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Companionate Marriage: Mary Wollstonecraft's Vision as a Cure to Divorce in a Women Empowered Society

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Abstract

Historically, women have occupied a subordinate position, with marriage and family structures perpetuating their social and economic dependence on men. The long struggle for women's liberation has centered on securing access to education, employment opportunities, and social and economic independence as foundations for social status. Within this trajectory, feminist activists have played a pivotal role, with Mary Wollstonecraft emerging as a key figure who emphasized women's social responsibilities and argued that, by virtue of their rational capacities, women merit equal recognition in society. Her advocacy for equality within the family structure was particularly influential in proposing that the Aristotelian concept of high-level friendship be applied to marriage—identified as "companionate marriage"—thereby positioning egalitarian marital relationships as a pathway to women's greater status and equality. In the contemporary context, women's increased empowerment and capacity for independent action, including greater willingness to leave marriages that no longer serve their interests, signal the autonomy they have gained but also raise questions about the rising incidence of divorce. This study examines the historical concept of marriage as a form of high-level friendship—originally

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advanced as a means of promoting gender equality—and investigates its potential application as a strategy for addressing contemporary divorce in a society where women are increasingly empowered. Conducted as a qualitative study using secondary data, it analyzes the notion of friendship as articulated in works such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The findings indicate that Mary Wollstonecraft's model for women's advancement remains normatively robust and socially relevant, providing a conceptual framework for reimagining marriage as an egalitarian partnership that can respond to current gender and relational tensions. This philosophical exploration of divorce further underscores the need to dismantle patriarchal ideologies embedded in social structures so that marriage can function as a space of mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared flourishing.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft; Companionate Marriage; Gender Equality; Divorce; Women's Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Historically, women have endured systemic oppression and violence, both within the public social sphere and the private family domain. Men, often viewing women through the lens of fulfilling traditional social responsibilities tied to their physical characteristics, have been quick to exercise control and repression. Even in the early stages of so-called civilized societies, women remained excluded from the principles of equality and justice. The challenges women faced within a family structure isolated from the public sphere were distinct and particularly acute. For much of history, no social mechanisms existed to address the difficulties encountered by women, largely because the very men perpetuating violence in the family were also those wielding power within the broader societal structure. The journey towards altering this dynamic, enabling women to act autonomously within the family and to gain public recognition through their social engagements, has been a long and arduous process—one demanding a significant evolution in human society and its institutions.

The family stands as the most significant institution in an individual's social life. Traditionally, this familial structure has placed women in a subordinate role under male authority. However, in recent times, there is a growing consensus that both partners, connected through the marital bond, should be afforded equal opportunities to pursue happiness and personal fulfilment within the family. In cases where one party is oppressed

or unable to lead a life aligned with their nature and abilities, contemporary social and economic conditions provide ample avenues for exiting such a relationship. Although divorce remains a relatively unspoken subject in public discourse, the modern family structure increasingly acknowledges it as a legitimate means of disengaging from dysfunctional or conflict-ridden relationships. Social acceptance of such decisions has also gained traction in recent years (Vincent, & D'Mello, 2018: 152). In developed nations, divorce is recognized as a legitimate means of escaping an unhappy marriage and reclaiming personal independence (Afroz, 2019: 262). Although divorce represents a form of liberation for women in societies that have long oppressed them, and even though women who experienced a low standard of living during marriage may find post-divorce life more satisfying than their married existence (Bourassa, Sbarra, & Whisman, 2015: 497), divorce is nonetheless responsible for the emergence of various physical, psychological, social, economic, and moral problems in both the short and long term. In particular, the children of divorced individuals are among those who experience the most significant and profound impacts (Damota, 2019: 06, Alqashan, Al-Kandari, 2010: 37-45, & George, 2016: 03). In this context, while ample emphasis has been placed on individual freedom, the necessity of safeguarding that freedom whilst ensuring the smooth functioning of the social structure has become a critical issue in contemporary society.

