Enlightenment and Its Shadows: Witchcraft, Devilry and the Cult of Feminine in Eighteenth-Century England

> Some secret truths from learned pride conceal'd
> To maids alone and children are reveal'd
> What tho' no credit doubting wits may give?
> The fair and innocent shall still believe.
>
> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

Pope wrote those lines, as it is generally known, to mock the women of eighteenth-century aristocratic society for their superstitious nature, but the lines can also be taken as potentially subversive exposing the limitation of the Enlightenment values as well as the learned proponents of them. According to Immanuel Kant, “Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (1). He defined the Enlightenment, the great European phenomenon, that took place in Europe in the period from 1680 to the late eighteenth century not as a period but as a process. This process, according to Kant, involved making “public use of one’s reason in all matters” (2). He stressed the free use of reason against all sorts of preconceived notions or ideas propagated by the authority. In the eighteenth century, reason was seen as *lumen naturale* - the natural light with which every human being is endowed with. Like light, it is invisible but makes other objects visible to men. It may be corrupted by prejudice or passion, but it is true in itself. It was considered as the part of the God who is also the Supreme Reason and has given men the intellectual and rational faculty. Reason was thus both the truth and the means to attain it. Michel Malherbe describes it as the “*logos*, both discourse and reasoning”. He further explains, “reason is both the human faculty of reasoning and the set of first truths or

common notions on which any real knowledge depends" (Haakonssen 320). Under the supervision of this divine reason, man was expected to find himself in consonance with the reason that lies in the nature of things. This coincided with the scientific revolution led by Isaac Newton. Newton is often considered as the beacon of scientific rationalism and the epitome of the scientific spirit of the eighteenth century. His discovery of the laws of gravitation and its subsequent application to explain the planetary motion led to the idea of a structured and regular universe.[1] People became optimistic to unravel and explain every mystery and miracle in the universe which was running on a well-balanced and well-regulated order. Thus, Newton's discovery played a pivotal role not only in shaping the basis of modern science but also bringing about a change in the religio-cultural scenario of the eighteenth century. Moved by Newton's revolutionary ideas, Alexander Pope wrote in his epitaph: "Nature and Nature's Law lay hid in Night/ God said, let Newton be, and all was Light."[2] Newton considered the regularity of the planetary system of motion as the "most wise and excellent contrivances of things." According to him, it "could not spring from any natural causes, but were impressed by an intelligent agent."[3] Newton's opinion on the regularity of the planetary motions and the laws of nature led to the development of the idea of the universe as a complicated giant clock and God as its creator. This mechanical approach to the universe justified the Christian interpretation of the regularity and the reliability of the universe and the wisdom of the creator behind it. However, it was opposed by some Cambridge Platonists such as Henry More (1614–87) and Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) who believed in the organic model of the universe, which described the coherence and the regularity of the universe as an outer frame which is actually a manifestation of a Supreme Being. These two approaches are not antithetical as both of them rationalized Christianity and gave it a stable

ground in a period of political instability. However, the mechanical approach to the universe created another problem. It gave birth to the idea of a self-sustaining universe that did not require the intervention of God. God created this great clock with all its perfection, wound it and set it to move in a motion governed by a predetermined law. He crafted it so efficiently that it did not need his further intervention. The mechanistic view of the universe also suggests the idea of a universe without meaning, a cold and indifferent God, and a satanic metaphysics. This idea conformed to the Christian idea of Providential Design. It also gave rise to Deism, a form of natural religion, which advocates the belief in God on the basis of reason rather than revelation. Deists believed that with the help of reason one could prove the existence of God in nature tracing the symmetry, coherence, and order among its elements. God created the world and let it run on the natural laws he has made. This realization of order and coherence in the natural world created a hope for stable and ordered social and political life. Thus "reason" at its centre surrounded by the ideas of freedom, progress, and science formed the basic ideas of the European Enlightenment. It was a period marked by optimism and belief in reason, progress, and secularism. It was characterized by the decline of passion, enthusiasm, and fanaticism and the rise of the rational and scientific approach to life.

Therefore, it became necessary to rationalize Christianity and purge it of all the miracles and mysteries. David Hume in *Of Miracle* defined miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" (120). An incident that appears as a miracle may actually arise from human ignorance. He regarded Christian religion as founded upon faith, not on reason. So, a reasonable man can hardly believe it. He says,

> …*Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere

> reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (138)

Shelley in his "Essay on the Devil and Devils" said, "The wisest of the ancient philosophers accounted for the existence without introducing the Devil. The Devil was clearly a Chaldaean invention, for we first hear of him after the return of the Jews from their second Assyrian captivity" (2). Voltaire, another proponent of the Enlightenment rationalism, came down heavily upon the belief in magic and superstition considering magic as "the secret of doing what nature cannot do. It is an impossible thing" (Ankarloo 219). He regarded superstition as the most dangerous thing next to the plague to destroy the mankind: "Superstition is, immediately after the plague, the most horrible flail which can inflict mankind" (Ankarloo 220). Locke in *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) and Toland in *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) tried to filter Christianity with eyes of reason and present a rational version of Christianity. Thomas Woolston in *On the Miracles of our Saviour* (1728) rejected all the miraculous parts of the Bible. Though he tried to show in his book that "the literal History of many of the Miracles of Jesus, as recorded by the Evangelists, does imply Absurdities, Improbabilities, and Incredibilities" (4), he ensured his faith to his Lord, saying: "…this I do, not for the Service of Infidelity, which has no Place in my Heart, but for the Honour of the Holy Jesus" (3). Conyers Middleton in *A Free Enquiry into the Miraculous Powers* (1749) denied the existence of witchcraft and miracles in a disguised manner. He remarked:

