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Sensibility, Sexuality and Selfhood
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The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria

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Since the publication of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1989), numerous articles on the full range of her literary output have been proliferated in the fields of literature, history, feminist and gender studies. This essay will take up Wollstonecraft's last and unfinished autobiographical novel, *The Wrongs of Woman: or Maria*, first published in her *Posthumous Works* (1798).

Early readers' interest in the *Wrongs of Woman* focused on the author's biographical details, since Wollstonecraft's dramatic and tragic life of thirty-eight years had made a strong impact on people. Moreover, as Virginia Woolf aptly pointed out, Wollstonecraft's life was a series of experiments,¹ and her troubled but pioneering way of life has its own value in women's history.

The next concern with the novel came mainly from researchers of feminism. They read it in order to understand Wollstonecraft's thought expressed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) more profoundly. In addition, they studied the development of Wollstone-

craft's feminism in the *Wrongs of Woman*, looking upon it as the second volume of the *Rights of Woman* that she had intended to write. We can see, in fact, the correspondence of the two words: right and wrong. Stimulated by her husband's novel, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), in which he succeeded in popularizing his radical political message, Wollstonecraft wrote a novel instead of a philosophical work. She wanted to write a really good novel to be read by many people, especially by women, and also she wanted to appeal to readers' feelings as well as intellect.

Then, the *Wrongs of Woman* as a literary work came to be evaluated and discussed in various ways with the flourish of feminist literary criticism. Certainly, this novel should be read as a social novel because Wollstonecraft herself stated that the main object of the *Wrongs of Woman* was "the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society"(83).² Still, more than that, I believe that Wollstonecraft desired to portray a heroine who had enough strength and ability to stand against the oppression and criticize "the partial laws and customs of society", because the heroine's name, Maria, was added to the title and she is central to the plot. Maria's character develops as the story goes on, unlike the novels of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries. Wollstonecraft criticized them in the advertisement of the *Wrongs of Woman* as follows:

In many works of this species, the hero is allowed to be mortal, and to / [*sic*] become wise and virtuous as well as happy; by a train of events and circumstances. The heroines, on the contrary, are to be born immaculate; and to act like goddesses of wisdom, just come forth highly finished Minervas from the head of Jove. (83)

According to her, these heroines were stereotypes created for men's

convenience. In place of such idealized characters, she wanted to display a heroine who became “wise and virtuous” by “a train of events and circumstances”.

In the advertisement for her first novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), Wollstonecraft stated her intention to portray a heroine who had “thinking power”, and in the *Rights of Woman*, she made more of reason and intellect than feeling and sensibility in women. Also “female sex is charged with fruity disgust in the *Rights of Woman*”.³ On the other hand, in the *Wrongs of Woman*, sensibility and sexuality played an important role in the heroine’s self-identity and subjectivity. Therefore, my purpose in writing this essay is to survey the heroine’s growth of selfhood in terms of her sensibility and sexuality. I will also discuss the second heroine Jemima’s self-development and her relationship with Maria.

II

Abodes of horror have frequently been described, and castles, filled with spectres and chimeras, conjured up by the magic spell of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wondering mind. But, formed of such stuff as dreams are made of, what were they to the mansion of despair, in one corner of which Maria sat, endeavouring to recal [*sic*] her scattered thoughts! (85)

The novel opens *in medias res* with its heroine, Maria, regaining consciousness to find herself a prisoner in a madhouse. Heavy iron gates, cruel jailors, groans and the shrill cries of her unseen companions make up her surroundings. From the iron-bared window she can only see a desolate patch of ground and a mass of ruins. The author depicts “the mansion of despair” with a convention of gothic novels. By the use of

Gothic setting, the author tries to announce to readers that this story is about the suffering and persecution of women, as well as to call for terrifying images to their minds.⁴

