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First Feminisms and their Foremothers: A Comparative Analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana*

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Abstract:

This paper will analyse the gendered dynamics of education as reflected upon by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* (translated as *A Comparison between Men and Women*). The paper will argue how Wollstonecraft and Shinde subverted the roles expected of women through their literary prose, and even the tone in which their works are written, and I compare and contrast Wollstonecraft's engagement with the philosophy of the Enlightenment and her notoriety with Shinde's blazingly passionate scathing commentary and her relative obscurity until the 1970s. It will also comment on the different ways in which they deal with the topic of women's education itself: while Wollstonecraft focuses on the gendering of education and how it moulds young girls, Shinde turns her focus to the lack of education, and will discuss R. Radhakrishnan's warnings about comparative literature.

keywords: comparative literature, feminism, gendered education, colonialism, Enlightenment, tone.

In the twenty-first century, feminism interacts with the digital world and contributes towards the creation of supportive online communities and an international sisterhood through hashtags and various social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The ease of access and the immediacy of response that the internet and social media enable has led to what Munro calls a new awareness, a "call out" culture that challenges misogyny and sexism, by providing a forum for discussions and a route for activism. The #MeToo movement, cyborg feminism, "Girls for Girls" on Facebook, Jameela Jamil's @i_weigh movement, and the riot grrl movement are all examples of the same. This intersection of feminism and technology forms a significant part of the highly debatable fourth wave of feminism, and is often called the engine that drives this discourse. While the feminist movement is too vast and protean to

be neatly packaged into tightly confined and ideologically distinct packages, the sequential waves contribute towards the relative ease in analysing its development.

When one looks back to the history of feminist literary criticism, its emergence as a self-conscious and concentrated approach towards literature can be attributed to the 1960s, during the second wave of feminism, whose slogan, "the personal is political", is often perceived to be synonymous to the movement itself, sharing its polemical force and activist commitment. The first wave of feminism emerged out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics and laid concrete emphasis on securing the right to vote and administering their own property for women, along with various abolitionist movements, led primarily by white, middle-class women. The foundations of the same, however, were laid in the 18th century, with the publication of crucial feminist texts such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), J.S. Mill's *A Subjection of Women* (1896) and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845).

Simone de Beauvoir argues in the second sex, "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex" was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in the 15th century (105). It is in the defence of women, and in opposition to masculine narratives of women that Mary Wollstonecraft and Tarabai Shinde rose in the 18th and 19th century respectively. While nine decades separate the two, numerous similarities and parallels can be found in their historical contexts and arguments, and in this paper, I will carry out a comparative analysis of their seminal works, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and *Stri Purush Tulana*, in the spirit of the transnational feminism that the fourth wave offers. While reading their accounts, one feels a critical familiarity with the arguments they make, which is proof of the shift in the paradigm of literature, as most of what they argue for has been accomplished, or acknowledged by the majority. However, these very notions of 'common' or 'basic' arguments have contributed to their neglect, in terms of direct critical responses, by scholars and academics today.

The Hyena in the Petticoat: Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft, widely recognized as one of the foremothers of feminism and an intensely political voice in the sphere of 18th century patriarchy, garnered a mixed response in her own times. While her genius was acknowledged by initial reviewers who found it a 'sensible treatise' on female education and ignored those recommendations in the work that might unsettle the relations between the sexes, favourable, but they have had little impact on

the popular misconception. However, Wollstonecraft was also vilified by the press, and for much of the nineteenth century hers was a name to brandish at feminists as evidence of the horrific consequences of female emancipation (Janes 293). The rise of middle-class values of liberalism, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism, all the values that inform present Western social and political systems, and the fiery revolutionary socio-political environment led her to conceive of new and more powerful roles for women as well as for men.