Since the mid-twentieth century, divorce has significantly increased in both the United States and European countries. Numerous social, economic, and political factors have encouraged this rise, including the opportunities created by the industrial age, the deepening intimacy in personal relationships, the shift from traditional extended families to nuclear households, and the economic independence afforded to both men and women. These factors, far from being limited to developed Western nations, have had a widespread impact on societies globally (Mendoza, Tolba, & Saleh, 2019: 03, Musyafaah, & etc. 2022: 124). The empowerment of women, while a positive development, has also generated certain negative repercussions, chief among them being the rise in divorce rates (Hassan, 2023: 204, 213). However, the opportunities that contribute to these challenges are available to both parties involved in marriage. Married women now have ample opportunities to succeed in their professional lives, but when their spouse fails to approach this reality with an equitable perspective, their marriage is more likely to face difficulties. Similarly, when a successful woman perceives her husband as lacking in social status or ambition, their marital relationship may begin to encounter significant challenges (Morgan,

Lye, & Condran, 1988). This shift must be recognized as a fundamental transformation within the social structure. Families that successfully adapt to and embrace this change are more likely to achieve lasting happiness, thereby fulfilling their role as the foundational units of society.

Accompanying the rise in women's self-reliance is an increase in divorce rates. Any attempt to diminish women's autonomy in order to reduce divorce is both irrational and counterproductive. Nonetheless, the preservation of the family structure remains a significant concern. This research paper explores whether Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of "marriage as a form of high-level friendship" can serve as a viable solution to this issue. Wollstonecraft originally proposed this approach as a means of ensuring women's safety, while fostering their freedom and independence. However, this paper aims to examine whether her concept can also function as a strategy to preserve marital relationships in a context where women have achieved greater social and economic independence.

Research Problem, Research Questions, and Objectives of the Study

In the wake of modernization, women's opportunities to act autonomously and independently have expanded, diminishing their economic reliance on men. However, this shift has also contributed to tensions within the traditional family structure, with divorce emerging as a significant global issue. The central research problem guiding this study is how to address the possible link between women's freedom, independence, and self-reliance, and the rising incidence of divorce. A key responsibility of the other party in a marriage is to recognize that women seek an egalitarian family structure, where they are treated as equals, and are prepared to leave if such conditions are not met. Mary Wollstonecraft stands as a pioneer of this vision of equality. This study is premised on the idea that her concept of "marriage as a relationship of high-level friendship" offers a potential solution to the contemporary problem of divorce. The following research questions are formulated to investigate this premise.

1. How can Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of 'marriage based on high friendship' be applied to address the issues surrounding divorce in contemporary women empowered society?

2. What are the advantages and limitations of the 'high friendship marriage' model in addressing divorce-related challenges in modern women empowered society?

In light of these research questions, the study seeks to achieve the following two objectives:

1. To critically analyze Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of 'marriage of high virtue' and assess its relevance to contemporary divorce issues.

2. To evaluate the efficacy of the 'high friendship-based marriage' model in addressing the problems associated with divorce within the framework of modern women empowered social structures.

This study aims to explore solutions based on the problem identified in previous researches, which suggest that women's economic independence and social empowerment through education and employment have created opportunities for them to exit unsatisfactory marriages. However, this study does not seek to analyze the potential positive correlation between women's independence and divorce, as that issue lies beyond its scope

Literature Review

A study by Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) examines the trends in marriage and divorce in relation to social and economic changes over the past 150 years. The study highlights those factors such as the increased participation of women in the workforce, the narrowing of status-based disparities, and advancements in technology have contributed to diminishing the economic incentives of marriage, while simultaneously contributing to rising divorce rates. In light of these developments, the authors suggest that alternative approaches to family management should be fostered between men and women, and that policies surrounding marriage require reconsideration and adaptation. Similarly, Ascandra, Bachtiar, and Nazer (2019) conducted a study focusing on the economic factors that contribute to divorce among working women. Their findings reveal that income level, working hours, number of children, education level, occupation, and the quality of work all influence women's decisions regarding divorce. Furthermore, the study indicates that women are more likely to initiate divorce compared to men. A study by Telatar (2019) found that women's attainment of economic independence significantly altered their status within both the family and society, leading to a complete transformation in their social standing. This shift created opportunities for women to challenge traditional male-dominated power structures, with divorce serving as a means to escape these dynamics. The study further indicates that in cases where the wife earns more than the husband, the

incidence of divorce tends to increase, largely due to conflicts arising from competition for power within the marital relationship.

