

The Roots of Modern Feminism: Mary Wollstonecraft and the French Revolution

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Abstract

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), attributing a particular importance to “woman” -in the narrow sense- and to all oppressed groups -in the broad sense-, has a peculiar position in the history of political thoughts. Taking a position different from the modern male thinkers in her era, she expanded such ideas as “reason”, “natural rights”, “social contract” towards relations between genders and patriarchal authority of the family. These ideas of Wollstonecraft, who applied basic arguments of Enlightenment to the family, woman and private sphere, have constituted the foundation of modern feminism. Wollstonecraft produced classical writings that integrated political theory with gender roles and private relations. In this sense, relations that she made among freedom, equality, virtue, reason and genders and her criticism towards the societies of her era are important. The present study that has focused on Wollstonecraft’s perception about “woman” and her thoughts about the French Revolution will investigate the topic in three basic phases. The first phase will try to present her methodological point of view and her basic thoughts by moving from her book “A Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790)”. The second phase will investigate the concepts and analysis that cover basic arguments of the modern feminist thought by focusing on her book “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)”. The third and the final phase will discuss the results of Wollstonecraft’s basic concepts on political theory, especially in relation with the French Revolution where these concepts have been expressed.

Key words: Mary Wollstonecraft, French Revolution, modern feminism, gender regime/politic

I- Introduction

The French Revolution occupies a special place in shaping modern political thought. Works that have been written about the history of political thoughts relate political thoughts and basic movements of the modern era –in some way- to the process towards the French Revolution and the outcomes that were created by the French Revolution. Today, some of the basic writings of the modern political ideologies have been shaped in terms of the French Revolution. In this context, the writings that have been written to defend the French Revolution or to oppose against the French Revolution are not only expressions of conjectural behaviors but also reflect some basic points of views about aesthetic, epistemological, moral, social and political theory. Therefore, different arguments that occurred were repeated by various political thinkers after the French Revolution period, too. To sum up, a significant and constitutive moment that is important for modern history –like the French Revolution- has constituted basic structure of political ideas. However, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that those who opposed against the French Revolution differed from each other in many ways although they shared some common arguments. Similarly, we can suggest that those who defended the French Revolution differed from each other, too and belonged to the traditions of different political thoughts.

The position of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) in this context - by differing from other thinkers’ - has become an interesting one. Mary Wollstonecraft had a unique position with her interest in women rights and with her criticism about women rights although she agreed in many ways with the thinkers of the era who were considered “liberal” in human rights. Her analyses about the French Revolution are also reflecting these differences. For example, Wollstonecraft took sides near the arguments of such thinkers as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine when she opposed a conservative thinker like Edmund Burke whereas she differed from Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Paine in “woman” topic and developed an original thought. In this respect, Wollstonecraft’s thoughts and ideas defended by her have been accepted as the foundations of modern feminism and their actuality still continues.¹

¹ “...her insights and arguments have far-reaching relevance and use in contemporary debates on such subjects as human rights, social knowledge, the nature of gender inequality, and feminist philosophy” (Sen, 2005: 2).

Ideational roots of feminism and women's movement extend to the works of Wollstonecraft's works although feminism and women's movement have recently occurred as a political ideology. In this sense, particularly, Wollstonecraft's work titled as "*A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)*", regarded as the first representative of early modern feminism, becomes prominent. According to the book, traditional social and political theories ignored inequalities and oppression in gender field and made gender relations complicated and failed to include them in political theory. To Wollstonecraft, many thinkers who defended new and liberal ideas brought by Enlightenment could easily ally with those against whom they opposed when the case was "woman". Wollstonecraft's findings about these issues were used by the feminist political idea that developed in the 20th century. Feminist thinkers claimed that the arguments of modernism that seemed neutral and asexual -in fact- bore a kind of "*masculinity*" which was sometimes clear and mostly hidden.

Here it should be noted that feminist political idea of 20th century included different thought traditions that might be contradicted with each other in some cases, too. All feminist thoughts/thinkers were divided among themselves in some ways although they aimed to develop social/political role of women and women's movement. In this sense, it may be argued that there are four basic traditions in feminism: Liberal feminism, socialist/Marxist feminism, radical feminism and new feminist traditions (postmodern/poststructuralist feminism, psycho-analytic feminism, black feminism, lesbian feminism etc.). Mary Wollstonecraft's arguments are generally placed in '*liberal feminism*' of these thought traditions. Yet, in Wollstonecraft's writings, it is possible to see analyses and arguments that go beyond these ideas.² The first wave of the modern feminist thought was largely affected by liberal thoughts and values. Accordingly, women and men, who are human beings, should benefit from the same rights and freedom. When women got privileges granted to men, especially when they got education right, gender discrimination in social and political life would be eliminated. Radical feminists directed serious criticisms to these and those ideas during the later periods.

The present article that focused on the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft who has a distinguished position in the history of history will discuss the topic in three classifications. This classification is based on both basic studies of Wollstonecraft and methodological perspectives. Although other works of Wollstonecraft are also important, her following three works are especially important in political ideas: "*A Vindication of the Rights of Men (1790)*", "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)*",³ "*A Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect it has Produced in Europe (1794)*". The following part of our study will be focusing on the first book of Wollstonecraft titled as *Rights of Men* that was written as an answer to the book of Edmund Burke titled as "*Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*" that criticized the French Revolution.⁴ This work is very important in order to understand Wollstonecraft's methodological point of view.⁵ Later, the roots of modern feminism will be attempted to be revealed by dealing with her second work (*Rights of Women*) where the perspectives and the basic arguments in *Rights of Men* are applied to women's rights and women perception. Finally, political results of Wollstonecraft's basic thoughts will especially be discussed in terms of the French Revolution. Wollstonecraft's ideas about the French Revolution differed from monolithic and one sided Revolution criticisms by being based on both supportive and critical perspectives.

II- Methodological Arguments and the Fundamental Thoughts

Wollstonecraft was affected by the principles of "reason", "science" and "development" of the age of Enlightenment and established her ideas on these principles. Humanity was gradually progressing towards a regime where reason was dominant. An equalitarian and liberal regime will be possible only if reason is dominant in social and political issues.

² For the different approaches like "*bourgeois radical/liberal*" or "*republican*" that describe Wollstonecraft's opinions in this sense, see (Kramnick, 1990; Barker-Benfield, 1989). For the critical assessment that finds these approaches reductionist, see (O'Neill, 1999; 2002). For example, Hunt (2001: 10) writes that "Wollstonecraft and her philosophy of the family do not easily fit in any modern definition of feminism".

³ Wollstonecraft dedicates her book to Talleyrand, a well known member of the National Assembly in France.

⁴ For an interesting study that discusses the contradictions between Wollstonecraft and Burke through the similarities of their writings, see (Blakemore, 1997). For Blakemore, Wollstonecraft resembles Burke in the sense that she has implicitly adopted traditional perception of men.