For Wollstonecraft, the terror and confinement are not only situations in her novel, but representative of women's reality. Though not insane, Maria is unjustly locked in the madhouse by her husband; she is "buried alive". Her debauched husband Venables, who married Maria only to acquire her dowry, arranged a loan from an acquaintance in return for Maria's own sexual favors. She announced her intention to divorce Venables and left him with her four-month-old daughter. However, knowing that her daughter would inherit the property of Maria's uncle and Maria had been appointed as the daughter's guardian, he bought off her maid and drugged Maria. Maria was robbed of her daughter and incarcerated in the madhouse. Divorce was impossible according to the laws of England at the end of the eighteenth century, and women were not entitled to property rights until 1870. The Court of England, in fact, permitted husbands to confine wives until 1840. The madhouse symbolizes the condition of women across England. Maria is represented as the victim of the partial law and the women's subordinate status in a male-dominated society. She laments, "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?" (88)

Maria is as much Mary Wollstonecraft as she is Mary Queen of Scots. Deprived of the rights of Queen, Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned, and the name of her unfaithful lover was Darnford, the same as Maria's. Gary Kelly also points out Maria's association to Marie Roland and Marie Antoinette, victims of the ruined Revolution.⁵ Thus, Wollstonecraft gave symbolic significance to Maria and tried to make her a symbolic figure for women's predicaments.

Then, how is this heroine characterized and how does she respond to the oppression? This is the critical point of this novel, for the critics who

regard this work a failure consider Maria to be the stereotype of the second-rate sentimental heroine who abandons herself to grief in her abject situation.⁶ Yet, I would argue that Maria is rather the counter-image of the sentimental view of women purveyed by popular novels of the time. Let us examine this point further. The third person narrator tells the story of Maria's sufferings, but often loses the distance from the heroine and tends to assimilate with her, so that the readers might be impressed with Maria's lament strongly as if she did nothing but express her grief.

Nevertheless, Maria, indeed, has the traits of the heroine of sentimental novels; she has the kind of sensibility that generates benevolence and philanthropy, and her sensitive bodily response to grief shows her innocent and noble heart. The author depicts her feature as follows, which shows not only her outward appearance but also her mind.

Grief and care had mellowed, without obscuring, the bright tints of youth, and the thoughtfulness which resided on her brow did not take from the feminine softness of her features; nay, such was the sensibility which often mantled over it, that she frequently appeared, like a large proportion of her sex, only born to feel; and the activity of her well-proportioned, and even almost voluptuous figure, inspired the idea of strength of mind, rather than of body.

(104)

Since her childhood, Maria has felt deep sympathy with the poor and the troubled, and given assistance to them even at the cost of her comfort. Music and reading are her favorite pastime and she is fond of singing and playing the pianoforte. Analyzing her own personality, she says, she has some peculiarities in her character, "which by the world are indefinitely termed romantic"(126).⁷ Her romantic disposition is in

sharp contrast with materialist Venables who asserts, "all the world were governed by their own interest"(156).

Her education was typical for the middle class women of her age. She was not taught to cultivate her intellect or sound judgment, so that she could not see through Venables' true character. Therefore he easily deceived her and inveigled her into marriage. Taught only to cultivate her sensibility and easily moved by passion, she shares much with ordinary middle class women in her age.

However, Maria has the "strength of mind," which is her unique personal trait. She has a strong sense of self-respect as well as ardent imagination. Various experiences, and reflection on these experiences, have urged her mental growth. Wollstonecraft has much concern with female education. Wollstonecraft develops her idea of female public education in the *Rights of Woman*, while this novel demonstrates her opinion of female self-education.

While Maria was leading a married life in London for six years, various circumstances ripened her faculties and cultivated her taste, and "the film seemed to be withdrawn, that obscured the piercing sight of reason"(154). When her husband tried to persuade her to give her sexual favors to his acquaintance, she lifted her hands and eyes to heaven and pulled off her ring and announced, "I mean immediately to quit his house, never to enter it more. I will provide for myself and child. I leave him as free as I am determined to be myself" (152).