> …the case of witchcraft affords the most effectual proof of the truth of what I am advancing, There is not in all history any one miraculous fact, so authentically attested as the existence of witches. All Christian nations whatsoever have consented in the belief of them and provided capital laws against them: in consequence of which, many hundreds of both Sexes have suffered a cruel death. In our own country, great numbers have been condemned to die, at different times, after a public trial, by the most eminent Judges of the Kingdom. (221)

However, he observed that men's skepticism and reasoning triumphed over all these superstitions. So, he added that "the belief of witches is now utterly extinct, and quietly buried without involving history in it's ruin, or leaving even the least disgrace or censure upon it" (223). Latitudinarianism presented an image of a well-ordered and well-designed universe governed by a supreme creator. Thus science aligned with religion used the weapon of reason to triumph over all sorts of miracles, magic, and everything outside the Latitudinarian law of the universe. Witchcraft, devilry, and sorcery were being viewed with the eyes of disbelief and mockery by the elite intellectuals of eighteenth-century England. A debate, proposed in the Temple Patrick Society and thoroughly discussed by its members in 1788 in England, concluded in the following manner:

> How weak does the power of witches and evil spirits appear, when we consider that the hairs on our heads are numbered, and that heaven superintends and directs all actions and events. Under the influence of this delightful thought, the faith of witchcraft is entirely demolished, the thing itself appears a wild chimera. Awake, asleep, at home, abroad, I am surrounded still with God. (Temple Patrick Society 22)

Thus the members of Temple Patrick Society refuted the possibilities of all sorts of miracles in a universe ruled and governed by God. Besides these, numerous books, pamphlets, and treatises were written by different intellectuals guided as well as inspired by reason and rationalism of Enlightenment to condemn the false-belief in magic, witchcraft, and superstition and illuminate the human mind with the light of reason.

The most crucial attempt to erase witchcraft and devilry from the official record was taken by the government in 1736 when English parliament issued a statute that denied the existence of any supernatural power of the witches or sorcerers but permitted legal prosecution against those who pretended to have such power. So, witch-hunting and witch-trials gradually declined and came to an end at last. The last court conviction was the case of Jane Wenham in Hertfordshire in 1712. She was exempted, and the case against her was dismissed as the trial judge Sir John Powell "rejected the usefulness as proof of witchcraft of a number of bent pins said to have been vomited" (Ankarloo 195). This official decriminalization of witches appears to be a result of the intellectual movement during the period of the Enlightenment. However, Brian P. Levac refutes this theory arguing that the decline in witchcraft prosecution was a result of the continuous reluctance of the English judges to convict the suspected witches due to their utter disbelief and this event preceded the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment. He says, "The responsibility for the end of witch-hunting lies mainly with the judges, inquisitors and magistrate who controlled the operation of judicial machinery in the very secular and ecclesiastical court of Europe in the late seventeenth century and eighteenth century" (Ankarloo 33). Whether the judicial system or the intellectual movement contributed more to the decline in witch-hunt and witch-prosecution is a matter of debate, but we can safely

conclude that both interdependently contributed to the gradual decline of belief in witchcraft and witch-prosecution in England. Belief in Witchcraft and black-magic were almost swept away from the town and found its shelter in the corners of village and countryside where the light of reason was yet to come.

Elite intellectuals of the Enlightenment often associated the rustics and women with superstition and witchcraft and laughed at them. Women, it was believed, were more vulnerable to superstition and false imagination than men. The quotation from Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* in the epigraph testifies to the fact. Reason was mainly a domain of the male. Historians often consider the Enlightenment as a male narrative written by the canonical male authors who denied women the capacity of rational thinking. Antoine-Leonard Thomas, a French poet and literary critic, in his book *Essai sur le caractere, les moeurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différens siècles* (Essay on the Character, Manners and Spirit of Women in Different Ages) (1772) commented on the philosophical differences between the nature of male and female mind. He "denied women the capacity for logical and philosophical reasoning and for action in political sphere" (Haakonssen 203). Women, he argued, excelled in the sphere of religion and domestic and moral virtues. His views closely echoed the views of Rousseau who eulogizing women in the sphere of morality, sensibility, and religion pointed out their weakness in the intellectual sphere. Rousseau was of the opinion that men and women have differences in their nature and character, and consequently, they have different roles to play in society. They can work together but cannot do the same thing. He makes a generalization in his famous *Emile* (1762) about the inherent nature of men and women:

> Boys seek movement and noise: drums, boots, little carriages. Girls prefer what presents itself to sight and is useful for ornamentation: mirrors, jewels,

> dresses, particularly dolls. The doll is the special entertainment of this sex…It is certain that the little girl would want with all her heart to know how to adorn her doll, to make its bracelets, its scarf, its flounce, its lace…almost all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance. But as for holding a needle, that they always learn gladly…Once this first path is opened, it is easy to follow. Sewing, embroidery, and lacemaking come by themselves. (367-68)