A study conducted by Vincent, and D'Mello (2018) revealed that, among various factors, women's educational attainment, professional careers, and economic self-reliance significantly contribute to the breakdown of marriages. Similarly, research by Damota (2019) highlighted both the short-term and long-term challenges that divorce presents to those involved, particularly the adverse effects on their children. An empirical field study by Mendoza, Tolba, and Saleh (2019) examined the experiences of divorced individuals, uncovering the difficulties faced by both men and women post-divorce, as well as the positive developments in their lives after separation. Kalmijn, and Poortman (2005) conducted research on decision-making in divorce and found that women are more likely to make the initial decision to end the marriage compared to men or joint decisions by both partners, with various social and economic factors influencing this trend. A study by Sayer, England, Allison, and Kangas (2011) further suggests that women who approach a threshold of dissatisfaction in marriage are more inclined to withdraw from married life, with their engagement in professional careers reinforcing this decision.

Kreager, Felson, Warner, and Wenger (2013) have demonstrated that education empowers women to maintain stable marriages, while also equipping them with the capacity to leave unsatisfying or abusive relationships. They further revealed that the social status gained through education plays a significant role in women's decisions to pursue divorce. In a field study conducted by Schoen, Astone, Rothert, Standish, and Kim (2002), it was found that women's employment and the favorable status that accompanies it do not negatively impact a happy marriage, but pose a risk to marriages that are already unhappy or abusive. In the introduction to their study, the authors cite previous research, which consistently demonstrates a positive and significant correlation between women's participation in the labor force and divorce rates during the period from 1880 to 1990. A study by Lee (2006) revealed that the divorce rate tripled between 1990 and 2003, with women's increased access to respectable employment and delayed childbearing identified as contributing factors. Similarly, Afroz's (2019) study, from a sociological perspective, explored whether the rise of feminism has contributed to the growing divorce rate. The study highlights the contradictions that arise when gender inequality persists within marriage, and how such disparities foster marital discord, ultimately leading to divorce. The analysis draws on the principle of contradiction to explain this phenomenon. Furthermore,

the study identifies women's education and economic independence as key determinants in divorce, with a major factor being the reduced necessity for women to remain in abusive family structures.

In her 1999 work Abbey revealed that Mary Wollstonecraft views marriage as a political institution and argues that the principles of justice inherent in liberal thought should be applied within the family structure also. While she critiques the structural inequalities present in married life, she does not dismiss the institution itself. Wollstonecraft advocates for the incorporation of equality, freedom of choice, opportunities for rational decision-making, mutual respect, and support for personal growth within marriage. This article builds on Wollstonecraft's assertion that liberal principles must be implemented to address and eliminate the power imbalances that persist, particularly within the institution of marriage. The research paper co-authored by Abbey and Den Uyl (2021) addresses the rising incidence of divorce in societies increasingly influenced by Western lifestyles. The authors argue that to mitigate these issues, new approaches to marriage must be adopted. They propose that the philosophical insights of various thinkers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, should be utilized to reframe marriage as a union grounded in mutual friendship and respect. Such an approach, the paper suggests, could offer a viable solution to the growing challenges faced by contemporary marital relationships.

Brace's (2000) article critically examines Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of the systemic oppression of women within patriarchal societies, where the principles of law and justice inherent in liberal social frameworks are not extended to the family structure. The study explores the dynamics of women, as a marginalized group, confronting men, who occupy positions of societal power and privilege. It offers an in-depth analysis of the archaic family structure and the patriarchal norms that sustain it, wherein women are effectively confined within familial roles, sacrificing autonomy in exchange for economic security. Hartman's (2019) article contends that marriage is inherently a relationship between two unequal partners, in contrast to Aristotle’s depiction of marriage as a bond between two equals, a dynamic which, according to the author, cannot exist between a man and a woman. The article critically examines how Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas were revolutionary for their time, challenging prevailing social norms, and how they offer an alternative interpretation of Aristotelian thought in relation to the traditional understanding of gender roles within marriage.

Adhikari, and Saha 's (2022) essay on Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist contributions offers a foundational bibliography in feminist philosophy. Despite initially being overshadowed by the controversies surrounding Wollstonecraft's unconventional personal life, her work laid the groundwork for subsequent feminist theory and activism. Specifically, her critique of the conditions faced by women in male-dominated societies and her advocacy for women's equality have become central to feminist discourse. In the twentieth century, Wollstonecraft's life came to be viewed as emblematic of the challenges women faced in patriarchal societies. This essay suggests that Wollstonecraft's philosophical positions are deeply intertwined with her personal experiences, highlighting the importance of considering these experiences in studies on divorce and the concept of 'higher level friendship' as a way to protect family life aganst to divorce. This insight underscores the necessity of incorporating her personal life into such analyses.