Before that incident, Maria went back to her native village, and meditated in the countryside she used to frequent. She also went to church to visit her mother's grave, and recollected with what fervor she had addressed the God of her youth. Believing again in Nature and God generated in her a new courage and calmness of heart. Therefore, she could convince herself of the rightfulness of her self-made divorce that violated the law, the social institution and the conventional morals. She

believed that Nature and God would sanction her deed. Wollstonecraft delineated the heroine who awakens to her self-identity, one hundred years before Henrik Ibsen depicted Nora.

We might imagine that a woman in such a situation would worry about realistic problems such as where to live or how to support herself and her child. But her first reaction is quite different:

“Was it possible? Was I, indeed, free?” . . . How I had panted for liberty—liberty, that I would have purchased at any price, but that of my own esteem! I rose, and shook myself; opened the window, and methought the air never smelled so sweet. The face of heaven grew fairer as I viewed it, and clouds seemed to flit away obedient to my wishes, to give my soul room to expand. I was all soul, and (wild as it may appear) felt as if I could have dissolved in the soft balmy gale that kissed my cheek, or have glided below the horizon on the glowing, descending beams. A seraphic satisfaction animated, without agitating my spirits; and my imagination collected, in visions sublimely terrible, or soothingly beautiful, an immense variety of the endless images, which nature / [*sic*] affords, and fancy combines, of the grand and fair. (152-3)

This passage is not mere sentimental effusion but a demonstration that aesthetic capacities depend on political ones. Maria’s imaginative quality withered while she was subjugated to her ignoble husband. But as soon as she frees herself, she soars to imaginative heights.⁸ Her physical sensation and nature here merge into an eroticism radiating from her imagination and body. “A seraphic satisfaction” indicates that she experiences a moment of ecstasy by sensibility. Wollstonecraft argues: “Sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible: when it pervades us, we feel happy . . . Sensibility is indeed

the foundation of all our happiness. . .”⁹

Once awakened to her selfhood and conscious of her freedom, Maria came to acquire keen insight. In the course of her flight from the relentless chase of her husband, she met several women who suffered from various oppressions and wrongs resulting from the existing state of society, and she felt deep sympathies with them. She realized that her case and theirs were not personal problems but political issues which concerned all women. She gradually acquired so-called feminist consciousness (of course, for Wollstonecraft the word “feminism” did not exist).

Even though confined and made powerless, Maria tries to assert herself as much as she can. She takes a pen and writes a memoir of her past life to her daughter “with the sentiments that experience, and more matured reason, would naturally suggest. They might perhaps instruct her daughter, and shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid”(90).

III

Maria further develops her selfhood in her love of her fellow prisoner Darnford. Before discussing her love and growth, let us observe another important female character, Jemima and her relationship with Maria. Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd evaluate the *Wrongs of Woman* as the first English novel in which two important female characters, each of different classes, are portrayed.¹⁰ Jemima belongs to the working class, and she is Maria’s jailor. Her features are rugged and stern, quite opposite to Maria. Her predicament is different from Maria’s hardship.

Jemima is an example of the lower-class oppressed women who have scarcely lived the lowest human lives, mentally and materially. The illegitimate child of a servant-girl, Jemima has been treated like a brute

since her birth. She has been beggar, thief, and whore. As an oppressed woman, she becomes an oppressor of her own inferiors; she once was obliged to drive a helpless girl to death. Preying on the society by which she was oppressed, she has acquired "selfish independence" and lost all tender feelings for others. As a social outcast or pariah, she related her past life to Maria. This part of the novel, related by the first-person narrative, is presented in the manner of criminal's biography such as *The Newgate Calendar* (c.1773).

Jemima's moral education really begins when she accepts an offer to become the housekeeper, and kept mistress, of an elderly gentleman. In his house she gradually acquires intellect and principles by reading books and conversing with educated men. But after her master's sudden death, his family order her to leave his house and refuse to give her references, so that she is unable to find decent employment. The following passage is Jemima's social criticism according to her experience when she is hired as a washerwoman.