Thus, he comes to a conclusion that "(t)he quest for abstract and speculative truths, principles, and axioms in the sciences, for everything that tends to generalize ideas is not within the competence of women" (386). Rousseau appears explicitly gender biased when he considers women incapable of reason and scientific rationalism. He justifies his proposal for separate education for women by saying that "man and woman are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way in either character or temperament, it follows that they ought not to have the same education" (363). Women being docile, gentle, humble, and delicate in nature, according to Rousseau, should aim at pleasing and nurturing men who are contrary in nature. Thus, they can contribute to the welfare of society. Rousseau in *Emile* (1972) remarks, "If woman is made to please and to be subjugated, she ought to make herself agreeable to man instead of arousing him. Her own violence is in her charms. It is by these that she ought to constrain him to find his strength and make use of it" (358). Mary Wollstonecraft in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* comes down heavily upon Rousseau for degrading the female sex. She goes to the extent of attacking Rousseau's personal life and his marrying of Theresa, an illiterate and humble laundry-maid, on whom, according to Wollstonecraft, he could unleash his pride and arrogance. Wollstonecraft writes,

> Who ever drew a more exalted female character than Rousseau? Though in the lump he constantly endeavoured to degrade the sex. And why was he thus anxious? Truly to justify to himself the affection which weakness and virtue had made him cherish for that fool Theresa. He could not raise her to the common level of her sex; and therefore he labored to bring woman down to hers. He found her a convenient humble companion. (205)

Dr John Gregory, a Scottish physician and moralist, wrote *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), a popular book on female conduct in the late eighteenth century. In this book, he opined that natural goodness, delicacy, and softness of women's hearts enabled them to preserve the basic human virtues. Gregory advised his daughters to keep faith in religion and not to be entrapped in reasoning that would plunge them into chaos:

> Religion is rather a matter of sentiment than reasoning. The important and interesting articles of faith are sufficiently plain. Fix your attention on thee, and do not meddle with controversy. If you get into that, you plunge into a chaos, from which you will never be able to extricate yourselves…Avoid all books, and all conversation, that tend to shake your faith on those great points of religion which should serve to regulate your conduct, and on which your hopes of future and eternal happiness depend. (15-16)

Apart from religion, Gregory further advised women to focus on marriage and stay away from all sorts of learning and knowledge that may affect their ability to attract good husbands. Thus women's role and importance in religion, domestic sphere, and polite society were highly recognized, but they were considered inferior in philosophy and politics. Due to inherent differences in nature between men and women, some

questions regarding the education of women arose in the minds of philosophers, thinkers, and educationists of the eighteenth century: Whether should women be educated? What should they be taught? Where and how they should be taught? Most of the thinkers and educationists were unanimous in promoting education for girls. Even Rousseau advised to educate the women, but women, according to him, should be educated differently than men so that they may become good mothers and wives. Michèle Cohen in her essay "To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise': Girls' Education in Enlightenment Britain" has shown how the educationists were divided in their opinions regarding the subjects and places of girls' education. Locke in his *Some Thoughts Concerning* Education (1693) advocates private education for gentlemen's children. According to Locke, the main aim of education was virtue, and the public schools were full of violence and vices, but the advocates of public schooling were of the opinion that private education would make boys effeminate and unfit for harsh realities of life. One of the strong advocates of public schooling was Vicesimus Knox, Master of Tunbridge School. He agreed with Locke on the point that virtue should be the sole aim of education, but the process to attain it, he argued, should be different. According to him, private education actually made the boys more vulnerable to vice by shielding them from it. It often made them indulgent, undisciplined, and idle. These were actually signs of effeminacy. On the other hand, public education made them strong, disciplined, and more masculine. In a novel by famous educationist Maria Edgeworth, "a model father" wants to send her son to public school "to be roughed about among boys, or he will never learn to be a man" (Knott 227).[4] What was appropriate (public schooling) for boys was considered detrimental to the girls. Rev John Bennett, a moralist of the eighteenth century, in his *Strictures on Female Education* (1795) clearly explained the causes of his supporting domestic education

for girls. According to him, public education inculcates in the boys confidence, emulation and sense of friendship which are essential for the growth of their character:

> Three principal advantages of publick schools for boys are; 1st. That they cure a Timid bashfulness, and establish a confidence, so necessary for any publick character or employment; 2dly. That they excite a proper emulation by the collision of talents; and 3dly. That they foster early, lasting friendships, sometimes of a powerful kind, which frequently lead the way to worldly honour and advancement. (176)

He never wanted women to internalize these qualities as "(c)onfidence, in them, 'is a horrid bore.'" Rather, the greatest graces in them are "the crimsoning *blush* and the retiring *timidity*" (176). Emulation, which is necessary for boys, is not required for girls as they do not run the "government, the offices of state, or the post of a commander" (177). Women, according to him, do not require the last quality "friendship" as they are capable of the "grand promotion" – "a dignified marriage which their *sister* acquaintance are not capable of conferring" (177). Besides this, friendship among girls at a "*dangerous* age, when nature bids an unusual fervour rise in their blood", in his words, may result in "putrefaction of the moral air" and "a total forfeiture of that delicacy and softness" (178-180). According to Bennet, the public method of education, which was beneficial for boys were harmful for girls as he compared female virtue to "a plant of too delicate a nature, to bear this scorching method of exposure" (191). Besides Bennet, Vicesimus Knox, who strongly advocated women's education, also suggested private education for women. He in his *Liberal Education* (1781) writes,

> …though I disapprove, for the most part, of private tuition for boys, yet I very seriously recommend it for girls… It has been asked, why I approve of public education for boys and not for girls, and whether the danger to boys in large seminaries is not as great as to girls? I must answer, in general, that the corruption of girls is more fatal in its consequences to society than that of boys; and that, as girls are destined to private and domestic life, and boys to public life, their education should be respectively correspondent to their destination. (280)