Despite extensive research exploring the relationship between women's economic independence, education, and the increasing likelihood of divorce (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007; Ascandra, Bachtiar, & Nazer, 2019; Telatar, 2019; Vincent & D'Mello, 2018), and studies identifying structural inequalities within marriage that contribute to marital breakdown (Afroz, 2019; Brace, 2000; Hartman, 2019), there remains a significant gap in the examination of alternative frameworks for marital stability grounded in philosophical thought. Existing literature largely focuses on how patriarchal traits ingrained in men perpetuate control and violence within marriage, prompting many women to seek divorce as a form of liberation. However, research on strategies to preserve marriage—particularly through rethinking gender dynamics and fostering men's active involvement in marital harmony—remains limited. One underexplored approach is Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of 'companionate friendship,' which emphasizes equality, mutual respect, and personal growth within marriage. While some scholars have acknowledged Wollstonecraft's critique of patriarchal structures (Abbey, 1999; Abbey & Den Uyl, 2021; Adhikari & Saha, 2022), no comprehensive studies have applied her theory of marriage as 'companionate friendship' to contemporary discussions on addressing rising divorce rates. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how Wollstonecraft's philosophical framework can be integrated into modern marriage practices, particularly in contexts where female empowerment is reshaping traditional marital roles, to promote stability and harmony.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a philosophical approach to the issue of divorce. While numerous sociological and psychological analyses have been conducted, this research explores Mary Wollstonecraft's concept of 'companionate marriage' as a potential solution to the challenges posed by divorce, particularly in women empowered societies. A qualitative methodology, utilizing secondary data, was employed. The study critically examines Wollstonecraft's ideas in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in conjunction with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* on friendship. Additionally, a thorough review and critical analysis of various academic works on marriage, divorce, friendship, and Wollstonecraft's philosophy form the basis of this research paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empowerment of women and transformations in family structures

Marital life and the family structure have undergone profound transformations as a result of various social and economic influences. The traditional conceptions of marriage and family, along with their assigned meanings, have shifted significantly. Historically, the man was considered the head of the household, responsible for financial matters, while the woman was primarily tasked with childbearing, childrearing, and the upkeep of the home. However, this dynamic has evolved. Women now enjoy economic independence and have moved beyond their traditional roles, empowered to make autonomous decisions about their lives and marriages. The expectation toward women to always make sacrifices for the sake of the family has dramatically changed. Today, women assert their desire for independence within marriage, often taking charge of both their personal and familial responsibilities. As a result, phenomena such as divorce, single parenting, and remarriage have become more prevalent, reflecting a departure from traditional family norms (Abbey, Den Uyl, 2021: 38).

A comprehensive perspective reveals that education, career opportunities, economic independence, and legal protections for women have significantly transformed the structure of marriage and the family. Historically, marriage was predominantly viewed as an economic arrangement, where women were financially dependent on their husbands. However, in contemporary society, the autonomy women have gained through education and employment has reshaped this traditional marital dynamic. This newfound freedom

allows women to enter marriage without economic necessity, enabling them to seek a partner based on mutual respect and shared benefits. As a result, marriage has increasingly become defined by friendship and equality as its foundational characteristics. In addition, legal frameworks that safeguard women's rights have further alleviated the obligation to remain in marriages that fail to meet their emotional or psychological needs. These changes have also contributed to the growing willingness to seek divorce, not only as a means of escaping domestic violence but also as a way to pursue personal well-being and psychological fulfillment.

There is a notable positive correlation between the empowerment of women and the rising rates of divorce. Women have increasingly developed the courage to leave marital relationships that they find unsatisfactory. A key motivating factor is that the advantages of prioritizing their own well-being and exiting an abusive marriage now outweigh the social stigma historically attached to divorce. This shift is largely due to changes in women's social expectations regarding marriage, driven by their empowerment. Women are no longer willing to tolerate inequality, abuse, or violence within a marriage. Consequently, they view leaving a relationship devoid of respect, love, and mutual support as both a viable and beneficial option (Habibi, Hajiheydari, & Darharaj, 2014:53). In this context, it can also be interpreted as a reflection of women's growing independence from marriages that fail to align with their social and personal status.