I have only to tell you, that at last I got recommended to wash in a few families, who did me the favour to admit me into their houses, without the most strict enquiry, to wash from one in the morning till eight at night, for eighteen or twenty-pence a day. On the happiness to be enjoyed over a washing-tub I need not comment; yet you will allow me to observe, that this was a wretchedness of situation peculiar to my sex. A man with half my industry, and, I may say, abilities, could have procured a decent livelihood, and discharged some of the duties which knit mankind together; whilst I, who had acquired a taste for the rational, nay, in honest pride let me assert it, the / [*sic*] virtuous enjoyments of life, was cast aside as the filth of society. Condemned to labour, like a machine, only to earn bread, and scarcely that, I became melancholy and desperate. (116-117)

Jemima contends that she has been exploited economically and alienated socially because she is a woman. Not a few novels of its contemporary delineate working-class women or prostitutes, but no working-class female character analyzes her miserable social condition and identifies the social system as its main cause like Jemima. Her “dark large eyes” reflect her strong mind and intellect, which is advanced for her age.

Jemima injures her leg in an accident with a washtub, so she also has to experience the wretchedness of hospital, prison and workhouse. The overseer, noticing the evidence of some resolution in her manner, hires her as a jailor of the madhouse where Maria is incarcerated.

Jemima’s humanity has not been lost, but shut in a hard shell. When Maria tells Jemima of her past life and hardships, Jemima comes to feel deep sympathy and gradually finds her sensibility restored. Jemima sheds tears when Maria treats her as her fellow creature.

Rather than narrate their stories, Wollstonecraft has Maria and Jemima tell each other about their lives in their own words. In the process of women sharing their common personal stories, we can see the glimmering of the idea of a political practice that later became a feminist political practice, to which the twentieth-century feminists give a name of “consciousness raising”.¹¹

Although each has undergone different oppressions according to their classes, Maria and Jemima recognize an affinity with each other as victimized but self-entitled renegades. Though their relationship exposes subtle class fissures and prejudices, a bond of female solidarity begins.¹² Jemima makes up her mind to become Maria’s devoted attendant and friend.

The two women’s relationship not only shows female fellowship, but also reveals the relation of “helpless mother and abandoned daughter”.

This motif appears in various patterns throughout this novel. Looking back, Jemima attributes most of the misery she suffered to the lack of a mother's affection. She relates thus:

Now I / [*sic*] look back, I cannot help attributing the greater part of my misery, to the misfortune of having been thrown into the world without the grand support of life—a mother's affection. I had no one to love me; or to make me respected, to enable me to acquire respect. I was an egg dropped on the sand; a pauper by nature, hunted from family to family, who belonged to nobody—and nobody cared for me. I was despised from my birth, and denied the chance of obtaining a footing for myself in society. (110)

As Jemima's ill-treated mother died shortly after her birth, Jemima was driven to trace her road to ruin without maternal care. Maria fears that her infant daughter will be made motherless by a father's brutality and trace the same road as Jemima.

Maria has been writing the memoir for her daughter to teach and guide her. Wollstonecraft inserts Maria's first person narrative in the novel for readers to know Maria's past life, but also to oppose John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), the widely accepted conduct book. Wollstonecraft refutes Gregory's book in the *Rights of Woman* as an example of the wrong way to approach female education.¹³ The mother is the first model of a daughter's self-development and has a great influence on her. Maria encourages her daughter to have mental and economic independence, and her appeal is also for the readers to share the author's political consciousness.¹⁴ However, Maria is, in reality, a helpless mother because she cannot protect and bring up her daughter by herself.

Maria's own mother was also an unhappy helpless mother. Her

mother had blindly subordinated herself to her husband and endured his abuses; she lived such a miserable short life that her death was a delivery from the abject life in this world, as she said at her death bed, "A little patience, and all will be over!" Her mother was weak and indolent in character and doted on the first son. She neither cared for nor guided her daughter. Maria herself is an abandoned daughter.