Among the supporters of women's domestic education were also women thinkers and writers who disapproved of women's public method of education. Michele Cohen in her essay "To think, to compare, to combine, to methodise': Girls' Education in Enlightenment Britain" has shown how different women figures in the eighteenth century rejected the public method of education for women. Mary Wray, a famous figure of the early eighteenth century, considered public education "useless, and indeed pernicious" (227). Clara Reeve disliked the idea of sending girls to boarding schools as there attention is primarily given to external accomplishment without paying much attention to teaching moral and social values to women. Besides this, Reeve was also concerned with the mixing of different social classes in those schools. Even Mary Wollstonecraft in *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) opposed the idea of boarding school for girls as it taught them nothing to "engage their attention and render it an employment of the mind" (59). The curriculum of women's education in the eighteenth century reflected the dominant patriarchal assumption that women were incapable of profound and structured rational thinking. Therefore a variety of subjects were included. John Bennet in his *Letters to a Young Lady* (1798) formulated a moral and instructional programme for his niece Lucy. This

can be taken as the dominant model for the curriculum in women's education of this time. It consisted of religion, geography, history, natural history, letter writing, orthoepy (good pronunciation), and grammar. Only one novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* was included, and others were rejected as they would divert women from the path of virtue. Women thinkers of the eighteenth century often complained about the superficiality of curriculum for women's education. Michel Cohen in her another essay "'A Little Learning'? The Curriculum and the Construction of Gender Difference in the Long Eighteenth Century" remarks,

> What made a curriculum 'feminine' was therefore not the subjects it comprised so much as avoiding depth. The girls' curriculum was woven into assertions about women's lack of 'intellectual strength' and their incapacity to 'penetrate into the abstruser walks of literature.' (329)

Cohen further refers to an English physician and thinker in the eighteenth century, Erasmus Darwin who believed "that 'temper and disposition' of the female mind made young ladies 'ready to take impressions rather than to be decidedly mark'd. 'Impressions' evokes surface and shallowness: 'mark'd', deep imprint" (Cohen 329). Therefore, Cohen concludes that "what makes certain subjects women's 'department' … is not primarily their elegance or the polish they impart, but the fact that they require little time, abstraction or comprehensiveness of mind" (329). Thus, female curriculum, according to Cohen, created a "female mind" in the eighteenth century, and "superficiality was no longer just a characteristic of the female curriculum it had become the defining feature of female intelligence" (330). In this way, the patriarchal assumption about female nature, Cohen says in "'A Little Learning'? The Curriculum and the Construction of Gender Difference in the Long Eighteenth Century," contributed to the formation of two different types of education systems for men and

women in eighteenth-century England: public and private. “Public schooling”, according to the dominant patriarchal assumption, “alone provided the discipline that fostered virtue and manliness while domestic instruction, indulgent and lacking in discipline, promoted idleness and vice, both signifiers of effeminacy” (Knott 227). Thus women for whom the private education was recommended came to symbolize the irregularity, indiscipline, and irrationality in contrast to the masculine reason.

However, this interpretation of the Enlightenment as a masculine phenomenon has been regarded as one-sided and rejected by recent historians who have rewritten the history of Enlightenment incorporating the role of women as active participants. John Robertson in his essay “Women and Enlightenment: A Historiographical Conclusion” remarked, “As late as the 1980s, a negative view of the Enlightenment’s significance for women was common” (692). In a more recent approach to the Enlightenment, Robertson added, “Women have benefited as much as any from the new pluralism, both as the objects of Enlightenment thought and as active participants in the movement” (693). Different feminist figures in the eighteenth century ranging from Mary Astell (1666-1731) to Bluestocking Society of the mid-eighteenth century succeeded by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) focused on women’s intellectual ability and rational qualities and demanded equal rights for women in the intellectual, educational, and political sphere. But before them, many French and Italian women prepared the intellectual ground for the English women to claim their equal rights and positions in society. Many of them used Plato’s doctrine about the soul and nature of things and reinterpreted different biblical myths. Siep Stuurman in his essay “The Soul Has No Sex: Feminism and Catholicism in Early-Modern Europe” in the book *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* has shown how Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) and other different French and Italian female authors with orthodox Catholic religious

background used Christian myths and Platonic theories about soul to substantiate the rational capability of women and demanded equality of status and rights in society. Christine de Pizan in her *Book of the City of Ladies* (1404–05) argued that the myth of the Creation has been misinterpreted by men. The patriarchal notion that Eve being created out of Adam's rib should take a subservient position beside him was opposed by Pizan who argued that Eve's creation out of Adam's rib actually suggested that Eve "should stand at his side as a companion and never lie at his feet like a slave" (Stuurman 419). She further argues that the biblical story that God created man in His image is often misinterpreted. She opines that here "His image" actually refers to the soul, not the material body. So, this same soul, which was created in the image of God who is actually the Great Soul that never took physical form, exists in masculine and feminine bodies. She remarked, "God created the soul and placed wholly similar souls, equally good and noble in the feminine and in the masculine bodies" (Stuurman 419). This idea of the sexless soul is Platonic in origin, but she moulds this idea in a Christian theological background to vindicate her arguments. The book is an allegorical story of the salvation of women. Here a city is proposed to be built to protect and liberate women from the oppression and bondage of men, but the key figure who would salvage and liberate them is not Christ but the Virgin Mary who would protect only the virtuous women. According to Pizan, the human race was more benefitted from the virtues of Mary, than it was harmed by the vices of Eve. She invokes Mary to save women from destruction in this book. Thus placing of Virgin Mary at the centre of this allegorical religious story might be looked upon as an attempt to redefine and reinterpret Catholicism in a feminist term. Following the lineage of Pizan, another woman in the sixteenth century argued for the equal rights and status for women within a religious context. Lucrezia Marinella in *La nobilità et*

