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## A Critical Analysis of Women's Position in Enlightenment Thought

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the contradictory relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and the "Woman Question" by conducting a critical analysis of the writings of Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Although the Enlightenment promoted the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, it concurrently upheld gender hierarchies that confined women to the private and domestic realms. Through a meticulous examination of significant philosophical texts, the paper uncovers the inherent contradictions present in Enlightenment discourse, especially regarding the exclusion of women from the universalist concepts of reason and citizenship. Kant's differentiation between public and private domains, along with his rationale for women's dependency, and Rousseau's gender-specific educational framework in *Emile*, illustrate a continual support for patriarchal norms disguised as natural differences. Conversely, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* stands out as a revolutionary challenge to these beliefs, advocating for women's rational and educational equality. By placing these discussions within the wider intellectual and historical landscape of the Enlightenment, the paper contends that feminist discourse both originated from and opposed Enlightenment ideology. In conclusion, it emphasizes how the purported universal tenets of the Enlightenment were profoundly gendered, exposing a significant tension between its liberating assertions and its exclusionary practices.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Woman Question, Gender Inequality, Patriarchy, Rousseau, Kant

The Eighteenth Century has always been regarded as a controversial and problematic area of literature and scholarly studies owing to its allegiance with the contemporaneous Enlightenment movement. The century witnessed the historical event of French Revolution, which espoused the ideas of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality. Of particular importance of this era observing enlightenment is the Rise of values of liberty, equality and fraternity because of which many female thinkers argued that it should be polemical to all humanity including women. It has long been recognized that enlightenment and rise of feminism is intrinsically interconnected. The history of enlightenment is often seen by critics as being dominated by canonical male writers, with women being treated as merely subjects relegated to the subordinate sphere and being denied the equality of rationality. In an age popularly considered as the age of Reason, the discussion

on “Woman Question” acquired an important place as the traditional values were vehemently challenged and the need for a more egalitarian society arose.

The paradoxical nature of enlightenment movement becomes apparent with the fact that on the one hand, products of enlightenment promoted the idea of universal equality while on the other hand it consigns women to a subordinate position in terms of reason, strength and restraint. This paper presents an evaluation of the writings of Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft in an attempt to bring forth the inherent inconsistency in the enlightenment discourse in terms of its egalitarian conceptions. The brief analysis will try to shed some light on the plausible relegation of women to a subservient position by prominent writers like Kant and Rousseau in contrast to the study of Mary Wollstonecraft who shows her radical thoughts in terms of advocating the idea of women’s own inalienable rights.

Feminist critics of the enlightenment have stressed upon the fact that the Aufklärer(enlighteners) were often very inimical to women’s aspirations, predominantly their intellectual ambitions. Sapere Aude! (Dare to Know) may have been a rousing motto for men but when it came to women he believed it to be dangerously inappropriate. As Barbara Taylor notes that Kant, “Despite his modernist liberal stance adopts a brutally negative position with regards to women’s rights.” (Barbara Taylor: Feminism and the Enlightenment.264). In ‘What is Enlightenment’, when he distinguishes between the private and public spheres in one’s life, it is interesting to note that Kant does not recognize the role of ‘domestic’ space. According to his definition, one sees that while the ‘Private’ sphere is one that concerns a citizen’s attitudes to his professional commitments in society, the ‘Public’ is where one engages intellectually with larger societal trends. Contextually speaking therefore, in negating the ‘domestic’, Kant also happens to be negating women, considering that might have been the sphere they had occupied. He even justifies the denial of suffragette rights to women by saying that only people with economic independence, and people who are one’s own masters, can be given this right. As Elshtain points out, “Women owe their ‘existence and support’ to the arbitrary will of another person” and are not therefore characterized by the conditions of ‘civil equality’ and ‘independence’ that Kant considers to be of utmost importance to be a citizen-“a human being in his public aspect.”(Kant, Groundwork of The Metaphysical Elements of Justice, as quoted in Elshtain 217). Thus women’s dependence on men becomes one of the prime reasons for Kant to justify the need for a gendered hierarchy. That is why Kant’s views on women are largely known to frustrate women. In ‘Of the distinction between the beautiful and sublime in the interrelations of two sexes’, he writes that women are called the ‘fairer’ sex with good reason as they are beautiful and captivate and that is enough whereas Men are more suited, according to him, to deal with more intellectual pursuits and can thus be called the ‘noble’ sex. He says a man and a woman complement each other in marriage because one compensates for the other in terms of aesthetic pleasures versus noble duties. According to Jean Bethke Elshtain’s analysis of Kant’s ‘Groundwork of the metaphysical elements of justice’, Kant claims that “the woman who is subservient and servile in her relations with her husband commits a transgression of her moral duty to herself.” Kant suggests that the husband has a “right to possess her...He insists that the wife’s duty to obey her husband is a demand of natural law as well as moral obligation.”(Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Kant, Politics and Persons:

The implications of his Moral Philosophy”,1981).Therefore it’s very clear that Kant consciously chooses to attach narrow roles to women, saw them in an inferior light and leaves no space for them to raise voice and gain social and political equality.

Rousseau’s Emile is no exception in terms of the paradoxical nature of his work, being rather an anti-institutional treatise on education. Emile became a special source of discomfiture to contemporary feminists and to numerous women who avidly read Rousseau in the late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries because he unswervingly snubbed the education of women. The following comments will express his views: “Emile was to be a critical, self-reliant citizen, entitled to an elaborate education and full equality with his peers. Sophie, on the other hand was to be trained only as a wife to Emile and as a mother to his children.”(Victor Wexler: “Made for Man’s delight”: Rousseau as antifeminist) . Rousseau believed that sexes are not essentially differentiated by nature but sex difference should be enforced and encouraged because he considers it to be beneficial for society. Women were supposed to stay confined to their private spheres engrossed in their domestic duties and limited to indirect access to power while men were taught to judge independently, trained to be soldiers and had full liberty to express their thoughts and desires openly. Rousseau can clearly be seen as a proponent of sex roles., given that “a role is...an institutionalized sex role only if it is performed exclusively by persons of a particular sex and societal factors tend to encourage.”(Joyce Trebilcot, ‘sex roles: the argument from nature’, ethics 85(April 1975)).Theoretically, Rousseau didn’t draw a distinction between the sexes on the basis of how they learnt or what they knew rather he claimed that in a society there were only 2 classes of people-those who think and those who do not. He overtly stated that these two classes were composed of men and women(Rousseau, Emile 408).Thus under Rousseau’s scheme of things, only one difference completely determined how individuals will be educated that is Sex. As Nicole Fermon calls attention to the fact that Rousseau explicitly encouraged women to stay confined within the domestic sphere, run household and rear children underlining the ‘usefulness’ of mother-child bond and its social benefits of reducing corruption: “Let mothers deign to nurse their children, morals will reform themselves...The attraction of domestic life is the best counterpoison to bad morals.” (Rousseau, Emile as quoted in Nicole Fermon ,Domesticating Women, Civilizing men: Rousseau’s political program (1994)).Therefore Rousseau’s ideal society contradicts the very concept of enlightenment universalism in which he advocates for society the very necessity of a gendered hierarchy. According to Lori J. Marso’s observation, Rousseau believes that “A too intimate commerce between the sexes is most dangerous because the sexes tend to take on the traits and morals of each other. Men become effeminate; women speak and command authority.”(Marso, Lori.J “The stories of citizens: Rousseau, Montesquieu and De Stall challenge Enlightenment Reason”(1998) .451)

The poignant fact which is quite visible in the above discussion is that the Enlightenment Thinkers adopted traditional misogynist beliefs which divided the genders on the basis of their natural differences and used these arguments further in order to confirm the social hierarchy between the two while at the same time, claiming to denounce the very nature of social hierarchies among men. As Barbara Taylor notes, “The enlightenment world resisted feminist ideas as much as it encouraged their emergence...Enlightenment

theorists were as likely to emphasize differences between the sexes as similarities, often garbing traditional prejudices in new theoretical dress.”(Barbara Taylor: *Feminism and Enlightenment 1650-1850*). Women thus existed purely for the satisfaction of men as Rousseau writes in his 1762 work *Emile*, “The man should be strong and active; the woman should be weak and passive...When this principle is admitted, it follows that woman is specially made for man’s delight.” Women’s subjugation by men is not a new idea, it was also prevalent in the past as even eminent philosophers opined that woman’s social role is to be one of passivity. Hence this proves Taylor’s argument that the theorists of Enlightenment are saying nothing new rather they just dress the traditional biases against the female sex in a new cloth. So for Rousseau, the tenets of universalism did not encompass women. He becomes a key figure of inconsistency preoccupied with the tensions and perplexities over women’s inclusion in the notions of universalism and equality.