Another variant of this "helpless mother and abandoned daughter relationship" is shown in that of Venables' servant-girl and her daughter. Venables seduced and abandoned the girl. She died soon after she gave birth to her daughter. Venables concealed the incident to Maria, and drove his daughter away to a wet nurse with so scanty expense that she was almost deformed because of malnutrition. Maria found out about that poor infant and played the mother's role by paying the expense of bringing her up.

Wollstonecraft does not overlook the mother's role and influence on her daughter and asserts that helpless mothers produce unhappy daughters. Maria asks Jemima to rescue her daughter and become "the second mother" for her daughter.

IV

Before long, Maria enters the world of romantic love. As Maria has nothing to do except writing the memoir, and is often lost in a pensive mood, Jemima lends her some of Darnford's books to divert her sorrow and pass the time. Maria is absorbed in reading such books as Dryden's *Fables* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Then, knowing Maria can understand French, Jemima brings her a copy of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. "She had read this work long since; but now it seemed to open a new world to her—the only one worth inhabiting" (95). Maria comes to feel that the only world worth inhabiting is the world of love. *La*

Nouvelle Héloïse stimulates Maria's romantic disposition. Reading the owner's notes on the margin of the book, she realizes that Darnford is the same sort of person as herself who is sensitive and cannot live without love, as well as that he is confined though not insane. As they cannot meet freely, they exchange the letters like Julie and St Preux through the good offices of Jemima. Once Maria can glance at him from behind as he is walking, accompanied with attendants in the morning twilight. His steady, bold steps and the whole air of his person please her and give "an outline to the imagination to sketch the individual form she wished to recognize" (96). Then, when the sound of his voice happens to reach her, she feels his accents are "characteristic of a noble mind" and even sweet. By the time when Darnford is permitted to meet Maria and takes her hand at last with Jemima's assistance, he has been transformed into a romantic hero, like "the personification of Saint Preux" by the power of her imagination. "Pygmalion formed an ivory maid, and longed for an informing soul. She [Maria], on the contrary, combined all the qualities of a hero's mind, and fate presented a statue in which she might enshrine them"(105).

Maria must have gained some wisdom through her hard experiences, but she falls in love again with "plastic in her impassioned hand." Her love seems like an escape from reality in the vein of many middle-class women who are isolated and have nothing to do but read romances and be given to fancy to escape from their tedious daily lives. Still, Maria's case is different from theirs. During her miserable marriage, plenty of other men had made advances to her, but she had refused them all. It was after she announced her intention to divorce Venables that events brought Darnford onto the scene, and Maria believes herself to be "in the sight of heaven, free" and thus at liberty to form a new tie. As Janet Todd aptly points out, Maria's history is marked by two movements, "one circular and repetitive, and the other linear and developmental".¹⁵ The

linear tends towards Maria's deeper understanding of female sexuality.

Though Maria's love is not a magic wand to change the blockaded situation, Maria's love with Darnford has a great value because Wollstonecraft explores women's sexuality and its relationship with their subjectivity. As Venables became increasingly physically repugnant to her as a result of his drinking and extra-marital indulgences, Maria grew to resent the drudgery of a marital life in which she was expected to submit to her husband's brutal sexual demands. Maria asserts a woman's right to sexual fulfillment based upon mutual love and respect between men and women, which must have been shocking to her contemporary readers.