excellenza delle donne co'difetti et mancamenti de gli huomini ("The Nobility and Excellence of Women, with the Defects and Faults of Men," Venice: 1600, 1601, 1621) formed the basis of her doctrine drawing upon Platonism and Christianity. Both Platonism and Christianity support the idea that the soul has no sex, but Marinella owing to the Platonic theory of beauty as the exterior aura of the sublime went one step further to suggest that the soul of woman is better than that of man. She further argued that the creation of Eve out of the rib of Adam suggested that she was made of more noble and finer materials than that of which Adam was made of as rib was more valuable than the most other parts of the body. However, the focal point of her argument is based more on Platonic theory than the biblical myth. Another woman, who wrote for the rights and dignity of women from a religious perspective, was Marie de Gournay. She in her *Égalité des hommes et des femmes* ("The Equality of Men and Women," 1622) argued in the same tone of Marinella that the sexual difference between men and women exists only in bodies, but in the spiritual realm, there is no such difference as God has created men and women in his own image. According to her, God is beyond any sexual differences, and she considered the people, who tried to portray God as male or female, as philosophically as well as theologically ignorant. She had to face the hard fact that Jesus Christ was a male. She counter-balanced the masculinity of Christ with the femininity of the Virgin Mary in her writing. Her argument of such Platonic-Christian doctrine of "sexless-soul" helped the feminists of her time to assert the equality of men and women in spiritual and mental level despite their outward physical disparity. Gournay was followed by Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), a Venetian nun and Early Modern Italian writer, who protested against the ill-treatments of women in her writings. The injustices which Tarabotti particularly referred to in her writing were actually faced by her in

personal life. Due to her physical deformity, she was forced by her parents to become a nun and live in a convent. Her writings reveal the repression and hypocrisy of the cloistered life and her hatred for the person who sent her there. Her *La tirannia paterna* ("Paternal Tyranny," 1654) severely criticizes Catholic matrimonial law for depriving women of their freedom. She considered the lack of proper education as responsible for the impoverished condition of women both inside the convent and outside in the society. She also countered several misogynist texts of her time. Her work *Che le donne siano della spezie degli uomini* ("Women Do Belong to the Species Mankind," 1651) was mocked and criticized by Orazio Plata Romano in his treatise *Che le donne non siano della spezie degli uomini. Discorso piacevole* ("Women Do Not Belong to the Species Mankind. An Amusing Speech," 1647). In this treatise, showing pieces of evidence from religious strictures, Plata argued that women do not have rational souls, and they cannot make rational choices. So, they cannot be saved by Christ. Tarabotti retorted this pointing out his misreading of the scripture like an expert theologian and subverted the culturally constructed binary between rational male and irrational female. In her response to Giuseppe Passi's misogynistic *I donneschi diffetti* ("The Defects of Women," 1599), she adeptly exploited the Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy* to establish her argument that Adam and Eve were created by God in the same state of innocence. God endowed them with the same power of free will to make choices. It is men who have subjugated the women by forcing her either to marry or to take religious vows. Another example of religious feminism was Gabrielle Suchon (1632-1703), a French philosopher and writer, who stressed the importance of spiritual freedom. She considered liberty as "an interior state of the soul" (Stuurman 427). God has endowed everyone (man and woman) with this, but only those with "free hearts" who live solely for God can

experience this “transcendent state of liberty.” Suchon’s own life explains her idea of freedom. Though she was forced by her family to become a nun, she fled the convent and managed to live independently, evading the decree of the Parliament by legal means. Then she chose voluntary celibacy for the rest of her life. She in her *Du célibat volontaire* (“Voluntary Celibacy,” 1700) considers this voluntary celibacy as a blessing for women as it can offer freedom to them from the married as well as the cloistered life. All these women coming from the strict Catholic religious background discussed and criticized gender discrimination and argued for the proper education for women. They used different biblical myths and reinterpreted them to substantiate their arguments. However, they never accepted the supernatural and miraculous parts of the Bible. They tried to view religion rationally stressing issues like personal freedom and gender equality. Though the elements of Protestantism are found in their writing, they never explicitly rejected Catholicism. Located within Catholicism, they criticized it, pointing out its several drawbacks. This religious feminism got ideological support from Poulain de la Barre, who used Cartesian philosophy to analyze the causes of gender discrimination and argued for the equal rights of women. However, his approach was different in the sense that he resorted more to the rationalism of Descartes than to the Bible. He defended women’s rights by interrogating the dominant patriarchal assumption about women. Firstly, he questioned whether the assumption that women are weaker than men in nature is factually true. He argued that there was no factual evidence to validate the assumption that women are inferior in nature and lack the natural ability like men. According to Barre, this is a “prejudice” which is often taken for granted. He also used the doctrine of Cartesian mind-body dualism that distinguished mind and body as two separate and independent mechanisms to establish the truth that “the mind has no sex” (Knott 353). His

argument echoes the Catholic feminists' argument, "the soul has no sex", but unlike them, he supports his claim with reason and empirical evidence. Secondly, he also refutes this claim that women are inferior in nature by Descartes' argument that we cannot know one's nature directly. We only know about the properties ascribed to it. Therefore, the knowledge about women's nature is a contingent truth that varies with regard to time and space. Thus, Barre demolished the ideological pillars upon which the rationale of women's subjection was founded. These led the supporters of women's rights of this time to uphold the view that both men and women were equally endowed with reason and rational qualities. Though this Cartesian theory and Platonic-Christian doctrine appeared helpful to them for substantiating the equality of men and women in metaphysical and spiritual level, it was problematic in the sense that "the neutral spirit has its earthly existence only within a sexually differentiated body, with all the consequences for the disparagement of women that have followed from that" (Soper 710). Kate Soper remarked, "…the encouragement it gave to women to seek emancipation in celibacy and the life of the intellect at the expense of emotional and sexual fulfillment has also proved painful" (Knott 710).