⁵ As we stated, the present study of Wollstonecraft was written as a response to the Burke's book. However, the study of Wollstonecraft will be discussed here not to reveal the responses given to Burke but to uncover Wollstonecraft's basic ideas.

Wollstonecraft, being aware of the discussions on “*human nature*” of her era, put forward arguments about how a holistic change that covered women should take place. Accordingly, human beings as rational creatures have inborn natural rights. These natural rights cannot be eliminated by tradition, customs or prejudices. As put by Wollstonecraft who adopted the concept of classical natural rights (1995: 18): “it is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights”.

According to Wollstonecraft, change has slowly happened in the situation of human beings under the effect of social conditions and mode of living. Similar to the process of individual maturity, human beings have gradually developed in the historical process. What caused that development were not instinctive impulses in the nature of the humans but inclusion of reason in the humane spheres and its increasing effect during the course of history.⁶ In short, the explanatory factors or effective factors on evolutionary development in the course of history were not instinct or impulsive powers of the human nature but reason. Wollstonecraft disagrees with the approach of the common sense school that puts emphasis on innate instincts, passions or sentiments; and suggests that this approach makes ultimately current social, political and gender inequalities normal and legitimized (O’Neill, 1999: 199, 212-213). In order to change the current structure, it is necessary for reason to dominate sentiments and to govern them. Otherwise, “*natural sentiments*” will cause the present social and political structure to be perceived as “natural”; i.e. “unchangeable”.

To Wollstonecraft, the approach that makes references to “*natural sentiments*” in the common human nature integrates this argument with such outcomes as “*natural moral principles*”, “*natural social relations/connections*” and “*natural political structures*”. In other words, human nature, epistemology, moral, social and political theory have an integrative and supportive structure for each other. Therefore, Wollstonecraft (1995: 11, 13) attacks grand principles that she considers as the basis of the ideas against which she opposes. Accordingly, she uses the term “romantic” in the sense of “false, or rather artificial, feelings”: “This romantic spirit has extended to our prose, and scattered artificial flowers over the most barren heath; or a mixture of verse and prose producing the strangest incongruities” (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 31). This hollow rhetoric creates a kind of naturalness and spontaneity perception and prevents the intervention of reason. The approach that suggests that human beings can attain the truth through a kind of instinct that is called *common sense* or *sensibility* and reason cannot understand is dangerous and deceitful.⁷ This point of view that prevents critical reason from working presents different natural sentiments and virtues for “woman” and “man”. However, to accept these arguments, to Wollstonecraft (1995: 44-45), will create not moral outcomes but immoral outcomes. In order to get rid of this deceptive and insulting understanding of moral for women, reasons that distinguish human beings from other creatures should be used. Reason should dominate other passions or instincts to discover what is virtuous and moral.⁸

According to the thinkers who maintain “a mortal antipathy to reason” such as Edmund Burke; the past, experience, tradition and prejudices should be respected. When we encounter problems, not our reason but our nature and sentiments will guide us. Wollstonecraft asks where these natural sentiments arose and why they did not appear while bad things were happening in the history: “What do you mean by inbred sentiments? From whence do they come? How were they bred? Are they the brood of folly, which swarm like the insects on the banks of the Nile, when mud and putrefaction have enriched the languid foil?”

⁶ “...Wollstonecraft drew on radical British Enlightenment sources and the French *philosophers* to argue that, when developed, reason could educate, tame, and control natural effect in a normatively progressive and virtuous fashion. I could also determine which passions were natural and which were the artificial products of historical circumstance” (O’Neill, 2007: 457).

⁷ With the words of Wollstonecraft (1995: 13, 31-32): “Sensibility is the *manie* of the day... A kind of mysterious instinct is *supposed* to reside in the soul that instantaneously discerns truth, without the tedious labor of ratiocination. This instinct, for I know not what other name to give it, has been termed *common sense*, and more frequently *sensibility*; and, by a kind of *indefeasible* right, it has been *supposed*, for rights of this kind are not easily proved, to reign paramount over the other faculties of the mind, and to be an authority from which there is no appeal.” For the different uses of “sensibility” in Wollstonecraft’s writings, see (Sapiro, 1992: 64-71).

⁸ “...without fixed principles even goodness of heart is no security from inconsistency, and mild affectionate sensibility only renders a man more ingeniously cruel...” (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 44).

Were these *inbred* sentiments faithful guardians of our duty when the church was an asylum for murderers, and man worshipped bread as a God?" This point of view that keeps the society "in frozen inactivity" is for the benefit of the privileged classes. The highlighted tradition or prescription is "an immortal boundary against innovation" (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 14, 33). Besides, Wollstonecraft thinks (1995: 50) that belief in God and critical reason and individuality do not conflict with each other but conform to each other: "And the more men discovers of the nature of his mind and body, the more clearly he is convinced, that to act according to the dictates of reason is to conform to the law of God." Human beings should surrender not to the irresistible and irrational power of God or His arbitrary decree but to the reason that shows the only truth. Human beings should surrender to the moral principles that they deduct from this relation via their reasons. Their relation with God should make them respect not for kings, clergy or nobility but for themselves (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 12, 31, 34-5).

Wollstonecraft, being in opposition to the thinkers who state that nobility and religion/Church are historically indispensable for the European civilization, asserts that the European civilization is deficient and defective. Having produced artificial sentiments and ideas, the European civilization prevented the development of the real values and reason; which caused artificial ranks among the people and prevented a friendship based on equality to flourish. In Wollstonecraft's own words (1995: 14-15), "The civilization which has taken place in Europe has been very partial, and, like every custom that an arbitrary point of honor has established, refines the manners at the expense of morals, by making sentiments and opinions current in conversation that have no root in the heart, or weight in the cooler resolves of the mind. –And what has stopped its progress? –hereditary property–hereditary honors. The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo's touch; - or a being, with a capacity of reasoning, would not have failed to discover, as his faculties unfolded, that true happiness arose from the friendship and intimacy which can only be enjoyed by equals; and that charity is not a condescending distribution of alms, but an intercourse of good offices and mutual benefits, founded on respect for justice and humanity." For Wollstonecraft, it is possible to change deficient structure of the course of civilization that produced fake sentiments and ideas only when human beings are seen as creatures that have equal rights. To this end, equality based on justice and humane respect should be established in all areas -including gender relations-.⁹

Wollstonecraft, objecting to the previous social/political structure of Europe and to those who defended the prejudices that this structure harbored, claims that the past is not as positive as thought. To Wollstonecraft (1995: 15, 17), power was in the hand of either a leader or a small group during the first phase of the societies. During the course of the history, unlawful acts of ambitious individuals, immoral demands of the barbarians or deceptive demands of the parliaments were effective. Government was not shaped in an equitable way with some sort of predetermined principles nor was it restricted with indisputable and certain rights.¹⁰ The kings, the nobles, the clergy and the people had principles and rules that contradicted with each other. One of them attempted to be dominant in light of the events. According to what Wollstonecraft (1995: 15) cited from the work of David Hume's *The History of England*, "The King conducted himself by one set of principles; the Barons by another; the Commons by a third; the Clergy by a fourth. All these systems of government were opposite and incompatible: each of them prevailed in its turn, as incidents were favorable to it: a great prince rendered the monarchical power predominant; the weakness of a king gave rains to the aristocracy; a superstitious age saw the clergy triumphant; the people, for whom chiefly government was instituted, and who chiefly deserve consideration, were the weakest of the whole." Therefore, there is in fact no "*whole*" because a structure formed by the masses that possessed heterogenic and different rules cannot be called as *constitution*.