When novelists or moralists praise as a virtue, a woman's coldness of constitution, and want of passion; and make her yield to the ardour of her lover out of sheer compassion, or to promote a frigid plan of future comfort, I am disgusted. / [*sic*] They may be good women, in the ordinary acceptation of the phrase, and do no harm; but they appear to me not to have those "finely fashioned nerves," which render the senses exquisite. They may possess tenderness; but they want that fire of the imagination, which produces *active* sensibility, and *positive* virtue . . . eagerly as I wish you [Maria's daughter] to possess true rectitude of mind, and purity of / [*sic*] affection, I must insist that heartless conduct is the contrary of virtuous. Truth is the only basis of virtue; and we cannot, without depraving our minds, endeavour to please a love or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us. (I 144) (Italics Wollstonecraft's)

Harriet Jump pointed out; "particularly notable is the way in which Wollstonecraft associates the ability to respond sexually with the imagination, which in turn is viewed as the foundation of '*positive*

virtue".¹⁶ *Eros*, the energy of heart and soul, is the core of her authentic subjectivity and generates "true sensibility, the sensibility which is the auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius"(163). While in the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft mistrusts passion and recommends only a passionless friendship between men and women; she vindicates the rights of woman to passion in the *Wrongs of Woman*. As Ellen Moers argues, the *Wrongs of Woman* "explores the literary consequences—in terms of sensibility, imagination, language—of female truths about female passion".¹⁷ This change resulted from Wollstonecraft's experience with Gilbert Imlay. Even though the Imlay affair brought her much trouble and disillusionment at last, Wollstonecraft believed her emotions when in love to be sacred and that nothing could extinguish its heavenly spark.

V

Though the author attaches importance to love affair in the *Wrongs of Woman*, she does not develop her novel in the way of the genuine Romantic novels like *The Wuthering Heights* (1847), where Catherine is united with Heathcliff in their own transcendent world beyond the social level. The *Wrongs of Woman* is a social novel at its core.

One morning, confusion seems to rein in the madhouse, so Maria and Darnford can flee on this occasion with Jemima's guidance. They come to live in a house together, but Venables discovers their whereabouts, and brings an action against Darnford for seduction and adultery. Maria decides to undertake his defense herself and writes an impassioned speech to be read in court.

We can see her mental growth and radical revision of conventional morals in her plea. In the first place, she was not seduced passively, but positively took the decision to take Darnford as her husband based upon her own moral standards. At the story level, Maria is a typically

traditional “seduced heroin”,¹⁸ but Wollstonecraft challenges the definition of “seduction” itself. Maria stands for humanity and decency, and against existing institutions. She contrasts the laws imposed by “the policy of an artificial society” with a woman’s absolute prerogative to “consult her conscience, and regulate her conduct . . . by her own sense of right” (180). Maria is convinced of her righteousness, so Maria’s plea becomes social criticism. This mirrors what Wollstonecraft states in the *Rights of Woman*; that women should not be only daughters, wives and mothers in the domestic sphere, but also citizens in the public sphere on the same level as men. Maria embodies the author’s idea and makes social criticism as a public agent. She claims her right to divorce and appeals to the jury, but is rejected. The judge sums up the evidence thus:

We did not want French principles in public or private life—and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-gate for immorality. What virtuous women thought of her feelings? —It was her duty to love and obey the man / [*sic*] chosen by her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could for herself. (I 181)

The judge’s refusal to recognize a woman’s right to have her own feelings means the denial of her freedom to make her own decisions. In other words, she is not permitted to have a self-identity. A woman like Maria can never be understood, nor allowed to exist.

Maria develops emotionally and intellectually by experiences and reflections, and comes to realize the woman’s social situation as a whole. Does this new selfhood and insight make possible for her to find a new position in society or make a new human relationship? The rest of the

story is unfinished and only some fragments or hints are left. According to them, the judge sentences "separation of bed and breakfast", and Maria becomes pregnant. Then, Darnford is proved to be unfaithful, and Maria attempts suicide by swallowing laudanum after having a miscarriage. Maria's love with Darnford plays an important role in Maria's mental growth, but it does not afford her a new relationship with a man in the existing society. In this sense, love is unable to break the social confinement of the middle-class women, and also Maria's self-fulfillment has not been realized.