Conversely, a woman's decision to leave a marital relationship carries significant emotional, social, economic, and legal consequences for her partner. Emotionally, it can lead to feelings of loss, grief, identity conflict, and the onset of psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. Socially, the separation often results in isolation, strained relationships with children, and the burden of societal stigma. Economically, men may face the financial strain of legal fees, alimony payments, and a reduced standard of living. Although men may have opportunities to recover from these challenges, the mistrust that arises from the breakdown of the relationship can impair their ability to form meaningful connections in the future, both personally and socially. Furthermore, when men assume responsibility for raising children, they may find it difficult to balance their parental duties with rebuilding their personal lives. Children, during this formative period, are often left to grapple with the psychological repercussions of divorce, potentially facing emotional unrest and the need for greater effort to heal from the trauma of family disruption (Amato, 2000: 1273).

High-level friendship in Classical Period and Approach of Mary Wollstonecraft's

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a ten-volume work, friendship is extensively discussed in fourteen chapters of Book VIII and twelve chapters of Book IX. Aristotle portrays friendship as an extension of oneself, embodying a moral virtue. He asserts that friendship is essential across all stages of life: it helps safeguard against errors in youth, inspires significant accomplishments in middle age, and provides support in old age when one may no longer be able to act independently (Thomson, 1976: 138). Aristotle, employing the Greek term *philia*, conceptualizes friendship as a multifaceted construct that encompasses various relational dimensions. The term *philia* not only denotes friendship but also implies 'relationship' and 'being good with one another.' Aristotle categorizes friendship into three distinct relational levels: the exchange of benefits, the enjoyment of shared pleasures, and the admiration and appreciation of virtue (Nicomachean Ethics VIII.3.1156a5–1156b30; Hughes, 2001: 94). These levels reflect the different ways in which friendships are formed and sustained, each representing a progression towards a higher form of relational depth and commitment.

The third category of friendship, often regarded as the highest form, is distinguished by its profound nature. In this type of friendship, individuals are attracted to each other's virtues and qualities not for personal gain but with a sincere intention to foster each other's growth and success in their respective endeavors. Such friendships are characterized by selfless mutual support, devoid of any ulterior motives. Friends within this realm exhibit transparency and offer discerning advice, thereby contributing significantly to each other's personal development. Aristotle contends that these relationships facilitate the attainment of an elevated state of personal and moral advancement. It is crucial to recognize that such high-level friendships are feasible only between individuals of exceptional moral character and shared virtues. Equality and mutual respect are foundational to these elevated relationships. Unlike other forms of friendship, this type of friendship may require substantial time to cultivate, and also these high-level friendships possess the potential for enduring across a lifetime (Hughes, 2001: 106; Kendrick, 2016: 37).

Mary Wollstonecraft incorporates the concept of friendship as a pivotal element in her analysis of effective governance and social justice. She argues that individuals who embrace and nurture genuine friendships are ideally positioned to be exemplary citizens

within any political framework. Such individuals demonstrate qualities of open-mindedness, loyalty, and acceptance, which are essential for a harmonious society. Wollstonecraft posits that communities which promote a spirit of companionship, rather than adhering to rigid hierarchies or power structures, are more likely to foster authentic self-expression and cooperative interactions. In her application of Aristotle's concept of social life to familial contexts, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the necessity of cultivating amicable conditions within any form of cohabitation to ensure a fulfilling existence. She advocates for a societal framework where individuals interact as equals rather than occupying subordinate roles (Frazer, 2008: 238; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002: 174).

In this context, Wollstonecraft seeks to address the intricate challenges inherent in human relationships. She endeavors to reconcile two seemingly contradictory yet profoundly significant needs: on one hand, the familial requirements for affection, love, and security, and on the other, the principles of freedom, independence, and self-reliance. Wollstonecraft envisions a model where the emotional security and stability provided by a close-knit, interdependent family structure can coexist with a life characterized by personal autonomy and self-determination. Achieving this balance requires a committed, shared-responsibility relationship that supports mutual interdependence. However, realizing this ideal often demands substantial departures from traditional expectations and practices, which conventional family structures frequently fail to accommodate. To navigate this tension, Wollstonecraft advocates for incorporating the notion of 'higher friendship' into family dynamics. She contends that by transforming the marital relationship into one of high-level friendship, the family can become a source of emotional support while still allowing for individual independence. In this ideal, the friendship encompasses the love, protection, and support that women seek, without requiring personal sacrifice.

