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Maternity “Bastilled”: Vindicating the Suffering Revolutionary Women in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*

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The objective of this article is to examine why Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), an Eighteenth century British thinker universally recognized for her seminal feminist manifesto *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), felt the need to express her views about the condition of women in eighteenth century British women in the literary genre of novel. This article also explores the domestic despotism and gender discrimination perpetuated by the state machinery and the legal system. This article discusses the legally disadvantageous position of married as well as maternal women and how the bodies of these "revolutionary" mothers were confined and mentally harassed by both private and state systems in eighteenth century Britain. The issue of the imprisonment of female body is examined in the context of female desire in this article. Despite the realistic and somewhat pessimistic depiction of the imprisonment of female body and intellect, Wollstonecraft still shines through as the first liberal feminists of the late Eighteenth-century Britain and her novella *Maria* (in spite of its fragmentary nature) is a colossal achievement in the tradition of feminist writings.

“To force me to give my fortune, I was imprisoned-yes: in a private madhouse...” (Maria 131-32). These lines from Mary Wollstonecraft’s (1759-1797) unfinished novella *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* substantiates the private operation of the madhouse where the protagonist Maria is confined. The importance of private ownership is that this places the madhouse outside the discourse of law. It is illegitimate yet it is legitimized as it is a symbol of male-dominated state oppression. Parallel to this Bastille becomes the direct symbol of the same repression which is used by Wollstonecraft to depict the predicament of dissenting revolutionary women in the late Eighteenth- century England. The language which she is using is evidently from the French Revolution as we know the symbolic importance of the dreaded tower of Bastille where political ‘criminals’ were imprisoned. So, Wollstonecraft’s objective is to politicize the genre of novel as the other Jacobin women writers- novel, for them, is a vehicle of political propaganda.

The objective of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to examine why Wollstonecraft felt this quest into the genre of novel for the politics which she already had discussed at length in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)? The second strand of inquiry will be into the domestic ideas of despotism which arise from gender discrimination perpetuated by the state machinery, with the legal system, in particular. This second strand will envelope the prevalent issues like the legally disadvantageous position of married as well as maternal women and how the revolutionary bodies of these mothers are confined along with infliction of mental harassment by both private and state systems. The issue of the imprisonment of female body will be examined in the light of female desire. I will attempt to chart out the direction and outcome of this desire to challenge legal strictures to give precedence to rights over duty. The practice of disciplining by confinement will be examined using Foucauldian model of

“disciplinarity.”

Coming to the question of the choice of genre by Wollstonecraft, it is a fact that novel was the most accessible narrative form to the masses in her times made the author along with the other Jacobin women writers, like Elizabeth Inchbald and Mary Hays, to use this form for their political content. Sadly, her attempt was aborted as the novel was left unfinished by Wollstonecraft. On the 10th of September 1797, (the same year she had married the radical Dissenter William Godwin, 1756-1856) she died after the birth of the daughter who lived to become Mary Shelly, the famed writer of *Frankenstein*. The fragmentary nature of this novella has its own political implications in the gender discourse. A fragment in patriarchal discourse is essentially feminine mode. Godwin's *Memoir* (1798) for Wollstonecraft also substantiates that how patriarchy resisted to give women a voice of their own. There, evidently, was a paucity of female vocabulary in the late Eighteenth-century England for which these women writers were contesting.

Wollstonecraft, through *Maria*, was attempting a continuation of the politics of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The question of her shift (of form) from political tract to sentimental novel is now answerable in the light of the argument given above. Wollstonecraft needed a form to evade censorship as well as patriarchal censure which was more sharply focussed on political writings by women. Her reputation as “a hyena in petticoats” (Horace Walpole) was well established after *A Vindication*. Mary Poovey most aptly substantiates this desire to avoid censure yet send her message across:

...[H]er [Wollstonecraft's] two political vindications were considered both “unladylike” and politically volatile, Wollstonecraft may have feared that her message would not reach those who most needed to hear it. In *Maria*, she sets out to remedy both these problems, to reformulate insights of *A Vindication*[...] in a genre she felt certain she could articulate her own emotion and attract the female audience- the sentimental novel.