In the nineteenth century, Anne Bronte and George Eliot wrote novels which had the similar plots to the *Wrongs of Woman*; a heroine chooses an unsuitable husband and falls in love with another man after her marriage. In both of the novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and *Middlemarch* (1871-72), the heroines accomplish mental growth in unhappy marriages and get married again to the men worthy of them afterwards (the first husbands die conveniently). Why did Wollstonecraft not end her novel in the way of woman novelists who succeeded her, even though she was fostering love with William Godwin when she was at work on the *Wrongs of Woman*? Because she thought that none of the social problems for all women would be solved, even if one woman found a fine husband by her efforts and good chance. Wollstonecraft does not want to solve the problem of social inequality or injustice by use of personal affection. Another reason is that Wollstonecraft herself had not yet found the favorable relationship between men and women in the existing social system. These are also the reason why she could not go on writing this novel. Rather, we might find the meaning and value in the fact itself that she cannot continue writing.

Maria attempts suicide because she has nothing to live for and no place to live in the male-dominated society. She knows Darnford is unfaithful to her and becomes disillusioned. She thinks of herself as no longer a mother on account of her miscarriage and by the conviction that her infant daughter is dead.

Novels are considered to be a kind of literary form that describes the relationship between individuals and the society. A sub-genre of novels called *Bildungsroman* was flourishing in the nineteenth century. These are mostly autobiographical novels in which a hero, the male author's alter ego, grows up wise and virtuous by the train of various events in society and finally finds his role and place to live in that society. Wollstonecraft intends to write the *Bildungsroman* of a heroine, but in her case, Maria is obliged to be opposed and excluded from society in spite of the fact that she has become wise and virtuous through her hard experiences.

By introducing Maria's suicide attempt, Wollstonecraft wishes to describe her as a victim of the male-dominated society. She is, as it were, a martyr of feminism, defeated in the struggle of her ego and society. The tragic ending ought to initiate readers' compassion and arouse their anger. Wollstonecraft characterizes her heroine as a noble woman who has strong self-consciousness and self-respect and chooses death by her own hand, rather than waiting for a debilitating death like Clarissa in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*.

Cindy Conger points out the similarity of Maria and Werther in Goethe's *Young Werther*.¹⁹ Both are endowed with the most exquisite and delicious sensibility, and they attempt suicide because of the breakdown in love and the estrangement from society. Also, reading books increases their romantic sentiment and passion. However, Werther's sense of alienation is mostly self-made, while Maria's is caused by oppression. And Werther died in the bliss of love, at least not in

despair like Maria.

Another ending for the *Wrongs of Woman* exists. According to the arrangement of Godwin, an editor of the *Posthumous Works* of Mary Wollstonecraft, the fragments or hints can be grouped into two endings: death and the restoration to life. I believe that Wollstonecraft conceived Maria's restoration to life as denouement because that part was disposed last and written in mostly complete paragraphs.

When Wollstonecraft herself attempted suicide, she never thought that she would fail in it. But when she used her experience for her novel, it was possible for her, the omnipotent author, to plan Maria's suicide attempt a failure in advance.

In Maria's hazy consciousness at the verge of death, her kidnapped and murdered daughter appears, mourning for the babe for whom Maria's body is the tomb (In this version, Maria has not had a miscarriage). Maria thinks that it is surely better for the babe to die with its mother than to start life without a mother's care. Then, reminded of her own mother and her last words, Maria says to herself, "Have a little patience"(183). Is Maria dying in despair like her mother as the victim of oppression? It is Jemima who gives strength to Maria to live. Jemima finds out the kidnapped daughter who, in fact, has not died, and brings her to Maria. Jemima encourages Maria to live lest this daughter should not suffer from the hardships that a motherless child will encounter. Embracing the daughter, Maria exclaims, "The conflict is over! I will live for my child"(184). Wollstonecraft puts great value on motherhood here.²⁰ Maria makes up her mind to guide and protect her daughter. Wollstonecraft indicates the way to Maria's self-fulfillment can be found in the solidarity of women and bringing up the generation to come. Wollstonecraft must have pictured this last scene vividly in her mind.