To summarize the work to its bare bones, Carolyn Korsmeyer suggests three theses for *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft argues that as per the discourse of the Enlightenment, Reason is essential for the development of a moral character, and women lack Reason, as they are denied the educational opportunities that encourage the development of rational intellect. She then goes on to insist that the common distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” virtues needs to be eradicated, as Reason makes no gender distinctions, and draws on John Locke’s concept of the human mind as a tabula rasa (Korsmeyer 98, qtd in Monroe 143-144). Wollstonecraft has been accused of deferring to her male contemporaries by several critics, and this shall be discussed later in the paper, she managed to find use her grounding in Enlightenment era discourse and debates to critique the tradition from within, and demonstrated the fragility of the claims of the inferiority of women. Her identification of women’s rights as human rights are particularly relevant today, and as Botting points out, have generated an international feminist political idiom (6). Wollstonecraft identified education as the culprit behind the inequalities between men and women, for it began long before children stepped into schools. One of the most significant observations made by her in the treatise is the idea that the pursuit of pleasure is seen to be the primary goal of a woman’s life. She argues that reason and common sense are usually ignored in favour of emotion and sentiment, and young girls are taught very early to concern themselves only with their own persons. These gross differences in the socialisation of young children, especially as expounded by Rousseau in *Emile*, Wollstonecraft saw, bore consequences that could hardly be overstated. Wollstonecraft also suggests ideas for education reform through the course of her work, which include a conflation of public and private education, co-education, and a more democratic, participatory educational structure. (199). Wollstonecraft’s ideas retain their relevance today, and readers across the world, regardless of age, culture and disciplinary affiliations, continue to read and absorb her work with alacrity.

The Indian Counterpart: Tarabai Shinde

The nineteenth and early twentieth century generated multiple narratives about women's issues, or as some feel, an obsessive engagement with the figure and the body of the Indian woman. The British cast themselves as the saviours of brown women from brown men, on account of their introduction of numerous social reforms in the form of abolition of sati and child marriage and the legalization of widow remarriage. Tarabai Shinde, a Maharashtrian woman, is often called an Indian Simone de Beauvoir, for her candid and radical irreverence towards social structures. She wrote *Stri Purush Tulana* in response to an article in the Pune *Vaibhav* that attacked a woman named Vijayalakshmi who was sentenced to death after getting an abortion, and women in general, for their "new" loose morals. Shinde's crude and blunt prose is punctuated with the anger she feels and lends glaring lucidity to complex issues she underlines and exposes, and is, as Vidyut Bhagwat deduces "the first major feminist expression in the colonial Indian context" (334). It is a riposte against patriarchal arguments of female inferiority; she does not restrict herself to the ideas of social reform and the other populist concerns during the time and expands the discourse to include and acknowledge the suppression and oppression of all women, irrespective of caste, marital status, and nationality. Additionally, going beyond a mere comparison between men and women, Shinde draws linkages between issues of de-industrialisation, colonialism and the commodification of women's bodies.

Shinde's prose is blazing and passionate; she uses a direct and forceful form of address, subverting the traditional expectations of passivity and submissiveness from women, and compares men to beggars and poisonous snakes, to mention some of the many colourful articulations in her work. She elaborates on seven charges that are typically levied against women and responds to them herself, showing how men play an equal part in the same, and are not even considered accomplices. To be specific, at a time when adultery was considered the biggest sin a woman could commit, she shifts the blame onto the husband for not being able to keep his wife happy. Furthermore, she argues that women should have husbands of their choosing in order to prevent adultery. Thus, Shinde's quick-witted repartee exposes the males in society at that time for their hypocritical norms and argues for widow remarriage, the abolition of strict behavioural codes for women, and even criticises the religions (Hinduism) that constricted women. Her direct prose involves arguments and suggestions that women in the twenty-first century, in the age of digital feminism, cannot voice without being condemned, especially in regards to the shastras and the current political environment that does not accommodate dissent and demands conformity to religious conventions and dictates.

Shinde gives various examples of women who undertake irrational and essentially stupid actions, such as the example of the woman who was deceived by a fraudulent priest into getting hold of a young boy's penis, mixed it with jaggery and ate it to beget a son (110). Shinde arrives at the woman's defence by attributing this instant belief in superstitions and false promises to the lack of education, only to secure their husbands' affections and giving birth to sons. While she focuses only on the lack of education for women, whatever education was provided to women was not fruitful as Rekha Pande has investigated that education for girls in India was a means to govern the feminine behaviour, train them to be good housewives and mistresses of homes, rather than equip them to be self-sufficient and independent (qtd in Pande 28).