In *Origin of Progress of French Revolution*(1794), Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the most influential exponents of equality of the sexes in law and education, highly praised Rousseau’s conception of equalitarianism because she herself believed in the ideals of French Revolution and she considered it necessary for women to emerge as independent creatures, however two years before when she wrote “*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*”, she had condemned Rousseau for negating the importance of woman’s presence and depicting her merely as an appendage in her husband’s life in his text *Emile*. As she writes “I firmly believe...that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and names from Rousseau to Dr(John) Gregory have contributed to...degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue.”(Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of Rights of Women* as quoted in Taylor’s *Feminists vs Gallants*,126). She boldly challenged patriarchy and demanded full equality for women. Even the famous historian and pamphleteer Catherine Graham Macaulay, whom Mary Wollstonecraft admired for her radical ideas in *Letter on Education*(1790) criticized Rousseau for his position on the education of women. She was appalled to see women suffering and being treated as commodities who had no say in society. She blamed women for their indirect compliance with the very system that repressed them and another element which she underlines in her draft ‘*A Vindication of the rights of women*’ is women’s self-effacement within this male devised system of education. This text becomes the first written argumentation ridiculing the gendered and unjust organization of society in which she focuses her controversial claims around a dimly perceived but compelling field of possibility namely ‘*Woman*’ who is an enigma at the centre of her argument. She not only encouraged women to be assertive and use their intellectual and rational faculties, but also advised them not to get enamored by the allure of romantic love and short lived beauty. Mary opines that if the two sexes have the same soul, then both are equally entitled for happiness or virtues. As she asks in her text, “If women are not a ‘swarm of ephemeron trifles’, then why should they be kept under ignorance under the name of ‘innocence’?”(Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of rights of Women*). The male dominated society had contributed much to enslave women by cramping their understandings as they are taught false notions of modesty and made to lead a sedentary and cloistered life within the four walls of the house, preventing their minds and bodies to develop in a ‘natural’ and ‘rational’ way. That is why she laid stress on the necessity of a proper education

and a resourceful training of mind as only it would empower women to accomplish a sound positioning in society. She was able to understand how gender relations were presented as natural in society, but in reality they constituted a religion of power and domination. Another prominent Enlightenment Feminist, Olympe de Gouges vociferously advocated the rights of women by challenging the commonly endorsed notions of a justified gender hierarchy within a supposedly egalitarian system. According to her 'Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizen', "Liberty and Justice consist of restoring all that belongs to others; thus the only limits on the exercise of the natural rights of woman are perpetual male tyranny; these limits are to be reformed by the laws of nature and reason". Thus she clearly refuses to acknowledge either Kant's claim of a 'natural female dependency on men' or Rousseau's concept of a 'natural order based on male strength vs. female passivity' and argued that women were as capable as men in every respect. Thus Mary Wollstonecraft's optimistic belief and her attitudes reflected the more enlightened views of her age highlighting the fact that the condition of society could be improved through self-advancement and self-education. Although Wollstonecraft did not endeavor to transcend the parameters of race, sexuality and ethnicity that restricted many reformist writers of her era, the concept of 'Woman' that she calls upon shows what such transcendence might have looked like.

As Patricia Waugh puts it, "Simply in articulating issues of sexual difference, the very existence of feminist discourses weakens the rootedness of Enlightenment thought on the principle of sameness; it exposes the ways in which this 'Universal' principle is contradicted by Enlightenment's construction of a public/private split which consigns women to the 'private' realm of feeling, domesticity, the body, in order to clarify a 'public' realm of reason as masculine." (Waugh, 1992: 189). The ever shifting boundaries between sexes defined in turns by desire, fantasy and anxiety has rendered gender as an inevitably mythologized category. Male desires have played a crucial role in delimitation of these boundaries. It is to the credit of Enlightenment philosophers that they began to expose this along with promulgation of myth regarding women which still find their echoes heard in modern day gender attitudes. Thus from the above discussions one can conclude that despite several attempts by Enlightenment feminists in terms of bridging the natural and moral divide between men and women, the works of prominent enlightenment writers left women behind. Beneath the apparent charade of freedom, equality, reason over prejudice and social hierarchy, The Enlightenment presented itself very different for men and women with men enjoying their freedom and many rights whereas women were doomed to the role of submissiveness and servility to men, thereby bringing into the forefront the sharp inconsistency inherent in Enlightenment Age's conception of universalism.

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