VII

In the male-dominated society of eighteenth century England, where passiveness and selflessness are esteemed as women's virtues, Mary Wollstonecraft delineates the portrait of a heroine who has her own identity. Maria grows up gradually through hard experiences and develops the self-consciousness of a modern woman. Maria is portrayed as a passionate woman with delicious and exquisite sensibility. Her code of emotional authenticity leads to a radical revision of conventional morals and a defense of women's sexual self-entitlement. Besides, she realizes her suffering is not a mere personal problem, but a political issue. Though not fully successful, Wollstonecraft tries to envision a female citizen who is not a domestic creature but a public agent.

Wollstonecraft depicts another woman who comes to aware of women's citizenship. The working-class woman Jemima has enough intellect and insight to criticize social injustice and prejudices.

In the *Rights of Woman*, it was not shown that Wollstonecraft was involved in any commitment or felt any sympathy with a collective female alliance. However, in the *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft describes female fellowship between Maria and Jemima, something that would become the driving force of a mass political movement. This movement was rooted in mutual sympathy.

Besides female fellowship, Wollstonecraft addresses mother and daughter relationships. By repeatedly describing the motif of "helpless mother and abandoned daughter", Wollstonecraft illustrates her wish for the future generations to defeat this sorrowful link.

The *Wrongs of Woman* is unfinished and Wollstonecraft's message did not reach her contemporaries because she was too advanced for her time, but she provided a guide by which women might find self-fulfillment through solidarity and the female generation to come.

Notes

- ¹ Virginia Woolf, "Mary Wollstonecraft," *The Second Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 63.
- ² All references to *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* are included in the text, indicating the pages of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. I, eds. Janet Todd & Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989).
- ³ Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 116.
- ⁴ Brigitta Berglund, *Woman's Whole Existence* (Lund, Sweden; Lund UP, 1993), pp. 118-19. Wollstonecraft reviewed Ann Radcliff's *The Italian* on *The Analytical Review* in 1791.
- ⁵ Gary Kelly, An Introduction to *Mary Wollstonecraft's Mary and The Wrongs of Woman* (Oxford; Oxford UP, 1976), xvii.
- ⁶ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.49; Harriet Devin Jump, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Writer* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 143.
- ⁷ See Mitzi Myer, "Unfinished Business: Wollstonecraft's Maria", *The Wordsworth Circle* 2 (1980), p. 111.
- ⁸ See Andrew Elfenbein, "Mary Wollstonecraft and the sexuality of genius", *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 241-42.
- ⁹ *Mary, A Fiction*, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. I, eds. Janet Todd & Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p. 59.
- ¹⁰ Moira Ferguson & Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), p.111.
- ¹¹ See Virginia Sapiro, *The Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political*

Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 267-70.

- ¹² See Taylor, pp.238-45.
- ¹³ An example of the conduct books written by a mother to a daughter in the eighteenth century is: Lady Sarah Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters* (London: S. Chandler, 1761).
- ¹⁴ Virginia Sapiro, "Wollstonecraft, Feminism, and Democracy: Being Bastilled", *Feminist Interpretation of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Maria J Falco (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996), p.43.
- ¹⁵ Janet Todd, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1908), p. 211-12.
- ¹⁶ Jump, p. 133.
- ¹⁷ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 150.
- ¹⁸ Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelists* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.134. "Seduced heroines" are portrayed in the following novels in the eighteenth century: Eliza Haywood, *The British Recluse* (1722), Sarah Fielding, *The Countess of Dellwyn* (1759), Elizabeth Griffith, *History of Lady Barton* (1771), Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art* (1796). These novels contain some resistance against the existing society because the heroines violate virginity and chastity, which are considered the great value for women.
- ¹⁹ Syndy M. Conger, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Language of Sensibility* (London: Associated UP, 1994), pp. 167-70.
- ²⁰ Maternal love is conditioned according to time and place. As Stone argues that the later eighteenth century is the beginning of "affective individualism" and "compassionate marriage" in England, domestic affection and maternal love became made much of. Maria's case might

be the reflection of that trend. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

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