⁹ With the words of O'Neill (1999: 215): "this is one of Mary Wollstonecraft's most important and fundamental arguments...: the European civilizing process has been incomplete, or 'partial', and therefore has developed artificial codes of 'manners', bereft of reason, and therefore incapable of developing innate sentiments into 'morals'. Rather, economic, social and sexual hierarchy, based in part on hereditary property and honors (Burkean prescription) has created 'artificial monsters', whom Burke defends by playing on a culture sensibility. Such a system of morals and manners can be altered only by establishing equality at all levels of human interaction –economic, social and sexual."

¹⁰ "In the infancy of society, confining our view to our own country, customs were established by the lawless power of an ambitious individual; or a weak prince was obliged to comply with every demand of the licentious barbarous insurgents, who disputed his authority with irrefragable arguments at the point of their swords; or the more specious requests of the Parliament, who only allowed him conditional supplies. Are these the venerable pillars of our constitution? (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 15).

These differences and inequalities are obstacles to establish a society/state in the modern sense.¹¹ For Wollstonecraft (1995: 39), “among the unequal there can be no society”. “Nobility” and “Church” as institutions and “the nobles” and “the clergy” as social/political categories were degenerated during the course of the history. Therefore, institutive structures of the past are not suitable to solve the problems of the modern era. These are historical structures that legalize the privileges and deepen the inequalities (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 35-41).

According to Wollstonecraft who opposes to the basic arguments of the conservative world view, the descendents should not necessarily follow what their ancestors have done. As the natural outcome of the historical development, the idea of “respective ancestors” should be abandoned because the acts of the ancestors are often more cruel, more ignorant and more wrong. Moreover, the example of their ancestors brings the prejudices of their own era. As put by Wollstonecraft (1995: 23), “...our *canonized forefathers* were unable, or afraid, to revert to reason, without resting on the crutch of authority; and should not be brought as a proof that their children are never to be allowed to walk alone”. Because the understanding of ‘*canonized forefathers*’ legitimizes the unjust and non-egalitarian social/political practices of the past. Wollstonecraft, giving examples of these practices, shows how cruel and merciless they were and emphasizes how they exerted their power on the poor in an unproportional way. These protect the interests and privileges of the wealth holders. As the result of this class structure, properties in England are protected better than freedoms: “Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed... property in England is much more secure than liberty, and not having concealed that the liberty of an honest mechanic –his all- is often sacrificed to secure the property of the rich... Our penal laws punish with death the thief who steals a few pounds; but to take by violence, or trepan, a man, is no such heinous offence... In this land of liberty what is to secure the property of the poor farmer when his noble landlord chooses to plant a decoy field near his little property?” (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 18-20).¹²

To sum up, Wollstonecraft asserts that the understanding that was called as “common sense” or “sensitivity” was integrated with a certain understanding of society and history; which bore in political outcomes. Accordingly, there is a direct relation between “natural instincts” in the human nature and concrete shaping of the historical/social structure. This perspective, which is based on evolutionary history/society view, uses universal structure of the human nature in order to legalize and to naturalize social/historical regime. In this context, the dominant moral principles that are approved in the society and perception modes related to “man” and “woman” become natural, too. According to Wollstonecraft who opposes to these arguments, to legalize the moral principles in the structure of the current social structure does not provide a strong foundation to attain virtuous behaviors. Standard moral principles independent from current social consensus are needed; which are only attained by reason.¹³ The reflection of this point of view on the social and historical regime is to demand “*change*” and “*transformation*” by criticizing conservative arguments. As far as Wollstonecraft is concerned, the most distinctive point of this demand is the perception of “woman”, woman’s rights and freedoms; i.e. gender regime in a broader sense.¹⁴

¹¹ O’Neill states (1999: 218) that “Wollstonecraft has recast Burke’s revered past as a time of ignorant and proud barbarians, shackled by prejudice and superstition, governed by false notions of civilized manners. In the night of ignorance, these founders of modern Britain cobbled together a ‘heterogeneous mass’ that scarcely deserves the name constitution.”

¹² According to what Wollstonecraft thinks (1995: 26-27), the root of the privileges that prevent virtue in human beings lied in the unequal and unjust distribution of property and as a result of this, human beings pursue their irrational ambitions: “The grand concern of three parts out of four is to contrive to live above their equals, and to appear to be richer than they are. How much domestic comfort and private satisfaction is sacrificed to this irrational ambition! It is a destructive mildew that blights the fairest virtues; benevolence, friendship, generosity, and all those endearing charities which bind human hearts together, and the pursuits which raise the mind to higher contemplations... are crushed by the iron hand of property!... The respect paid to rank and fortune damps every generous purpose of the soul, and stifles the natural affections on which human contentment ought to be built.”

¹³ In this sense, O’Neill (1999: 186) puts forward Wollstonecraft’s difference from Adam Smith in moral theory as follows: “...it is important to point out that unlike Smith, Wollstonecraft maintains that the existing state of social mores, by itself, simply cannot prove an adequate standard of morality. The empirical consensus of the disembodied Smithian “Impartial Spectator” is not a sufficient basis for moral virtue... There must be *an independent standard of morality, distinct from particular social convention.*”

¹⁴ ‘Gender regime’ may be defined as “the beliefs, customs, social structures, laws and institutions that structure women (and men’s) participation in civil society, the economy and the state”.

To cut it short, gender regime is directly related with the point of view on history, shaping of social/political regime and -consequently- the mode of interpretation of human nature.

