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Enlightenment's Shadow: Rethinking Women's Place in the Age of Reason

Amrita Biswas

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Hiralal Bhakat College, Nalhati, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The article makes an effort to study the Age of Reason on the basis of it's views about women's rights. Though Enlightenment, with its strong emphasis on logic, liberty, individual rights and progress ushered a new era in our history, but it largely bypassed women who remained confined by societal expectations and limited educational opportunities. This article explores the dissonance between the ideals of Enlightenment and the lived experiences of women, through a selective study of works of some philosophers who reflected contradictory views when it came to women. The legacy of Enlightenment on women's rights remain incomplete and necessitates a complete re-evaluation of the era's philosophical contributions.

Keywords: Women, Philosophers, Rights, feminism, enlightenment.

Introduction: The nineteenth century was a very crucial period in our history. It was during this period that we witnessed increasing importance of public role of women, their political mobilization and most importantly the emergence of an articulated feminist consciousness. However, in comparison to this oppositional aspect and despite the fact that an extensive historical literature on the feminist movements exists, there are indeed very few scholars who reconstruct the long-standing history of the problem, its roots in the past, or the means used to resolve it. Thus, as late as the mid-1970s, it was stated that although historical scholarship urgently needed to urgently re-evaluate women, the history of feminism persistently gave the impression of being something that abided by the limits of conventional history.

What is it that makes nineteenth century so significant? A study of existing sources reveal that during this period a series of profound changes affected the political, economic, social and philosophical landscape of Europe. In the light of French and American Revolutions, long held notions about right to rule were overturned. The French Revolution had declared equality, fraternity and liberty of all men and women irrespective of their class or cultural background. At the same time the growth of capitalism and demand for labour created new social needs that created a new class of working people. The arrival of the

industrial age brought sweeping social transformations in entire Europe and resulted in both positive and negative changes. It's these changes that made women conscious of the widening socio-economic gap between the sexes and strive for their rights.

It can be argued that the ideological origins of feminisms lies within the waves of 18th century intellectual enlightenment.¹ Enlightenment not only established reasoned enquiry as the source of all truth but also applied its principles on all traditional institutions whose vested interests and values always impeded the rise of a truly free and awakened society. All forms of wisdom that was perceived as impenetrable were verified on the basis of reason. The truth that emerged out of free and reasoned inquiry put a huge question mark on the long held values associated with women. Though its true that issues related to women and their rights still existed on the fringes of societal consciousness when its is compared with core socio-economic and political issues, , nevertheless it cannot be denied that Enlightenment gave birth to serious debates about women's place in society. A reflections of such philosophical rumblings surrounding women and their existence can be found in the writings of German writer Theodor Gottlieb Von Hippel. His works reveal the beginning of a serious literary debate about women.

In his celebrated essay 'On Improving the status of Women', Hippel not only pondered about 'natural' qualities of women, but also made efforts to understand as to how the constructs of marriage and motherhood affects women's characters. In his essay 'On improving the status of women', he questions the very belief system that considered women as the frailer sex, by pointing at the unfair division of labour.

He writes,

"Even among peoples who have achieved a certain degree of cultures, the part played by the other sex among the members of the working class is not of the kind which would allow us to infer a greater frailty in this sex. Those tasks performed in the cultivation of the soil and at the harvest – are they not divided more or less equally between both sexes?.....Indeed upon examining all the occupations which employ the hands and energy of mankind – does not the portion of work allotted to women invariably entail a greater expenditure of energy? With happy heart the harvester returns home to his hut to rest after his exhausting labour, while even in the simplest country household there still remain manifold tasks for the woman to perform- for the woman, who, by the sweat of her brow, has already bound the shieves, as task for which no lesser expenditure of energy is required..."²

But in spite of the fact that Hippel stood firmly in favour of equality of sexes, he was also a believer in equal abilities yet differing natures of male and female sex.³ This contradiction was a recurring characteristic about feminist writings of the period. Hippel's writings were produced at a point when French Revolution had reached it's most fiery state. But he himself was a strong critic of the revolution as it ignored the women who constituted half the nation.

