have indeed so much compassion for those young females who are entering into the world without fixed principles" (TED 135). *Thoughts* lays the foundation for Wollstonecraft's later arguments that women were not prepared for their futures—they were not equipped to care for their families nor themselves whether they be dependent on men or independent of them.

Although written in a style similar to these early manuals, *Thoughts* differs greatly in its contents. In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft stood in opposition to the conventional lessons and perspectives of these earlier manuals, suggesting that their educational program led to more harm for a young girl than good. In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft traced the life of a typical girl from childhood to early adulthood, suggesting that a woman's education did not prepare her for the experiences and responsibilities she would encounter as she matured and entered adulthood. Wollstonecraft identified and addressed the numerous problems a girl would encounter and emphasized the ways in which girls, parents, and young women might cope with the challenges and frustrations that lay ahead.

Wollstonecraft used the familiar form of the courtesy manual and at the same time used a conventional chronological pattern coupled with a system of contrast and comparison in constructing her arguments. While not unique in itself, this pattern of argument functioned in a distinctive way for Wollstonecraft. As a woman writer in the 1780s, Wollstonecraft had relatively little credibility. Not only was she a woman entering the man's world of writing, but she was also young, simple, and poor. Nevertheless, she managed to establish enough ethos as a writer that she secured a publisher, sold her book, and began her career as an author. Although she used a conventional pattern of argument, it was distinctive for Wollstonecraft because it enables her to gain a voice and challenge some of the conventions surrounding women's education within traditional framework.

While employing a conventional organizational pattern, Wollstonecraft borrowed some of the thoughts and themes of the credible male writers of her era. The use of other authorities of her time strengthened the power of her voice and added credibility to her arguments. A third formal element, the use of personal experience, also assisted in making her argument more effective. While Wollstonecraft's reviewers criticized her for her use of personal experience, I feel that this experience was one of the only sources of credibility that she possessed on her own. She used personal experience, in conjunction with her other formal strategies, in order to build credible arguments throughout her writing.

Wollstonecraft framed her work as a series of short essays that offered moral and educational lessons easily read in a short space of time. *Thoughts* is not a long treatise, as is the work of Locke and Rousseau, for example; neither is it organized as a series of lengthy discussions on individual's topics. Wollstonecraft's first book offered succinct and comprehensive chapters that a mother or governess might have read while she had a few quiet moments to herself. Wollstonecraft's book, in sum, matches the structure of the lives of many of the women for whom she was writing.

Wollstonecraft's book could be read in short sessions—the kind of time a woman involved with children and household maintenance was more likely to have. If women were her primary audience they were likely to have extended periods of times for reflection and reading, and the pattern of organization of *Thoughts* suggests that Wollstonecraft may have recognized this constraint—whether consciously or unconsciously. Each chapter presented a central theme with relevant supporting materials (personal experiences that other women might have shared, an example that could be read and assimilated quickly, for example) and this pattern of argument may have fit quite nicely with a woman's life. *Thoughts* is organized in a way that respected these possible limitations and found ways to work around the segmented and interrupted pattern of women's lives.

Further, Wollstonecraft argued from a logical chronology of child development. In choosing a chronological pattern of argument, Wollstonecraft felt that an audience would recognize this pattern of argument as logical, consistent with their experiences if they were parents or had experience with children, and perhaps even intuitively correct for those with little exposure to children. In using this structure, Wollstonecraft's ideas became grounded within a familiar pattern of experience and by extension, credible. Following this familiar form, Wollstonecraft then could offer a discussion of the state of women's education as it currently existed and suggest alternatives to the current educational structure, arguing for her version of what should exist. In order to do this, she employed a second familiar technique, contrast and comparison. As she traced a young girl's life from the nursery on, Wollstonecraft identified the errors she saw in women's education and offered a remedy for them. What follows is a discussion of her chronological pattern followed by an examination of Wollstonecraft's use of contrast and comparison.

Wollstonecraft began her lessons for parents and young women in her chapter titled "the nursery," addressing both the

needs of the infant and the duties of the mother. Every "rational creature," Wollstonecraft began, must "attend to its offspring," but because of improper socialization, mothers neglected their children and left helpless infants to the care of "ignorant servants" (*TED* 2-3). Reason must govern a woman's actions rather than "indolence" or thoughts of some "present indulgence," and the first thing to which she ought to attend was securing a state of physical and emotional health for the child (*TED* 3). To this end, Wollstonecraft suggested, mothers ought to nurse their children with their own milk. If they would do so, a bond of tenderness would be established between the mother and the child, and the customary neglect of children as well as their improper diet would be alleviated (*TED* 4).

Wollstonecraft went on to explain that children learned the habits of those around them, and these habits tended to contribute to the neglect and improper education of future generations. If children were allowed to be spoiled by nurses, as was the practice at the time which meant that they would be kept quiet and out of the way of parents, then the child was taught "gratification for every whim" and "affection devoid of respect" rather than the important skills they would need as an adult (*TED* 5-6). Without directly stating her purpose, Wollstonecraft's reasoning led the reader to the question of how a young woman would learn to nurture her child when she was only taught to satisfy her own immediate needs.

Throughout *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft extended these theories to encompass her program of education of girls. She did this implicitly, never directly stating that the education of girls should be modelled after that of boys or after the theories of Locke, Fordyce, or Rousseau, but by illustrating the benefits of this plan for society as a whole. If a parent or teacher embraced the theories of prominent men then Wollstonecraft, in borrowing these themes, illustrated the logical extension of these theories for girls. In extending the credibility of these thinkers to her own system of education, Wollstonecraft may have been able to add to her own ethos and make her recommendations more appealing to her readers.

Wollstonecraft identified the gaps that existed in the educational program for women and named the inaccuracies of women's education and the demoralizing effects of that system. She used the structure of a young woman's life and the theories of contemporary political thinkers of her day to illustrate that the education that was afforded to young men would benefit young women as well. She further illustrated how this would remoralize society at large by infusing new life into an old and established process. She incorporated personal pronouns and experiences to link her own voice to her audience, and she structured her discourse around the pattern of a woman's day. Wollstonecraft constructed a familiar framework for her arguments and then moved from this familiarity into newer ground.

In *Thoughts*, Wollstonecraft offered neither a direct attack on nor a complete revision of women's education—she did not even challenge woman's 'place' in society. In fact, she encouraged women to become better mothers and wives. Stretching the theories, perspectives, and composition of courtesy manuals of her day, Wollstonecraft's pattern of argument remained "faithful to old principles" while extending those principles to women as well as improving on the roles women were expected to fulfill. Through casuistic stretching, Wollstonecraft reasoned from the familiar to the new, challenged through association and extension, and secured a position of credibility in an age when credibility for women was scarce.

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