Mary Wollstonecraft's personal experiences, from her early childhood through to her death, are deeply intertwined with her philosophical scholarship, particularly concerning marital and family structures. She yearned for an ideal family life, a vision that is vividly reflected in her writings. Her personal journey was fraught with numerous disappointments and humiliations, accompanied by profound feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Understanding the depth of Wollstonecraft's philosophy requires a consideration of her own life, as her experiences had a profound impact on her philosophical perspectives.

Mary Wollstonecraft – Life and Experience

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was a British author, philosopher, and feminist activist who played a pioneering role in the development of feminist philosophy. Born as the second of seven children into a middle-class family in London, Wollstonecraft witnessed firsthand the abusive dynamics that a father could impose on a mother, which deeply shaped her views on the treatment and rights of women. Despite limited formal educational opportunities, she pursued self-directed learning, gaining a profound understanding of classical literature and philosophy. In 1787, Wollstonecraft published "Thoughts on the Education of Daughters," offering a thorough critique of the educational limitations imposed on women of her time. Her most influential work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), advocates for gender equality and argues that the subordination of women stems from their historical exclusion from educational opportunities. Wollstonecraft contends that access to education is essential for improving women's social status and advancing societal progress, advocating for equal educational opportunities for both sexes. Additionally, her novels, including "Mary: A Fiction" and "Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman," explore themes of female independence and societal constraints, further underscoring her commitment to challenging and reforming the restrictive norms of her era.

Wollstonecraft's personal life was marked by significant turmoil and instability. As a child, she endured profound dissatisfaction due to her father's behavior. In her youth, she entered into a romantic relationship with the artist Henry, and later cohabited with the businessman Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a daughter named Fanny. The dissolution of her relationship with Imlay was so distressing that it drove her to attempt suicide. Despite these hardships, Wollstonecraft later formed a romantic relationship with the philosopher William Godwin, whom she married in 1797 while pregnant. They had a daughter together, who tragically succumbed to an infection just eleven days after birth. Despite the brief span of her life, Wollstonecraft produced works of lasting influence that continue to inspire feminist activists and social reformers. After her death, Godwin published "Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," which, while documenting her life, also exposed inconsistencies and contradictions in her personal affairs, initially overshadowing her social contributions. Over time, however, Wollstonecraft's legacy in feminist thought and literature was firmly established. The correspondence between Wollstonecraft and Godwin, along with Godwin's reflections on

her, reveals her complex engagement with family life, her longing for love, and her dedication to her scholarly pursuits (Kelly, 1996: 201).

It can be posited that Mary Wollstonecraft's personal experiences profoundly shaped her insightful critiques of social structures, particularly concerning marriage and family dynamics. Her tumultuous breakup with Gilbert Imlay catalyzed a more critical perspective on marital and familial institutions. The subsequent relationship with William Godwin offered her fresh viewpoints, reinforcing her evolving beliefs. Wollstonecraft contended that marriage should embody ideals such as profound friendship, equality, independence, mutual respect, and support for each other's personal and intellectual growth. She maintained that transparency and adherence to these principles are essential for a successful and fulfilling marital relationship.

Wollstonecraft's insights and recommendations regarding marriage and family life

Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of marriage is intricately linked to her analysis of the responsibilities imposed upon women in eighteenth-century society and their resultant social standing. Her seminal work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, delves deeply into these themes. Wollstonecraft argues that marriage should be envisioned not as a commercial transaction but as a moral institution (Kendrick, 2016: 35). She offers a critical examination of motherhood, a role traditionally and biologically assigned to women, alongside the associated responsibilities. Wollstonecraft scrutinizes the preparation and social conditioning of women for these roles, highlighting how societal structures exploit and constrain their identities. She contends that while the roles of wives and mothers should be embraced naturally, societal norms have constructed a framework that enforces female dependency on men and reduces their roles to merely fulfilling male satisfaction (Williams, 2019: 17-23). This system has led women to focus disproportionately on their appearance, thereby impeding their authentic self-expression and intellectual development. According to Wollstonecraft, the constraints imposed by these roles result in psychological impoverishment and potentially harmful behaviors. She advocates for a transformative approach, suggesting that women engaged in education and the cultivation of efficiency are better positioned to balance their responsibilities. Such engagement would not only enhance their roles within the family but also enable them to make substantive contributions to broader societal activities (Berges, 2013: 148; Wolfson, 2023: 125).