It can undoubtedly be argued that the Enlightenment not only fuelled the fire of the French Revolution but also provided a much needed impetus to the growth of feminist ideology. But there is no linear and unified way to correctly perceive the views of all the philosophers of Enlightenment about women.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is held as one of the main philosophers of enlightenment wrote a great deal about rights of men in his most celebrated work, "The Social Contract". But curiously enough he didn't directly address the issue of women's rights. This omission in itself has resulted in a huge debate among social scientists who have put forward diverse theories surrounding the omission. However we get a crucial glimpse of Rousseau's views about women in his other work, "Emille: or, On Education." In spite of his exalted ideologies about rights and freedom of men, Rousseau firmly held that men and women had different roles in society and therefore women didn't need equal rights or education to the extent the men did. He further stressed that the main purpose in life for women is to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers and most importantly be submissive partners to men. Stressing on differences in natures and societal expectations from men and women Rousseau famously wrote,

"A perfect woman and a perfect man should resemble one another neither in mind nor in face...One should be strong and active, the other weak and passive ; one must necessarily have both the power and the will, it is sufficient for the other to offer little resistance. This principle being established, it follows that woman was specifically made to please man.... If woman is made to please and to be subjugated to man, she ought to make herself pleasing to him rather than provoke him; her particular strength lies in her charms; by their means she should compel him to discover his own strength and put it to use..."⁴

He goes to a lengthy detail in outlining the different roles for men and women and suggested that women should solely focus on domestic sphere and morality while men should participate in public arena.

He further wrote,

"Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not , and should not be constituted the same, either in character or in temperament , it follows that they should not have the same education. In following the directions of nature, they must act together but they should not do the same things; their duties have a common end , but the duties themselves are different and consequently also the tastes that direct them."⁵ It has been rightly pointed out that studying Rousseau helps in understanding and cultivating social arrangements that are most conducive to social equality and also contributes in shattering the belief that removing legal and social obstacles for advancement of women would solely lead to women's liberation."⁶

Another philosopher who left a rather complex and contradictory take on women was Montesquieu. In his satirical novel 'The Persian Letters' , Montesquieu presents a character,

aptly referred as “gallant philosopher” who argues vehemently against subordination of women.

He wrote,

“Another question among the learned is whether the law of nature subjects the women to the men? No, said the gallant philosopher to me the other day, nature never dictated such a law. The empire we have over them is real tyranny, which they only suffer us to assume, because they have more good nature than we, and in consequence more humanity and reason. These advantages, which ought to have given them the superiority, had we acted reasonably, have made them lose it, because we have not the same advantages.”⁷

Though Montesquieu's views aligned with the idea of natural equality of sexes, nevertheless he also stressed on women's weak state and different physical capabilities than men. This approach in itself points at the idea of separation of spheres that puts men in public sphere while thrusting women in more domestic roles. The contradiction that is visible in the *Persian Letters* is also glaringly obvious in his other celebrated work, *The Spirit of Laws*. Here Montesquieu, in a chapter entitled “On administration by women”, expressed the view that women possess more gentleness and moderation than their male counterparts, which are a function of “their weak state”⁸ But interestingly enough, in spite of the fact that Montesquieu stresses on physical deficit of women compared to men, he endorsed female administrators, saying that the intrinsic gentleness and moderation of women would make a good government.

The views of Dennis Diderot on women, one of the key figures of Enlightenment lands us in an even more complex battle of contradictions. His duality is particularly exemplified in his essay “*Sur Les Femmes*” (On Women). In the essay, he on one hand acknowledges the societal constraints on women, and yet on the other hand essentialized them to a large extent.⁹ On one hand he sharply criticizes the nature and civil laws that relegates women to a state similar to “imbecile children”. Yet on the other hand his praise for women is rather romanticized and elevates them as mystical beings. This fictional imagery of women not only undermines their agency and intellect but also fails to acknowledge the entire spectrum of the lived experiences of women.

But we should remember that Diderot's “*Sur les femmes*” cannot be considered a feminist work in the modern sense of the term. Not only did he stress on women's mental inclination to immorality but also focussed on sexual division of labour as the root factor that structure relationships between males and females. His idea of society was gendered. It depended heavily on men's superior physiology and women's unquestioned submission to men. It's this submission that formed the law of nature and even the slightest violation of this would threaten the smooth and synchronized working of society Diderot further puts forward the claim that with the progression of time and rise of material comfort, women would be the determinant of decadence and material comfort given to them would regulate their position in society. He believed that such a development would lead to immorality in