Besides the generic choice the language also plays a great role. It is a fact that language is an ideologically inflected phenomenon. The Wollstonecraft of *A Vindication* is glaringly different from the Wollstonecraft of *Letters* and *Maria*. The use of poetry and novel for political propaganda became a norm in the Romantics as is evident in P.B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

Coming to the second issue (of domestic despotism and gender discrimination), it would be necessary to focus on the autobiographical nature of *Maria*. This fragment is highly autobiographical. *Maria* has the same family circumstances where she is almost motherless and unloved. His elder brother gets preferment in both private and public spheres of home and profession. Wollstonecraft's mental predicament as a prisoner revolutionary “madwoman” is the predicament of *Maria*. The protagonist of the novel is persuaded, (by Jemima) in one of the two alternative endings, to stop trying to commit suicide for the sake of her child as was Wollstonecraft by her friends after her attempt to throw herself in Thames from Putney Bridge.

Beyond these narrative details, what really binds the author with the character is their revolutionary approach on the onslaught of gender discrimination and legal dispute on companionate marriage. Both forcefully assert their desire but this desire does not liberate. In fact, it further confines their bodies into- both private and state- control and confinement. This will be elaborated later.

Coming to the revolutionary aspect in the writings of Wollstonecraft, she had challenged the patriarchal authority by defining the tenets of liberal feminism, as Anne K. Mellor elaborates: “Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of the revolutionary French *philosophes* and by Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft insisted that women had the same natural ‘rights’ as did men.” But, more important is her challenge to the British legal system on the issue of marriage.

The legal concept of marriage was essentially feudal in nature and was based in the concept of “villeinage.” This concept is appropriately summarized by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon: “A woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody; and he can enforce his right by a writ of *habeas corpus*.” The legal system stripped the wife and mother of all her rights to property and children. This is why Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication* is proposing a concept of companionate marriage based on equality, mutual esteem and “rational love.” This political agenda is forwarded in *Maria*. The novella becomes a fictional portrayal of social evils and legal injustices against women of all classes. Mellor places Maria Venables near the top, that is, upper middle class and Jemima (the madhouse keeper) on the lowest rung of class ladder. Yet, both women mitigate the class barrier in their crusade against the patriarchal legal dominion to gain ownership and control over their bodies and property. This legal battle is extended to include the demand for liberalization of laws pertaining marriage, divorce and child custody.

What is necessary to bear in mind in this contest against established law is that both Maria and Jemima are not virgins. Their bodies are maternally feminine. The other common feature is that both the bodies become centre of state oppression. The inhuman treatment of the state apparatus did not even provide the women the basic right of citizenship! This aspect of maternal body must be elaborated along with oppressive imprisonment of the resisting female body. Ruth Bienstock Anolik, in her intriguing essay “The Missing Mother” elaborates on this notion of “madwoman” confined in the “attic” (cf. a seminal feminist text by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar). She connects the predicament of the imprisoned body of Maria to other female characters (e.g., Isabella in *Otranto*; Emily in *Udolpho*; Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*; Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White*) in Gothic tradition: “Although all Gothic women are threatened, no woman is in greater peril in the world of the Gothic than is the mother. The typical Gothic mother is absent; dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected to a state of [non-being]...” Anolik uses Julia Kristeva’s term of a state of being of “neither subject nor object” for these women.