III- A “Revolution in Female Manners” and the Roots of Modern Feminism

The understanding of human nature that we mentioned above separates the nature of “man” and “woman” from each other, too. The nature of “man” and “woman”, to which are attributed different qualities and senses, makes the foundation of social and political differences, too. According to Wollstonecraft who stands up to the naturalness of this definition of woman (1989a: 137), this woman perception has been socially constructed by men:¹⁵ “Numberless are the arguments,... brought forward with a show of reason; because supposed to be deduced from nature, that men have used morally and physically to degrade the sex”. This view constitutes one of the basic arguments of modern feminism. Accordingly, position of women in social relations is considered natural and compulsory by the point of view mentioned above. Universal principles of woman nature have been established in a way to legalize social and political position of women. For example; man is described as having rational capacity while woman is described as having sentimental capacity. Objecting to this and similar arguments, feminism/Wollstonecraft protest them by criticizing the most basic idea: *how universal are the universal principles of woman nature?* How much of the women’s qualities really belongs to women, how much of them has been identified from man’s point of view? Is it *Nature* or *Society* that determines the characteristics of women?¹⁶

For Wollstonecraft, partly/deficient structure of the European civilization, which we mentioned before, becomes clear especially in the perception about women.¹⁷ The understanding of equal citizen who uses reason and has equal rights should be advocated for all women and men. However, interesting enough, even the thinkers who seem opposing to each other are ally, when the case is “woman”. For example, J. J. Rousseau and E. Burke have similar arguments about inequality of woman and man, male dominance and perception of weak, secondary, dependent woman and about naturalization of these arguments. Therefore, Rousseau who is regarded as the thinker of equality comes to terms with Burke who is his merciless enemy in terms of externalizing the women who are the half of human beings.¹⁸ For Wollstonecraft, essential and mutual relations are present between private and public spheres due to her feminist perspective.¹⁹ Therefore, the privileges of fathers, husbands, kings, clergies and the nobles are interrelated. When the world is governed through the rules produced from reason, all of these privileges and inequalities will be terminated. Wollstonecraft directs her criticisms against the revolutionaries who did not acknowledge the right of political participation for women, the constitution draft designed by them and the thinkers like Rousseau.

¹⁵ Conniff (1999: 309) states that “Wollstonecraft was also more aware of the extent to which societies shape their members. In the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she maintained that the existing society was responsible for the corruption of female character”.

¹⁶ “For Wollstonecraft, although some initial passions were indeed natural, *human character*, as manifested in systems of belief, morality, and other forms of human interaction, *was always a socially constructed composite* created by beings with the unique rational capacity for controlling those affective impulses, *understood as the crucial component in human nature*” (O’Neill, 2007: 457). Tauchert (2003: 144, 148) contends that “Her [Wollstonecraft’s] *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* grasps with bloodied nails the questions of sexed embodiment and gender raised by positing reason for women in an unprecedented move towards an analysis of femininity as social construction... Her work centres on this primary apprehension of femininity as social and educational construct rather than a natural condition of women”.

¹⁷ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 73) states that “...either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilization, which has hitherto taken place in the world, has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? a profound conviction, that the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion.”

¹⁸ “But Rousseau, and most of the male writers who have followed his steps, have warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point to render them pleasing” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 96).

¹⁹ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 210, 264) writes of interpenetration between public and private spheres: “Why then do philosophers look for public spirit? Public spirit must be nurtured by private virtue, or it will resemble the factitious sentiment which makes women careful to preserve their reputation, and men their honor. A sentiment that often exists unsupported by virtue, unsupported by that sublime morality which makes the habitual breach of one duty a breach of the whole moral law”. In another page, “that public virtue is only an aggregate of private. But, the distinctions established in society undermine both.”

Some “*enlightened* philosophers” who have elaborative speeches may have serious dilemmas in their ideas.²⁰ In this sense, Wollstonecraft’s interlocutors are men who support both values of political liberalism and women’s traditional roles and *traditional patriarchal family*²¹ structure.

There is a principle of “individuality” in the philosophical basis of the feminist perspective that appears in Wollstonecraft’s thoughts. Accordingly, all individuals have equal moral values without any race, color, belief, and religion or gender discrimination. Individuals are distinguished from each other in points of their personalities, abilities or diligence. So, rights and freedoms related to social and political spheres are valid for all individuals. Any discrimination in these issues – whether in favor of women or men- should be avoided. That kind of discrimination is immoral and its outcomes will be negative not only for women but also for whole society.²² Wollstonecraft’s opinions about these issues have a ‘*reformist*’ character that aims to base the competition between men and women on equal terms by opening public life for women. This point of view aims not to terminate the discrimination between public and private life areas but to bring equality to public and private life areas. Wollstonecraft thinks that there is no point in virtue if there is no “freedom”. Only free individuals behave in a virtuous way. Wollstonecraft (1989a: 105) states that “liberty is the mother of virtue, and if women are, by their very constitution, slaves, and not allowed to breathe the sharp invigorating air of freedom, they must ever languish like exotics, and be reckoned beautiful flaws in nature; let it also be remembered, that they are the only flaw.”

Wollstonecraft extended such concepts as “reason”, “natural rights”, “contract” that were used by the thinkers of her age against the issues like Church, religion, privileges etc. in a way to question traditional assumptions about the nature of men and women. For example, in the logic of social contract (T. Hobbes, J. Locke, J. J. Rousseau), political society possesses an artificial quality built by human beings. This point of view that challenges ex-political truths places reason and individual will in the foundation of the political society. However, this contract, isolating women outside, is the one made between men (Sapiro, 1992: 203). Although the point of origin is an understanding of universal reason, this universality is true for men at the social and political level. Opinions that support universal rights and freedoms did not generally touch on the private sphere of women and family. Men could acquire rational thinking and acting ability when they were educated or civilized whereas women were considered irrational by their nature. Wollstonecraft (1989a: 131) states that “It would be an endless task to trace the variety of meanness, cares, and sorrows, into which women are plunged by the prevailing opinion, that they were created rather to feel than reason, and that all the power they obtain, must be obtained by their charms and weakness”. Despite all of the assumptions of the Enlightenment and rationalism, women continued to be in the secondary position in the present social/political regime and what was the worst of all was that this fact was not regarded as a contradiction neither theoretically nor practically. On the other hand, Wollstonecraft advocates that critical reason should be used for all kinds of relations that are based on inequality.

Wollstonecraft opposes against the argument that women are sentimental rather than rational by their nature. The differences between men and women in the present society have been totally resulted from the education they get. Men get an education that supports their rationality whereas women get an education that supports their sentimental and feminine characteristics and make these characteristics permanent.²³ Gender roles and traditions are ‘*artificial*’ productions of the society and education.

²⁰ “...I must own that I have often indignantly observed that some of the *enlightened* philosophers, who talk most vehemently of the native rights of men, borrow many noble sentiments to adorn their conversation, which have no influence on their conduct. They bow down to rank, and are careful to secure property; for virtue, without this adventitious drapery, is seldom very respectable in their eyes – nor are they very quick-sighted to discern real dignity of character when no sounding name exalts the man above his fellows” (Wollstonecraft, 1995: 58).

²¹ For the details of Wollstonecraft’s arguments about the structure and functions of the family, see (Hunt, 2002).