women. The rising immorality in women would pose a clear threat to men's authority and would usher social and economic decline of the society. He strongly advocated reforming the education system that stresses on scientific knowledge that aligns with the ideals of Enlightenment. Yet at the same time his ideals also suggested that women's primary role lies in the domestic sphere where scientific knowledge would be useful. Diderot's contradictory views on women sheds light on the complex ideological and social nature of the Enlightenment in itself that recognized social limitations that were placed on women by society and yet remained rooted in the conventional notions of femininity and womanhood. The contradictions that were visible in the works of all philosophers of Enlightenment on the subject of women and their lights and liberties is also visible in the work of Voltaire. On one hand he vociferously championed the cause of female equality and liberty, yet on the other hand his views reinforced traditional gender roles in society. In his famous historical work 'Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations', he harshly criticizes evil practices like Sati, that he viewed as mark of barbarity.

He wrote,

"India having been in all ages a trading industrious nation, its civil polity must have been excellent; and that country, to which Pythagoras had travelled for instruction, must have been governed by good laws, without which the arts are never cultivated. But mankind with good laws have ever been subject to foolish customs; that which made it a point of honour and religion, for women to burn themselves upon the dead bodies of their husbands of their husbands, subsisted in India from time immemorial, and is not yet abolished. Indian philosophers have flung themselves upon a funeral pile, through excess of fanaticism and vain glory...One would think that a nation, in which both philosophers and women devoted themselves voluntarily to death, must have been warlike and invincible: yet ever since the ancient Sezac, known by the name of Bachhus, every invader of India hath easily conquered that country.." ¹⁰

He further put question on exclusion of women from positions of leadership arguing that the rule which holds women unfit to rule due to a perceived 'weakness' of their sex is really unjust. It has also been argued that Voltaire's *Candid* also sheds light on exploitation and discrimination of women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ¹¹ But at the same time his female characters seen in his French satire *Candide*, published in 1759 have been criticized as lacking personality, and as being created to primarily serve the requirement of the narrative rather than being fully developed individuals. It has been argued that his portrayal of women in the work emphasizes his intrinsic belief that women existed to be viewed and possessed by men and thus conformed to the traditional gender roles and notions of femininity. ¹²

Perhaps the most famous feminist polemical work that was inspired by the Revolution was Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' published in 1792. Here she not only challenged the prevailing conventional views about women's societal role, education, their lights and liberty, but also made serious effort to craft arguments

against the socio-economic barriers that acted as hindrances in advancements of women. She also put forward the view that lack of proper education deliberately fostered frivolity and intellectual ineptitude in women. She strongly believed that the only method that would render women respectable in society is to make them virtuous, and true virtue according to her comes from a reasoned and cultivated mind. She strongly emphasizes the importance of financial independence of women to enable her to exercise her virtues to the fullest extent.

She wrote,

“but to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death- for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? Or, virtuous, who is not free? The wife, in the present state of things, who is faithful to her husband, and neither suckles or educates her children, scarcely deserves the name of a wife, and has no right to that of a citizen..”¹³ Apart from financial independence, Wollstonecraft also argued in favour of women's representation in government. Their inclusion in government would not only foster self respect and sense of agency but also lead to a more just and impartial society.

She wrote,

“Still to avoid misconstruction, though I consider that women in the common walks of life are called to fulfil the duties of wives and mothers, by religion and reason, I cannot help lamenting that women of superior cast have not a road open by which they can pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence. ...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”¹⁴

While it can be said that the nineteenth century witnessed a burgeoning women's rights movement, Wollstonecraft's fierce attack on the artificial constructions of female inferiority not only challenged the prevailing societal views about women but also firmly implanted seeds of feminist activism in social psyche of the period. Her vision about women extended far beyond home and four walls of classroom and challenged the notion that restricted women in domestic and maternal roles. Its impact in future feminist discourse is undeniable and sparked fierce debate that paved the way for women's fight for suffrage, education and equality.

It can be said that a close study about intellectual debates on women's role in the society during the enlightenment reflects both progress and contradiction. While some philosophers advocated for female domesticity, others expressed strong sympathy for limitations imposed on women. Though their ideas were initially contentious, but they sparked crucial conversations that laid the ground work for feminist movement during 19th and 20th centuries. The legacy of these philosophers is rather multifaceted and serves as a strong

reminder of the historical struggle for women's rights and the persistent need to challenge existing gender inequalities.

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