Stri Stri Tulana

Despite the nine decades, thousands of kilometres and the dichotomy of the East and the West separating the two, Wollstonecraft and Shinde have numerous similarities, especially when it comes to their criticism and praise. Wollstonecraft and Shinde both use collective modes, on account of the plural subjects of their utterances, vesting the right to speak for a collectivity, a community. Both wrote their seminal works in responses to Shinde to the article in *Pune Vaibhav* and Wollstonecraft to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Rousseau's *Emile*, and the numerous conduct books that flourished in the 18th century, including Dr. Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*. While Wollstonecraft acquired a certain notoriety in Georgian England and the times to follow, Shinde's voice was almost lost until her work was retranslated and published by S.G Malshe in 1975. The most significant aspect of common ground between the two, however, remains the fact that they challenge the idea of innate inferiority of women, and rather shift the blame to gendered education and societal norms and foundations.

Wollstonecraft targeted literary and intellectual giants and cultural authorities like John Milton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, for propagating absurd ideas about the innate inferiority of women. Similarly, Shinde attacks Balgangadhar Tilak, the conservative reformer, and also deconstructs several Sanskrit works such as *Manjughosa*, *Manorama* and *Muktamala* and comments on the implausibility and historical invalidity of these texts and enters into a contest with them. She also challenges the positions of husbands in India, with a special emphasis on the term "pativrata". She demands that men also need to conform to husband's duties towards their wives: "This is what pativrata (devoted to the husband) means these days.... Who on earth really follows the shastras to the letter or expects anyone else to? If the

husband is really to be like a god to the wife, then shouldn't he behave like one?" (81). Similarly, Wollstonecraft challenges the superior position of husbands, and argues that like the divine right of kingship, it needs to be contested without danger (67). Wollstonecraft's engagements with the philosophical thought of her time might make Shinde's address seem deprived of any theoretical basis, but the location of these two women in their social, cultural and historical backgrounds erases any such fruitless comparisons. Indeed, Rosalind O' Hanlon rises to Shinde's defence and says:

"The wide range of ways in which she (Tarabai) herself describes and represents women, contrasting strongly with the impoverished stereotypes of contemporary masculine discourse, is the most striking aspect of her text. Her voice itself moves from urbane social commentary to the scathing female abuse of the market-place, from mocking descriptions of men's sexual pretensions to the pleas of a pious wife for domestic harmony and companionship not arguing from abstract or 'modern' principles of rights or equality, except at the most common-sense level. Nor, indeed does she draw at all on themes from devotional religion, through which as we saw, some women in pre-colonial society expressed their dissent from brahminical religious culture. For her what seems to have mattered was not merely a religious milieu in which women could find acceptance as equals, but much more concrete changes in the domestic and social circumstances of women". (53-54)

Moreover, there is a pertinent need to move out of such comparisons that tether on dominance and presumptions of superiority, an argument that R. Radhakrishnan forwards in the course of essay 'Why Compare'. Radhakrishnan emphasizes the need for following newer models of comparisons that do not hinge on comparing the epistemological impasse of "apples and oranges" that haunts comparative studies, as such comparisons are inevitably unproductive and end with neither of us having learnt from each other (Radhakrishnan, 454). Comparisons, Radhakrishnan asserts, have to be made with the scrupulous awareness that we are perpetrating some form of epistemic violence, and to avoid that, we must undertake comparisons by asking ourselves whether we can even decenter our "Euro- or Indocentric or first-world or third world-frame of reference". (Radhakrishnan 461). Comparison should not exist on the same plane without any context, but rather, "the two works to be compared are deterritorialized from their original 'milieu' and reterritorialized so that they do not occupy the same space"(Radhakrishnan 456). Comparison, Radhakrishnan argues, rests on a double bind, wherein a "comparative methodology has to persuade each of the entities implicated in the comparison to reidentify

itself concerning the other”; and on the hand, it has an obligation let the entity be (Radhakrishnan 461). He insists that comparisons should not be vehicles of determining who is more developed than whom, and should rather function as “precarious and exciting experiments where every normative “self” is willing to be rendered vulnerable by the gaze of the “other” within the coordinates of a level playing field” (Radhakrishnan 471).

Additionally, there is a context to Wollstonecraft’s presumption of the voice of the philosopher as well. Meenakshi Mukherjee discusses her assumption of the voice of the philosopher and says that this stance of rational disinterestedness shows her straining to achieve a neutral voice and show that the woman and the writer could speak with one voice, as Poovey analyses, and women too are capable of the rationality and reason and aren’t limited to sentimental and emotional outpourings, as was the popular opinion of those times. The tenor of Shinde and Wollstonecraft’s critique is very different, but their engagement in outlining the conditioning of women that has cultivated the perpetuation of baseless assumptions is the same. While Wollstonecraft focuses more on the role that education and the very constitution of society has played in the subordination of women and argues for the tenets of Enlightenment-reason and rationality, Shinde focuses more on the charges levied against women, and exposes the hypocrisy of those who levy them.