²² With the words of O’Neill (1999: 17): “...Wollstonecraft argues that all of these forms of inequality [political, social and gender hierarchy] are not only pernicious, but socially constructed. Her chief claim is that morals are virtues learned in public and private through the exercise of reason. However, she insists that an artificial system of manners has been created that works to undermine the cultivation of true moral principles, and enables the replication of inequality of all types.”

²³ “...the instruction which women have received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire; mere propagators of fools! if it can be proved, that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short lived bloom of beauty is over...” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 77).

Masculine and feminine characteristics are the constructed productions of social opinions and education.²⁴ These are not the characteristics that originate from the nature or God and therefore are not unchangeable.

The characteristics attributed to women and the educational systems based on these characteristics make the women weak and increase their ignorance.²⁵ Women are obliged to behave in accordance with the prejudices of the society and men, that prevents women from become aware of their own situation, too. Wollstonecraft (1989a: 124) asserts that “Pleasure is the business of a woman's life, according to the present modification of society, and while it continues to be so, little can be expected from such weak beings. Inheriting, in a lineal descent from the first fair defect in nature, the sovereignty of beauty, they have, to maintain their power, resigned their natural rights, which the exercise of reason, might have procured them, and chosen rather to be short-lived queens than labor to attain the sober pleasures that arise from equality. Exalted by their inferiority (this sounds like a contradiction) they constantly demand homage as women, though experience should teach them that the man who pride themselves upon paying this arbitrary insolent respect to the sex, with the most scrupulous exactness, are most inclined to tyrannize over, and despise the very weakness they cherish”. Manners of women are not suitable for knowledge because they are wrongly educated. Therefore, it is a kind of prejudice to think that manners of women are naturally inferior and different from men’s manners because all of the human beings have the capacity to use reason; as long as the opportunities and the necessary education are provided women will also behave rationally and virtuously.²⁶ But “a mistaken education, a narrow, uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men”. Only the use of reason can change it: “I may be allowed to infer, that reason is absolutely necessary to enable a woman to perform any duty properly, and I must again repeat, that sensibility is not reason” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 99, 133). This is the only possible way to form a genuine friendship between men and women. Wollstonecraft makes friendship a central and crucial concept in her political theory of social justice and good government (Frazer, 2008).

Women are made slaves by families and political structure. Ignorance of women worsens men and the society, too, in the general sense. From this angle, ignorant women remind of the nobles in the society. The fact that prestige is determined by the rank differences vitiates the whole society: “From the respect paid to property flow, as from a poisoned fountain, most of the evils and vices which render this world such a dreary scene to the contemplative mind. For it is in the most polished society that noisome reptiles and venomous serpents lurk under the rank herbage... One class presses on another; for all are aiming to procure respect on account of their property: and property, once gained, will procure the respect due only to talents and virtue... There must be more equality established in society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind are chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 211). Similarly, ignorance of women and their manners prevents a virtuous society from being formed. Property regime lies at the bottom of this system (Halldenius, 2007: 85-88).

²⁴ In this context, it can be found some similarities in the thoughts of John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft. J. S. Mill (1869: 38-41) writes that “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently *artificial thing*—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others... Of all difficulties which impede the progress of thought, and the formation of well-grounded opinions on life and social arrangements, the greatest is now the unspeakable ignorance and inattention of mankind in respect to the influences which form human character. Whatever any portion of the human species now are, or seem to be, such, it is supposed, they have a natural tendency to be: even when the most elementary knowledge of the circumstances in which they have been placed, clearly points out the causes that made them what they are... For, however great and apparently ineradicable the moral and intellectual differences between men and women might be, the evidence of their being natural differences could only be negative. Those only could be inferred to be natural which could not possibly be artificial—the residuum, after deducting every characteristic of either sex which can admit of being explained from education or external circumstances.”

²⁵ “One cause of this... I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men, who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than rational wives; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilized women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 73).

²⁶ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 105) states that “these may be termed Utopian dreams. Thanks to that Being who impressed them on my soul, and gave me sufficient strength of mind to dare to exert my own reason, till becoming dependent only on him for the support of my virtue, I view with indignation, the mistaken notions that enslave my sex.”

The mode of the distribution of wealth in the society and social stratum created by this mode are directly related to gender regime.²⁷ Yet, the property regime damages women more than men.²⁸ Therefore, a revolution is needed in the manners of women in order to reform not only women but also social/political regime: “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners, time to restore to them their lost dignity, and make them, as a part of the human species, labor by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners... Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge, for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate, unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good?... that the most salutary effects tending to improve mankind, might be expected from a REVOLUTION in female manners, appears at least, with a face of probability, to rise out of the observation” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 114, 66, 265).

Wollstonecraft considers monarchical structure of the past regime that is based on nobility and patriarchal structure of the family that is based on male dominancy similar. In both structures; traditions and beliefs not based on reason govern and women are oppressed and insulted. According to Wollstonecraft (1989a:110), it is necessary to oppose against both structures though it is not easy: “The DIVINE RIGHT of husbands, like the divine right of kings, may, it is to be hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger...”. In this sense, Wollstonecraft does not make a radical recommend that family be terminated wholly;²⁹ she demands that the irrational structure of the family that is based on male dominancy be changed. Marriage should be converted a voluntary unity that is constituted between the equals. She advocates that artificial tasks that are the instrument of social oppression and require especially inspection of the women by distinguishing between the “natural” and “artificial” tasks of the parents. To change the structure of the family is possible only when universal reason principles are applied to the family, too; which above all requires women to be educated in line with reasonable principles. The education of women is so important that their being good wives, mothers and citizens depend on education. Ignorant and lazy women cannot be good wives and mothers. Education of the children is highly crucial for the future of the society and therefore children cannot be left to the hands of the ignorant women. In short, education of women will be beneficial for their husbands, children and the society.

In the present social regime, traditional gender roles make moral behavior a kind of show. It is more important for people how they look rather than who they are and real moral principles are undermined. Different roles of men and women degenerate both genders and corrupt them. Wollstonecraft (1989a: 120) claims that morality and virtues are not peculiar to gender and virtues are universal: “I wish to sum up what I have said in a few words, for I here throw down my gauntlet, and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty. For man and woman, truth, if I understand the meaning of the word, must be the same... Women, I allow, may have different duties to fulfill; but they are HUMAN duties, and the principles that should regulate the discharge of them, I sturdily maintain, must be the same. To become respectable, the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character; I mean explicitly to say, that they must only bow to the authority of reason, instead of being the MODEST slaves of opinion.”³⁰

²⁷ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 120) contends that “wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind, and are produced by the same cause; but allowing women to be rational creatures they should be incited to acquire virtues which they may call their own, for how can a rational being be ennobled by anything that is not obtained by its OWN exertions?”

²⁸ “Still there are some loop-holes out of which a man may creep, and dare to think and act for himself; but for a woman it is an herculean task, because she has difficulties peculiar to her sex to overcome, which require almost super-human powers” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 215).