Men who grow up under societal norms that impose specific roles on women may come to expect that their wives should conform to idealized notions of service and familial devotion. Often, women enter marriage not out of personal choice but due to societal pressures and economic necessity. They marry to secure social status and financial stability, while their opportunities for independent achievement and self-fulfillment remain severely constrained. Conversely, men typically gain social standing and autonomy through careers, political involvement, and personal property. Men frequently prefer women who outwardly conform to traditional expectations, offering comfort and deference, while independent thought and intellectual engagement are undervalued. This dynamic perpetuates the societal absurdity of prescribing specific traits for women, thereby reinforcing their dependence on their husband's shadow. In this context, society tends to perceive the wife as an extension of the husband rather than as an autonomous individual with her own identity and independence. This framework fosters conditions of oppression within marital relationships. Despite these constraints, Mary Wollstonecraft argue rationality and morality are inherent human qualities. Relationships founded on superficial appearances and marked by hypocrisy are inherently unstable. The patriarchal social structure has been systematically designed to restrict women's opportunities for advancement (Kerry, 2015: 28). Therefore, it is imperative for women to pursue educational opportunities to attain their own status and autonomy.

Mary Wollstonecraft contends that within a patriarchal framework, it is fundamentally impossible for women to lead lives that reflect their true capabilities and inherent nature. She proposes addressing this issue by reexamining the concept of friendship, a subject that has been a central theme in philosophical discourse since antiquity. Wollstonecraft advocates for the transformation of marital relationships to embody the principles of high-level friendship, suggesting that such an approach would enhance societal well-being. By elevating family life—considered the cornerstone of social organization—to a higher standard, the quality of societal interactions could be significantly improved. In critiquing the prevailing inequalities inherent in her era's conception of marriage, Wollstonecraft challenges the prevailing views, including those of philosophers such as Rousseau, who argued that women's roles should be limited to serving men and that their education should be oriented towards this end (Kendrick, 2016: 43). She advocates for a fundamental reformation that enables women to realize their full potential and participate more equitably in both societal and familial spheres.

Mary Wollstonecraft emphasizes the need to address the fundamental issues within marriage and the challenges women encounter in family life by advocating for a transformation of marriage into a relationship grounded in authentic friendship. She posits that traditional relationships, often based on social expectations and status, should be replaced by those characterized by mutual respect and companionship. Such a paradigm shift would enable couples—united by genuine regard and engagement—to elevate the quality of family life to a higher standard. Wollstonecraft argues that women are better positioned to fulfill their roles as devoted wives and mothers when they are not constrained by superficial or manipulative means. This reformation would also compel men to adopt responsible behaviors and eschew actions that undermine the integrity of relationships and marriages. Women, she suggests, should focus on engaging in meaningful discourse to address their needs rationally, rather than seeking validation from their husbands or resorting to transient solutions. By fostering relationships founded on sincere companionship and mature friendship, rather than superficial connections, both women and their partners can cultivate a more honorable and satisfying family life. This approach aims to enhance the overall quality and integrity of familial relationships.

When women are granted access to higher education, encouraged to engage in rational thought, and allowed to exercise greater independence, their marital lives can experience substantial enhancement, reflecting the qualities of friendship that are valued in contemporary society. In such a context, both partners in a marriage are likely to collaborate more effectively, overcoming feelings of suspicion, jealousy, pride, or inferiority, thereby fostering a life characterized by peace and mutual contentment. This improved dynamic extends beyond the family unit, enabling individuals to contribute meaningfully to society at large. Traditional concepts of friendship highlight those relationships in which both spouses value each other's moral virtues and behaviors—rather than superficial attributes such as beauty, wealth, and social status—are more likely to endure. Additionally, the increased capacity for rational thought and autonomy enables women to consider divorce as a legitimate option, facilitating their full participation in social spheres and ensuring appropriate recognition for their contributions. This autonomy also empowers women to leave unsuitable marriages, liberating them from the necessity of compromising their personal desires and aspirations in deference to societal expectations.