This concept of dehumanized, confined body is succinctly elaborated by Michel Foucault in his *Essential Works* (1954-84) on *Ethics*. In the chapter “Punitive Society”, he elaborates the punitive tactics implemented by the penal system. He gives four categories of these practices which are exile, imposition of fine, amputation,

scarification and the most important: confinement. He elaborates on the concept of

Lettre de cachet- the official documents which were issued to detain and confine the so-called minor criminals. In our case, George Venables uses his patriarchal rights to imprison Maria in a madhouse. Foucault terms these prisons sarcastically as “correctional” institutes and these punitive practices are termed as “technologies of internment” which includes madhouses. Insanity becomes a cover-up in *Maria* to imprison the female body and Foucault calls these practices as “coercion” and “subjectivation” of bodies. This political power play is termed as “governmentality” in Foucauldian discourse.

What Foucault and Anolik have established must be seen in conjunction of *Maria* to chart out the predicament of the maternal body of a dissenting revolutionary woman. The imprisonment in the text is in a madhouse which is privately operated and hence it is outside the discourse of law. Yet, the madhouse acquires an illegitimate legitimacy when the system supports the act of confinement and refuses to grant Maria the rights she demands by labelling her insane (the same label as “abnormal” in Foucault).

It is important to bring Jemima into the picture as the most important character (after Maria) in the novel. Jemima is the alleged confiner of Maria who eventually becomes the liberator and companion. It is ironic that the state labels both of them as prostitutes while Jemima was forced to practice it and Maria only desired for a companionate marriage. One of the alternative ending makes Jemima’s role really important as she is ready to serve and protect Maria’s interests in relationship which is seen as many critics as a harmonious female bonding due to a common experience of being duped and exploited (physically, legally and economically) by a male-dominated system. What is also common is that both the women had harboured desires which ended up in confinement and constriction instead of liberation.

This confinement, which was originally experienced by Wollstonecraft, is expressed by her in a language loaded by the nomenclature of French Revolution. As is clear that Maria’s assertion of her imprisonment is in terms of the tower of Bastille: “Marriage has bastilled me for life.” Wollstonecraft had earlier asserted the same emotion, in *A Vindication*, by calling conventional marriage setup as “legalized prostitution” and British wives as legal “slaves.” Both Maria and Jemima’s bodies are perennially abused. Maria is hunted like a felon when she revolts against her legal husband who wants her to hand over both her body and property to him in a marriage which turned out to be loveless and materialistic one. Women were imprisoned in the household chores like Maria while men like her brother and her husband thrived in public sphere. Ironically, Maria’s brother uses the skills of his profession (as a lawyer) to undo and make his own sister Maria’s case weak in when she is rightfully resisting her husband’s patriarchal dominion.

Despite of the imprisonment and attempts to repress the female voice, Wollstonecraft gives a kind of victory or vindication to Maria when she makes the protagonist be heard as a voice in the courtroom via a written document. Here Wollstonecraft has evidently taken literary liberty which is contrary to the legal reality of her times. The trial for the case of adultery (known as crim.con. or criminal conversation) was always a man-to-man case, that is, between the husband and the other man. The woman had no say in it and her body and voice was always absent from such trials. Wollstonecraft had given female voice by this liberating

subversive transgression.

But, the freedom of expression (in terms of views and the body) is eventually denied when the judge negates the “French” principles to be implemented in “public or private life” and suppresses the expression of female body and mind by judging Maria as insane. The Judge sees this decision as a goodly annihilation of the voice a few rogue elements (like Maria) for the good of whole (male-dominated) community. The language of the Judge is as anti-revolutionary as the Burke.

To conclude, despite the realistic and somewhat pessimistic depiction of the imprisonment of female body and intellect, Wollstonecraft still shines through as the first liberal feminists of the late Eighteenth-century England and her novella *Maria* (in spite of its fragmentary nature) is a colossal achievement in the tradition of feminist writings. The issues of domestic despotism arising from gender discrimination and the suppression of female desire through legal strictures are reiterated and reinforced by Wollstonecraft through her revolutionary attempt in politicization of sentiment. Whether it is Foucault’s diatribe against repressive “govenmentality” or Wollstonecraft’s indignation against the “bastilled” female body- their purpose is equally revolutionary. It is a victory for a revolution which is intended for reform.

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