Thus the ground for the feminists of eighteenth century England was prepared. Mary Astell (1666-1731), the earliest feminist of the eighteenth century, believed that truth was accessible to reason, and a woman was as rational as a man. She believed that a woman deserved proper and the same education like a man. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), she advised her contemporary women to focus more on the improvement of the self instead of making themselves the object of admiration for the male observers:

> How can you be content to be in the World like Tulips in a Garden, to make a fine shew and be good for nothing…our Souls were given us only for the

> service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the Eyes of Men. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our Worth in their Opinion; and do not think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart. (9)

In her other book *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700), she advised women not to marry as she considered marriage a contract that demanded a woman's absolute surrender to her husband. This is an institution that, in Astell's words, subdues the "free born souls" (42) of women. However, Astell did not want women to contest men in public offices. She wanted only proper education for woman and her right to live independently if she decides not to marry. In the early eighteenth century, besides Mary Astell, there were women like Bathsua Makin (1600—1675), Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), Elizabeth Elstob (1683-1756), and Damaris Masham (1659-1708) who upheld the demand for proper education for women and stressed the rational ability of women. This generation was followed by the Bluestocking society of the mid-eighteenth century. Bluestocking society was the informal association of some privileged women led by Elizabeth Montagu and Elizabeth Vesey. This group of women abstained from popular non-intellectual activities like gossiping and playing cards and discussed literature and other serious social and philosophical issues. They often invited male intellectuals to participate in their discussion. They showed their concern for women's education and equal rights of women. Later more radical writers like Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft came to vindicate the rights of women in the social and political sphere, but they showed their distrust of the Bluestocking Society's emphasis on female advancement through dialogue and conversation. Mary Wollstonecraft was a secular, rational feminist who first put

forward the question of female sexuality and female pleasure at the centre of her feminist project along with other issues like education, employment, etc. In her unfinished and posthumously-published novel *The Wrongs of Woman* (1797), she through her protagonist Maria voiced her own views about freedom (especially sexual freedom) of women. In a letter to her daughter, supporting her decision to leave her brutal husband, Maria writes: "Truth is the only basis of virtue; and we cannot, without depraving our minds, endeavour to please a lover or husband, but in proportion as he pleases us" (ch. 10). Maria questions the conventionally accepted passive role of women in a sexual relationship and speaks for the need for a relationship guided by reciprocal pleasure and love between man and woman. When Maria commits adultery for falling with a man whom she desired, Civil Court convicts the man for seducing her, but Maria taking the responsibility of choosing her desired man justifies her conduct in the court:

> To this person, thus encountered, I voluntarily gave myself, never considering myself as any more bound to transgress the laws of moral purity, because the will of my husband might be pleaded in my excuse, than to transgress those laws to which [the policy of artificial society has] annexed [positive] punishments… if laws exist, made by the strong to oppress the weak, I appeal to my own sense of justice, and declare that I will not live with the individual, who has violated every moral obligation which binds man to man. (ch. 17)

She asks women to break away from the image of false virtue imposed by the patriarchal society on women. She interrogates this image of false virtue, referring to its culturally constructed nature:

> …what are the vices generally known, to the various miseries that a woman may be subject to, which, though deeply felt, eating into the soul, elude description, and may be glossed over! A false morality is even established, which makes all the virtue of women consist in chastity, submission, and the forgiveness of injuries. (ch. 17)

This image of false virtue becomes a barrier before women's sexual autonomy. Thus, Wollstonecraft in this fictional text revolts against the gendered conception of virtue that subordinates women's pleasure and sexual autonomy to her social and moral duty. However, in her another groundbreaking text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she gave importance to reason and moral duties of women over pleasure (sexual pleasure) from which weakness of women, she opined, emanates. According to her, women should shun pleasure in favour of a life of struggle and adversity, which she should face with her rational mind. She rejected the false feminine virtues like modesty, delicacy, etc. She in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* referred to a poem titled *To a Lady, with painted Flowers* (1773) by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (81). Here virtuous women are compared to delicate and beautiful flowers that are not born to face toils and sufferings. Barabauld advises women to imitate this flowery nature to be called virtuous in the eyes of men:

> But this soft family, to cares unknown,
> Were born for pleasure and delight alone.
> Gay without toil, and lovely without art,
> They spring to cheer the sense, and glad the heart.
> Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these;
> Your best, your sweetest empire is—please. (Wollstonecraft 81)

Wollstonecraft severely criticizes Barabauld for supporting and internalizing such patriarchal assumptions about women. She wrote, "…how could Mrs. Barbauld write the following ignoble comparison?" (81). Referring to the views expressed in the poem, she remarked:

> So the men tell us; but virtue, says reason, must be acquired by *rough* toils, and useful struggles with worldly *cares*… It (virtue) is an acquirement, and an acquirement to which pleasure must be sacrificed—and who sacrifices pleasure when it is within the grasp, whose mind has not been opened and strengthened by adversity, or the pursuit of knowledge goaded on by necessity? (81-82)