²⁹ Hunt (2001: 118) writes that “although Wollstonecraft was more radical than her rivals Rousseau and Burke were, she never, at any point in her writing career, proposed a complete overhaul of family life. While she desired the egalitarian transformation of the relationships between husbands and wives and brothers and sisters, she sought to preserve the natural hierarchy between parents and children. She called for reform in marriage, divorce and property law that would encourage equality between spouses and siblings, but did not call into question the duty of parents to protect, educate, and discipline their children, or the corresponding duty of children to respect and serve their parents”.

³⁰ In another page, Wollstonecraft (1989a: 210) writes of this issue: “The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other. This I believe to be an indisputable truth, extending it to every virtue. Chastity, modesty, public spirit, and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by all mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect... it would be wiser to show, that nature has not made any difference [in these matters]...”.

According to Wollstonecraft, only an educated woman can behave virtuously in the true sense of the word and can design her own view of the world. Also, ignorant women cannot be good citizens. It is possible for women to be good citizens only when they get the rights and freedoms entitled to men and the education that men receive (Lefebvre & White, 2010).

Wollstonecraft (1989a: 67) demands that women be included in the political system using the concepts of Talleyrand and French revolutionaries that we talked above and to whom she dedicated her book: "Consider, Sir, dispassionately, these observations, for a glimpse of this truth seemed to open before you when you observed, "that to see one half of the human race excluded by the other from all participation of government, was a political phenomenon that, according to abstract principles, it was impossible to explain." If so, on what does your constitution rest? If the abstract rights of man will bear discussion and explanation, those of woman, by a parity of reasoning, will not shrink from the same test though a different opinion prevails in this country, built on the very arguments which you use to justify the oppression of woman, prescription. Consider, I address you as a legislator, whether, when men contend for their freedom, and to be allowed to judge for themselves, respecting their own happiness, it be not inconsistent and unjust to subjugate women, even though you firmly believe that you are acting in the manner best calculated to promote their happiness? Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason? In this style, argue tyrants of every denomination from the weak king to the weak father of a family; they are all eager to crush reason; yet always assert that they usurp its throne only to be useful. Do you not act a similar part, when you FORCE all women, by denying them civil and political rights, to remain immured in their families groping in the dark? For surely, sir, you will not assert, that a duty can be binding which is not founded on reason?"

Unless universal reason principles are applied to women's situation, it is impossible that they become virtuous and good citizens. The present condition of women vitiates both men and women: "...the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty, comprehending it, for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principles as those of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner. They may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent" (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 67).³¹ If the French revolutionaries do not grant women their rights in the new constitution, it means a new "tyranny". Wollstonecraft (1989a: 69, 216, 217) demands from French revolutionaries "*JUSTICE for one half of the human race*"; besides other duties every woman must be "*also an active citizen*".³² Women must have their own representatives: "as the whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism... some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government".

IV- Political Consequences: On the French Revolution

For Wollstonecraft, the social/political structure that is present in the history of England and is based on ignorance and inequality is present in France, too. Therefore, Wollstonecraft thinks (1995: 41) that the French revolutionaries need a new model that is different from their ancestors' and is based on justice: But, in settling a constitution that involved the happiness of millions, that stretch beyond the computation of science, it was, perhaps, necessary for the Assembly to have a higher model in view than the *imagined* virtues of their forefathers; and wise to deduce their respect for themselves from the only legitimate source, respect for justice. Why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials?" Advocating the activities of the French revolutionaries, she claims that the current unequal regime should be substituted with a new regime based reason. Yet, this change will not be realized by the dominant classes of the ancient regime like the nobles and the clergy.

³¹ Conniff (1999: 313) states that "...her subsuming of feminism under equality had three important consequences. First, it led her to consider the status of women to be both unnatural and unnecessary... Second, Wollstonecraft thought that the suppression of women hurt both men and women... Third, Wollstonecraft believed that the condition could and should be remedied. The key was that, if gender relations were restructured, the entire community would reap the benefits".

³² Wollstonecraft (1989a: 219) states that "in order to render their private virtue a public benefit, they [women] must have a civil existence in the state, married or single...".

According to Wollstonecraft (1995: 46-47), this change will be realized only by the French revolutionaries who do not have any privileges: “Was it natural to expect that sensual prejudices should give way to reason, or present feelings to enlarged views? – No; I am afraid that human nature is still in such a weak state, that the abolition of titles, the corner-stone of despotism, could only have been the work of men who had no titles to sacrifice. The National Assembly, it is true, contains some honorable exceptions; but the majority had not such powerful feelings to struggle with, when reason led them to respect the naked dignity of virtue”.

It is not correct to legalize the unjust, ancient regime via traditions or customs. For Wollstonecraft (1995: 49), “injustice had no right to rest on prescription”. It is an appropriate action that the French revolutionaries confiscate the properties of the Church and the nobles in accordance with the natural principles of justice because the assertion that the properties that have been acquired with injustices will be legalized in time is a subversive idea: “Can there be an opinion more subversive of morality, than that time sanctifies crimes, and silences the blood that calls out for retribution, if not for vengeance?” Because when this argument is agreed, it will be possible to legalize all of the injustices somehow. For example, slavery or Indian cast system can be advocated with this argument. Similarly, it is not correct to advocate an unjust relation due to its social benefit or its social function, because it is possible to legalize each unjust social/political relation by this way and critical reason can be dismissed from these domains.³³ As emphasized in the previous parts, universal arguments based on reason are needed for real moral arguments: “that in all cases morals must be fixed on immutable principles; and that the being cannot be termed rational or virtuous, who obeys any authority but that of reason” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 264). Otherwise prejudices of the people and prejudices of the countries and old ages will be determinative. Beliefs, values and mode of relations that have been socially constructed in the course of the history will be perceived as unchangeable. In this sense, Wollstonecraft considers the actions of the revolutionaries as the application of critical reason on the traditional structure. Not only the French but also the English, too, should apply universal principals of reason to all of the social/political domains like the French revolutionaries.

Living in Paris between 1792 and 1795, Wollstonecraft used the possibility to experience and to evaluate the French Revolution at first hand. To Wollstonecraft, first, it is necessary to have reason independent from the prejudices of the past in order to interpret an event like the Revolution correctly,³⁴ because violence of political/social changes like the Revolution will cause it to be totally condemned due to prejudices and sentiments. However, for a fair evaluation, it is necessary to compare negative situations of the revolutionist struggle and negative outcomes of the past system. This comparison will demonstrate that the French Revolution is not a manifestation of a short-lived enthusiasm or arbitrariness but a natural consequent of the progress in the social structure and of intellectual improvement. The Revolution will bring not destruction but improvement for the civilization (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 6-7).³⁵

³³ With the words of Wollstonecraft (1995: 50): “The same arguments might be used in India, if any attempt were made to bring back things to nature, to prove that a man ought never to quit the cast that confined him to the profession of his lineal forefathers. The Bramins would doubtless find many ingenious reasons to justify this debasing, though venerable prejudice; and would not, it is to be supposed, forget to observe that time, by interweaving the oppressive law with many useful customs, had rendered it for the present very convenient, and consequently legal. Almost every vice that has degraded our nature might be justified by showing that it had been productive of *some* benefit to society: for it would be as difficult to point out positive evil as unalloyed good, in this imperfect state. What indeed would become of morals, if they had no other test than prescription?”