Wollstonecraft has been critiqued for respecting the men she mentions in her treatise to an extreme, as supreme philosophers and as embodiments of Reason itself and is accused by some for directly it only towards men, a misguided idea, as she repeatedly addresses women. Monroe provides an insightful reason behind her “failure” to condemn these philosophers through the feminist theoretical concept of the “double-bind”. She also goes on to add that while Wollstonecraft certainly recognized women’s oppression and how these tracts reinforced sexist attitudes, she identified with those philosophers who shared her own humanitarian values (145). Monroe’s essay indeed makes a valuable contribution towards delineating the criticisms that have been levelled at Wollstonecraft, and provides a reasoned defense against critics, and is an interesting compilation of arguments for those interested in pursuing the matter further. Vlasopolos has also argued that Wollstonecraft defers too much to her male audience and makes concessions to avoid alienating the influential and uses flattery to mitigate the issues that make men feel least secure. However, it must be noted that Wollstonecraft could not alienate herself from the writers she was not only addressing but also striving to emulate. This rupture from the prevailing thought and philosophy of her times is as impractical as it is impossible, for her system of critique emerges from the very structure and thought she is critiquing. As Juliet Mitchell points out in *Woman's Estate*, revolutionary ideas must be

articulated first within the structure of the dominant ideology (34, qtd in Monroe 146). Only after the seeds have been planted can revolutionary thinkers begin to explore ideological limitations. Botting also comes to Wollstonecraft's defense, and persuasively argues that her humorous first-person arguments were strategically employed throughout the treatise and played a critical role in winning over a skeptical audience on an issue that was seen as something little more than a joke in 1792 (261).

Shinde's prose is also riddled with the centrality of men in the lives of women. To quote an example, "Because what's the greatest in the world for a woman? In the first place, it's a husband who suits her and really loves her...but she'll still only have eyes for one man and regard all her trials as happiness" (102). After having spent a considerable portion of the essay in devaluing the importance of a husband in a woman's life, this statement stands in stark contrast to the non-male centric view that she was attempting to further. Wollstonecraft is also critiqued for confining women to traditional roles of wives and mothers. However, she also sees the powerful potential of these positions in a society where the nuclear family was to become so vital to the economic system. If women were educated and thus afforded the virtuous nature that reason would insure, they would better educate their children into rational, virtuous adults, and would form a powerful moral force behind the new bourgeois society. However, before we turn our hasty conclusions into gated judgements, one needs to locate these writers as the first few feminist theorists of European and Indian thought, and locate them in their historical context. Shinde carries out a spirited and reasoned argument against the hypocrisies of the Indian man, who panders relentlessly to the colonial enterprise, against the caste system, against religion sanctioned practices of oppression; a radical move at that time, which attracted relentless criticism from conservative critics. Similarly, Wollstonecraft also had a significant impact on the thought of her times and was relentlessly villainized for her radical tracts. As earlier pointed out by referring to Radhakrishnan's essay, there is a pertinent need to ensure that comparisons are not context free and rest on the same plane.

Conclusion

Both Wollstonecraft and Shinde have shattered the boundaries that confined women during their times and envisaged a role for women that shocked many. While they are subjected to many criticisms according to the standards of feminisms today, it is important to acknowledge and recognise how they function within and beyond the demands of the dominant ideology. Despite the indifference of society, adverse material circumstances, exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance and the dominance of male literary tradition, both Shinde and Wollstonecraft gave expression to their experience of social injustice and

discrimination through their writings and their attainment of voice through textual creativity was the first step towards the assertion of identity. Writing on the subject, Mohanty opines: “Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. If the everyday world is not transparent written texts are also the basis of the exercise of power and domination” (78). The individual efforts made by early feminist writers and thinkers like Shinde and Wollstonecraft drew attention to socially constructed oppressive gender roles resulting in gender inequality, and despite their limitations, they laid down the foundations for feminist thought and theory to follow, in their respective literary traditions, and globally as well. Indeed, Shinde’s defense of the woman who got an abortion seems particularly relevant in present day discourse as we see laws banning abortion in several countries, particularly in the state of Texas in the United States. This begs the question, how much have we really progressed in terms of women’s rights?

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