A rational woman and a dutiful mother, according to her, should subdue her sexual urges to focus on her motherly duties. She, Wollstonecraft wrote in the same book, "represses the first faint dawning of a natural inclination, before it ripens into love, and in the bloom of life forgets her sex—forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion, which might again have been inspired and returned" (76-77). Thus Wollstonecraft's attitude to the sexual pleasure of women appears ambivalent and contradictory when we read her two books - *Wrongs of Women* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, she shuns what she considers most important in *Wrongs of Women.* Feminist critics of the 1980s, like Susan Gubar and Cora Kaplan, accuse Wollstonecraft of misogyny for her advice to her contemporary women to subdue sexual desires and her hatred for those who indulge in them. Kaplan remarks that Wollstonecraft "sets up heartbreaking conditions for women's liberation – a little death, the death of desire, the death of female pleasure" (39).[5] Susan Gubar calls Wollstonecraft's contradictory attitude towards female sexuality "the paradoxical feminist misogyny" (459) that emerges

partly, according to Gubar, from Wollstonecraft's self-disgust at her own "slavish passions", "fickle irrationality" and "over-valuation of love" (460).[6] Barbara Taylor in her essay "Misogyny and Feminism: The Case of Mary Wollstonecraft" points out the limitations of the studies of Kaplan and Gubar, saying that they fail to look into the historical and cultural context in which Wollstonecraft wrote her treatise. The image of the femininity at which Wollstonecraft rails is not of the ordinary middle-class woman, but of the elite woman of higher strata of society. Her target was the wealthy women of the landed gentry class, who represented themselves as embodying the objectified and eroticized version of femininity in order for a good matrimonial prospect. In Wollstonecraft's opinion, Taylor argues, these women were the "'chimeras' of male erotic imagination, manufactured into social existence through romantic conventions and cultural code" (504). "Against this objectified, eroticized version of femininity," Taylor further comments in the same essay, "Wollstonecraft set the ideal of a rational womanhood dedicated to the knowledge of truth and performance of duty" (504). Wollstonecraft never rejects the instincts and considered them essentials for both men and women. However, she warns against the excessive indulgence in it. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she remarks, "Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason" (158). Here lies the centre from which holds the balance of her entire arguments expressed in this treatise.

But the problem with these feminists of the eighteenth century was that they could never escape the effects of Enlightenment and find a separate identity for themselves. They just wanted to be reasonable and rational like the men. Reason itself was a patriarchal discourse that could hardly delve into the depth of female subjectivity. Similarly, in a system of thoughts governed by the masculine reason, the

female voice could hardly find space to express itself. What French Feminists want to stress is that the idea that femininity is just the opposite of masculinity stems from the masculine logic. So, according to them, women should try to find an identity outside the male system of thought. French feminism holds the view that women should celebrate their state of being marginalized instead of claiming to be assimilated into mainstream male ideology. Hélène Cixous in her essay "Sorties" shows how the male reason is ordered as a series of binary oppositions (male/female, light/darkness, activity/passivity, culture/nature, etc.) in which one half of the binary is taken as superior to another. Cixous observes:

> The (unconscious?) stratagem and violence of masculine economy consists in making sexual difference hierarchical by valorizing one of the terms of the relationship, by reaffirming what Freud calls *phallic primacy.* And the "difference" is always perceived and carried out as an opposition. Masculinity/femininity are opposed in such a way that it is male privilege that is affirmed in a movement of conflict played out in advance. (151-152).

Thus, Cixous has shown in her study how "woman has always functioned "within" man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds" (168). Cixous in her another essay "Laugh of Medusa" has shown how men have robbed women of their subjectivity and led women to hate themselves, their essential femininity that lies within their bodies. She says, "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves" (878). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Cixous refers to *ecriture feminine,* a feminine writing practice that may help women to escape the world of binaries. The Lacanian pre-

Oedipal stage that precedes language and the Symbolic order governed by the Law of the Father is the place of the feminine. This writing is characterized by fluidity, excesses, and creative extravagance. It not only creates a feminine identity outside the binaries of the patriarchal Symbolic order but also disrupts and subverts the male-dominated language. Other French Feminists like Kristeva and Irigaray also speak of the pre-Oedipal unconscious state that precedes language, and all sorts of reason, logic and structure. However, Irigaray sees "sexual difference" not as a system of domination. Instead, the sexless notion of the subject, according to Irigaray, represents the interests and perspective of men. This situates women in a position of non-subject or the "other." Like Cixous's *ecriture feminine and* Irigaray's "imaginary", Julia Kristeva introduces the notion of "semiotic chora" that constitutes the physical basis of language – its bodily force, tonal and rhythmic quality. It is full of chaos and delirium where signifying process collapses. It is the place of the feminine. Kristeva describes "chora" as "a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" (93). According to Kristeva, "the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specialization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm" (94). "Abject" is another important term in Kristeva's theory. The term, which had its origin in Latin, conveys the sense of being cast out and rejected. Therefore abjection, for Kristeva, is a psychic process in which identity or subjectivity is formed by casting out what is undesirable and threatening to subjectivity. Identity or subjectivity is formed at the cost of abjection of the pre-Oedipal maternal other as Kristeva says, "…primary identification appears to be a transference to (from) the imaginary father, correlative to the establishment of the mother as 'ab-jected'" (257). Thus in the patriarchal system, masculinity is threatened by this irrational and chaotic feminine principle. So,

it tries to suppress this unruly feminine principle by demonizing it as evil, unclean, and sin. This idea of the pre-Oedipal anarchic feminine state also closely resembles spiritual eco-feminist Mary Daly's idea of "wild zone" where women can be free. So the celebration of irrational could be another way for eighteenth-century women to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology and find a distinct identity outside the masculine system of thought. However, this approach to counter the marginalization of women has often been accused of essentialism. Irigaray describes this approach as "strategic essentialism." The term was coined by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak to refer to the strategy of resistance by which the marginalized and the minorities, despite their strong differences, can present themselves and put up strong resistance to authority. The essentialization of women implies that there remain some parts in women, which are always the same and unchanging irrespective of the differences among them. This part helps women resist masculine interpretation and appropriation of female identity. Diana J . Fuss in her essay "'Essentially Speaking': Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence" defends Irigaray's "strategic essentialism":