³⁴ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 182) states that “I know that a kind of fashion now prevails of respecting prejudices; and when any one dares to face them, though actuated by humanity and armed by reason, he is superciliously asked, whether his ancestors were fools. No, I should reply; opinions, at first, of every description, were all, probably, considered, and therefore were founded on some reason; yet not infrequently, of course, it was rather a local expedient than a fundamental principle, that would be reasonable at all times. But, moss-covered opinions assume the disproportioned form of prejudices, when they are indolently adopted only because age has given them a venerable aspect, though the reason on which they were built ceases to be a reason, or cannot be traced. Why are we to love prejudices, merely because they are prejudices?”

³⁵ “...Wollstonecraft saw the French Revolution not as destroying society, but rather as being driven by a democratic logic which held out the hope that it could finally be established on a defensible basis... She sought... to explain the French Revolution’s violence as a lamentable but foreseeable consequence of characterological underdevelopment within the context of myriad artificial hierarchical relationships. She then simultaneously defended the Revolution itself as an important moment in the civilizing process that was rooted in nascent intellectual progress in political and moral philosophy, coupled with the technological means of its transmission” (O’Neill: 2007: 458-459).

History is a course of being civilized that evolves towards civilization from barbarism.³⁶ This course has not been experienced in a linear way. Negative outcomes of the nobility and the Church have suspended improvement. The major determinant factor in the civilization of the Europe is advancements in technology and intellectual life and their effects on science, art, trade and -in the broad sense- mode of living. Oppression, cruelty, inequalities and injustices continued while science and art were advancing in Europe. Such examples as hierarchy in social and political domains, use of military power to dominate other people, slavery caused by the ambition for wealth/property, slavery-like positions of women, etc. show the negative sides of the course of the civilization (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 15-18, 23-24, 109-110, 113).

It is not correct to expect that these unjust situations change spontaneously or to hope that the reigning people of the ancient regime reform these unjust situations. The necessary changes should be made applying the critical reason on these situations and institution. It will be wrong to think that this change or transformation will be an easy or unproblematic one. We should assess the violence caused by the French Revolution in this sense.

According to what Wollstonecraft (1989b: 45) thinks, advancement of science and reason will inevitably lead to abolition of the privileges and achievement of the freedom of the citizens: "...from the progress of reason, we be authorized to infer, that all governments will be meliorated, and the happiness of man placed on the solid basis, gradually prepared by the improvement of political science". Yet, elites of the society are so degenerated that they continue to prevent humane efforts for change. Therefore, in order to cure this illness, there is no solution other than the violence and radicalism of the Revolution.³⁷ Here, what justifies people's use of violence is that they use the violence to repel the oppression. In other words, the strength of injustices and oppression in the course of the history makes the violence of the Revolution inevitable. Revolutionist violence is justified in order to change the old regime totally and to rebuild the country: "...the people are justified in having recourse to coercion, to repel coercion. And, further, if it can be ascertained, that the silent sufferings of the citizens of the world under the iron feet of oppression are greater, though less obvious, than the calamities produced by such violent convulsions as have happened in France; which, like hurricanes whirling over the face of nature, strip off all its blooming graces; it may be politically just, to pursue such measures as were taken by that regenerating country, and at once root out those deleterious plants, which poison the better half of human happiness... The rich have for ages tyrannized over the poor, teaching them how to act when possessed of power, and now must feel the consequences" (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 46).³⁸

However, Wollstonecraft feels uncomfortable that the French Revolution has been a bitter one although she agrees that the Revolution must use the violence.³⁹ Although the change is inevitable and essential, to make a sudden change causes different problems. The enthusiasm of the Revolution should not lead the French to a utopian adventure,⁴⁰ because the French society has a level of sociological development and the applied revolutionist policy should consider this level. Otherwise, attempt to establish the utopia in a short term –as desired by some French revolutionaries- will inevitably cause bloodshed, violence and chaos. In short, the present status of the French society should be considered. Political system should be adapted for the new system: "The improvements in philosophy and morals have been extremely tardy. All sudden revolutions have been as suddenly overturned, and things thrown back to their former state.

³⁶ For the details and stages of civilizing process, see (O'Neill, 1999: 382-393).

³⁷ "The old system of manners, embodied in accepted social mores and codified in partial laws, will (inevitably) be violently destroyed, since its supporters will not relinquish their power. This will clear the table for a moral reconstitution of the future; in a sense rendering principles superior to the behavior of the French masses on the stage of the present. Even here, however, their nefarious acts are to be understood as consequences of French national character, a character formed by the old regime's corrupt and artificial system of manners" (O'Neill, 1999: 405-406).

³⁸ For the details of Wollstonecraft's thoughts/arguments about this issue, see (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 20-24; 45-47; 108-109).

³⁹ "Like Paine after her, Wollstonecraft agrees with many particulars of Burke's criticism of the National Assembly and of the Paris mob that was first the servant, then the master of the assembly. Like Paine, too, she blames their errors on the history of corrupt social relations in France. Not the wrong judgments of the revolutionaries, but the depraved feelings that are the legacy of despotism, have produced these effects" (Bromwich, 1995: 624).

⁴⁰ Conniff (1999: 310) states that "Wollstonecraft also admitted the venality and inexperience of many of the French leaders. Comparing them unfavorably to the leaders of the American Revolution, she argued that the Americans were more successful because they were more practical and respectful of tradition".