CONCLUSION

Divorce has become a prominent feature of contemporary social transformation; however, preserving the family unit as a fundamental pillar of the social structure remains imperative. In evaluating whether Aristotle's principles of high-level friendship, as initiated by Mary Wollstonecraft, can be applied to modern marital relationships to address issues such as divorce, it is apparent that integrating the framework of high-level friendship / companionate marriage into marriage is both desirable and significant. High-level friendships are characterized by egalitarianism, mutual admiration, shared enjoyment, a commitment to each other's growth, engaging in thoughtful dialogue, and upholding transparency and honesty. These qualities are essential for individuals to incorporate into their familial relationships in the modern context. Relationships grounded in mutual trust and deep affection are more likely to remain stable over time. When partners view each other as equals, the dynamics of deceit and diminished respect are eliminated, preventing one partner from undermining the other. Consequently, Wollstonecraft envisions a family structure where women are free from violence, not subordinated, treated as equals, and granted the autonomy to act independently.

In contemporary society, it is essential for men to move beyond outdated expectations of female obedience, while women who achieve social and economic security through their own efforts should not be required to do so by subordinating themselves to their husbands. This evolution embodies one of the highest virtues of a moral man. Equally important is the need to approach marriage with a high degree of camaraderie and mutual respect. Wollstonecraft critiques Aristotle's moral framework as insufficient, arguing that true moral superiority for men can only be attained through fostering gender-neutral participation in high-level friendships. Moreover, she asserts that men have a fundamental responsibility to enhance the status of women within lower strata of the social hierarchy, contending that such actions are crucial for authentic moral advancement of men.

In the contemporary social landscape, the significant empowerment and opportunities available to women necessitate that men acknowledge and treat women as emotionally and intellectually equals. Women should unequivocally reject any form of unequal treatment, control, or abuse. Failure by men to recognize and address this evolving dynamic can result in marital discord and, ultimately, divorce. Thus, mutual trust, respect, shared responsibilities, and decision-making through informed dialogue have become

indispensable. When women exhibit the attributes of high-level friendship and expect their spouses to do likewise, the absence of these qualities can lead to disappointment and psychological distress, making divorce a plausible option. Aristotle's observations on the dissolution of friendships underscore this concept: high-level friendships cannot endure if one party exhibits irreparable negative traits or fails to celebrate the other's successes while pursuing personal gain. Applying this perspective to marital relationships, it is evident that the factors contributing to the breakdown of friendships similarly pertain to marital dissolution. Consequently, both partners must uphold high ethical standards and nurture a harmonious family life, benefiting both individuals and society as a whole.

To translate Wollstonecraft's ideals into practical solutions, several steps can be taken at the societal, educational, and policy levels:

1. **Educational Reforms**: Introducing Wollstonecraft's philosophy into educational curricula can foster a new generation of individuals who value egalitarian relationships. Courses on ethics, gender studies, and philosophy should highlight the importance of equality and mutual respect within marriage, challenging outdated patriarchal notions of gender roles.

2. **Policy Changes**: Governments and institutions should promote policies that support equitable marriages. Legal frameworks could incentivize premarital counseling that emphasizes equality and the principles of friendship within marriage. Furthermore, divorce laws could be revisited to encourage mediation that aligns with Wollstonecraft's ideals, ensuring that both partners enter into and exit relationships on fair terms.

3. **Cultural Shifts**: Society must move away from viewing divorce solely as a failure, and instead embrace it as an opportunity for personal growth when relationships are no longer conducive to mutual respect and development. Media and public discourse should champion the idea of companionate marriage, celebrating partnerships that exemplify Wollstonecraft's vision of equality, rather than reinforcing outdated gender roles.

By incorporating Wollstonecraft's principles into modern discourse on marriage, society can begin to reverse the rising trend of divorce. Her model of marriage, based on high-level friendship, offers a sustainable framework that balances personal autonomy with the shared responsibilities of marital life. This egalitarian approach not only preserves the integrity of family structures but also empowers individuals to flourish within their relationships, thus promoting both individual fulfillment and social harmony.

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