> Therefore to give "woman" an essence is to undo Western phallomorphism and to offer women entry into subjecthood… A woman who lays claim to an essence of her own undoes the conventional binarisms of essence/accident, form/matter, and actuality/potentiality. In this specific historical context, to essentialize "woman" can be a politically strategic gesture of displacement…to the extent that Irigaray reopens the question of essence and woman's access to it, essentialism represents not a trap she falls into but rather a key strategy she puts into play, not a dangerous oversight but rather a lever of displacement. (76-77)

Gerald Gardener, Margaret Murray, James Frazer, Jules Michelet have found the root of western witchcraft in the pre-Christian pagan fertility cult of goddess Diana who symbolized at once beauty, fertility as well as death, evil and magic. Gerald Gardener is considered as one of the most important proponents of neo-pagan and Wiccan movement that emerged as a reaction against the dehumanizing effect of modernism, industrialization, rationalization and universal taxonimization on human beings and above all Enlightenment definition of progress by positing the need of experiencing the wholeness and connectedness with nature as central to human life. This romantic approach is critiqued for its lack of historical and empirical evidences to legitimize itself, but later many neo-Pagan writers like Starhawk (1989), Vivianne Crowley (1989), and Margot Adler (1986) used Jung's theory to give theoretical support to the neo-pagan movement. They used Jung's theories to understand the role of symbolic and spiritual in human experience, and drawing on Jung's theory, they described the history of witchcraft as "representative of universal psychic truths, independent of empirical history" (Waldron 961). Thus Jungian approach in understanding neo-paganism was more helpful as it could dispense with the historical and empirical truth relying more upon psychological and cultural symbols emanating from the "collective unconscious." Another important aspect of this neo-pagan movement was the centrality of the divine feminine with its dualistic aspects of death and fertility manifested in the moon goddess Diana. In this context, David Waldron in his article "Wicca" quotes the following remark of Cassandra Carter:

> In Jungian terms the descent of the Goddess teaches the need for a woman to go on her own quest in search of her animus—not waiting for the knight on a white charger who will rescue her from the need to make her own choices, but

> going to confront the Dark Lord and solve his mysteries — going of her own choice and will into the Kingdom of the Unconscious mind. (Waldron 961)

Thus a witch is a woman who plunges into the unconscious mind in search of her animus instead of being driven by masculine reason and logic. According to David Waldron, "For some sectors of society the Witch represents superstition, evil, irrationality and the primitive, i.e., that which limits the potential for human progress and autonomy from nature. To others, the Witch represents beauty, nature, freedom and cultural autonomy from the corrupting and limiting influences of scientific rationalism, commodification and industrialization" (978). French Feminism, Wiccan and neo-Pagan movement show how the unruly feminine principle has been seen as potentially subversive force from different perspectives. It has been seen by different theorists and activists as a potent force to counter the Enlightenment values and its legacy that dominates the Western system of thought contributing to the marginalization of women.

Though in the Age of Reason, witchcraft and supernaturalism were simply laughed off or repressed by the rationalist thinkers and even by the feminists, it did not completely disappear. Roy Porter remarks:

> However scorned and spurned during the age of reason, the demonic and magical did not so much disappear from the polite culture as change their face and place. Once disclaimed and tamed, they became available for cultural repackaging, notably in domains of literature and the arts which were themselves enjoying phenomenal growth (245).

The Gothic novels written in the late eighteenth century are replete with the representations of witchcraft, devilry, sorcery, and supernatural events. Ann

Radcliffe, Clara Reeve, and other writers tried to represent “explained supernatural” in their novels. Though they showed many supernatural incidents in their novels, they rationalized it at the end with the help of reason and logic. They represented the central female characters in their novels as powerless, humble, and innocent persecuted by the patriarchal powers. They are finally reconciled with the patriarchal system through the functioning of the institution of marriage. They undergo a journey from emotionalism and immaturity to rationalism, maturity, and stability in personal and social life. These writers belonged to the tradition of the rational feminists of the eighteenth century, who internalized the Enlightenment values of reason and rationalism. But in the other mode of writings popularized by M.G. Lewis, Charlotte Dacre, and others, no such attempts were made to rationalize the supernatural events represented in their novels. The central female characters in their novels are shown as bloodthirsty, demonic, murderous, and dangerous. Equated with the Devil, they practise sorcery and witchcraft. They violate the norms of the patriarchal order and are consequently punished for it. In this later group of novels, the demonization of the women is actually linked up with their romantic transgressive spirit. Though the moralizing tone of these novels often tends to mask their subversive nature, their utter rejection of Enlightenment values upheld the cult of the irrational, anarchic but creative, fertile and organic principle of femininity that symbolized wholeness and connectedness with nature.