The improvements in the science of politics have been still more slow in their advancement than those of philosophy and morals; but the revolution in France has been progressive. It was a revolution in the minds of men; and only demanded a new system of government to be adapted to that change” (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 183). A genuine democracy is not feasible unless the society is wholly enlightened and moral principles and virtue are established in the society. Yet, the revolutionaries may hope this result in the long term by changing the state-mechanism accordingly. For Wollstonecraft (1989b: 213), this process will inevitably be conflictive: “Every nation, deprived by the progress of its civilization of strength of character, in changing its government from absolute despotism to enlightened freedom, will, most probably, be plunged into anarchy, and have to struggle with various species of tyranny before it is able to consolidated its liberty; and that, perhaps, cannot be done, until the manners and amusements of the people are completely changed”.⁴¹

Wollstonecraft regards the French Revolution as an expression of revolt of reason against prejudices, revolt of equality and freedom against privileges. The Revolution, the beginning of the process to change the deficient and flawed structure of the European civilization, will rebuild the social reality on equality grounds.⁴² The education will be of no use unless the society is rebuilt: “It may then fairly be inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education” (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 90).⁴³ The Revolution is the beginning of a regime where women and the poor are active citizens and all of the privileges and injustices are terminated at the social, political, economic and gender spheres.⁴⁴ It is a beginning because it is very difficult for the oppressed people to understand their own situation. The oppressed people are in a situation associated with the Marx’s analyses of “*false consciousness*” or “*objective illusion*” (Sen, 2005: 8). Halldenius (2007: 77-78) states that “Wollstonecraft’s attitude to society is structured around the idea of a dynamic between the strong and the weak, an idea that can be applied to all kinds of social relations. In a dynamic of power and oppression, the weak come to internalize their subordinated position, thus contributing to their own continued oppression through failing to recognize that there is anything wrong with it. Consequently, states of affairs that are unjust come to be regarded as fair or even reassuring, even by those who buckle under them. The oppressed ‘hug their chains’ for spurious comfort”.⁴⁵

For Wollstonecraft, the same changes should be experienced in England, too. The English constitution –which Burke admires- is in fact the useful instrument of despotism because the English constitution does not permit representation of the poor and women (O’Neill, 1999: 305).⁴⁶ However, Wollstonecraft’s expectation from the Revolution is not a short term but long term.⁴⁷ Europe will witness conflicts and struggles for some time, too, as the change of opinions and sentiments, breaking the effect of traditions and customs, transformation of manners and living modes will not take place in the short term.

⁴¹ According to Wollstonecraft, “The [French] Revolution was based on *theoretically* just principles, but it was carried out *practically* in the context of inauspicious historical circumstances created by the *ancien régime* itself” (O’Neill, 2007: 463).

⁴² In this context, Wollstonecraft (1989b: 234) calls for a “greater degree of equality of property” and warns about the destructive influence of commerce: “The destructive influence of commerce, it is true, carried on by men who are eager by overgrown riches to partake of the respect paid to nobility, is felt in a variety of ways. The most pernicious, perhaps, is its producing an aristocracy of wealth, which degrades mankind, by making them only Exchange savageness for tame servility, instead of acquiring the urbanity of improved reason”.

⁴³ In another page, Wollstonecraft (1989a: 167) writes that “till society is very differently organized, I fear, this vestige of gothic manners will not be done away by a more reasonable and affectionate mode of conduct”.

⁴⁴ Conniff (1999: 314) states that “Wollstonecraft noted that the arguments against gender equality were quite similar to the arguments used to exclude the poor from politics...”. Sen (2005: 7-8) contends that “Mary Wollstonecraft’s constructive proposal was to see deprivations of every kind within a broad framework, so that it would always be an incomplete exercise to protest about women’s inferior position, without raising questions about gross inequalities of other kinds. And also vice versa... That broad view is needed even now. And not just for the rights of women, but for the rights of all, in particular of the disadvantaged of every kind”.

⁴⁵ J. S. Mill (1869: 62) makes the same observation: “It is part of the irony of life, that the strongest feelings of devoted gratitude of which human nature seems to be susceptible, are called forth in human beings towards those who, having the power entirely to crush their earthly existence, voluntarily refrain from using that power”.

⁴⁶ On the contrary, “for Wollstonecraft, the protection of the weak against the strong is *the* end of government” (Halldenius, 2007: 96).

⁴⁷ “What she sought... was a more gradual practical realization of the egalitarian theoretical ideals that she believed animated the French Revolution” (O’Neill, 2007: 461).

It requires a long time for an equal and free regime to find its own balance: “Europe will probably be, for some years to come, in a state of anarchy; till a change of sentiments, gradually undermining the strongholds of custom, alters the manners, without rousing the little passions of men... things must have time to find their level” (Wollstonecraft, 1989b: 46-47).⁴⁸ Because according to Wollstonecraft (1989b: 53), “the strongest conviction of reason cannot quickly change a habit of body; much less the manners that have been gradually produced by certain modes of thinking and acting.”

V-Conclusion

It is possible to say that Mary Wollstonecraft is not in a position that she deserves in the history of political thoughts. It will be wrong to think Wollstonecraft as the thinker who applies 18th century Enlightenment theoretical arguments to woman problem. Or, it will be an inadequate portrayal to assess her as a liberal feminist thinker. As we attempted to emphasize above, although she uses theoretical arguments of her era, she is a thinker who has specific characteristics.

Wollstonecraft considers family as a volunteer unity between the equals and as a model for the society, too. A genuine justice, virtue and society are possible only between the equal individuals. Therefore, it will be impossible to establish a real society unless women who make the half of the society have the same as rights and freedoms as men. Such terms as reason, natural rights, social contract should be expanded in a way to include women and should be valid for all people. Otherwise hierarchal and unjust social/political structure of the old regime will be continued with another name.

Wollstonecraft accepts exactly the importance that Enlightenment attributes to reason and education. She thinks that women and men can change into good humans and citizens through education, which will solve the basic problems of the society. A new and equalitarian society will be born when education methods of men and women are based on reasonable principles. For Wollstonecraft, the state should perform its duty properly. Protecting the poor, it should terminate the inequalities and should make initiatives in order to improve peoples' virtue. Wollstonecraft adopts the concept of “decisiveness of politics” and advocates interventionist state. However, this intervention should be presented with a special content for both women –in the strict sense- and all of those oppressed –in a broad sense-.

Wollstonecraft's originality –as a thinker- is based on her reference of such concepts used by modern male thinkers as reason, natural rights, and social contract in order to challenge patriarchal authority and family structure. Wollstonecraft -who expanded the language of Enlightenment towards private sphere, family and women- laid foundation of modern feminism. She has produced writings that integrate family roles, gender roles and private relations with the concepts of political sphere. Wollstonecraft's contribution in the successive feminist literature is disputable. It is an open question whether or not the changes Wollstonecraft expected could have happened if the changes that Wollstonecraft desired had been made. There are also others who say that Wollstonecraft put forward opinions that kept traditional gender roles and therefore she did not bring a new ground. Yet, it is an undisputable fact that she occupies a special place in the history of political thoughts in terms of her era. In spite of everything, her opinions that discuss the interactions between morality, tradition, gender, society and politics and her questions about these issues are still up to date. Although the solutions offered by her are open to discussion, central questions asked by her about gender regime are the same as today's central questions. Mary Wollstonecraft is the first modern thinker who has made us think of *Nature-Society* relations -a general problem- through women.

⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft (1989a: 83) writes of future: “Rousseau exerts himself to prove, that all WAS right originally: a crowd of authors that all IS now right: and I, that all WILL BE right”.

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