



ISSN: 1812-0512 (Print) 2790-346X (online)

Wasit Journal for Human Sciences

Available online at: <https://wjfh.uowasit.edu.iq>



Muna Abdulkadhim Nima
Dept. of English- College of
Languages- University of
Baghdad

* **Corresponding Author**

Email:

mona.neima@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Keywords:

Pedagogy, women's
education, Rousseau, Emile,
feminism

Article history:

Received: 2024-12-01

Accepted: 2025-01-02

Available online:2025-02-01



The Role of Women's Education in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Emile

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Jean-Jacques Rousseau's novel Emile (1763), which provided an ideal system of women's education in France and Europe. Shortly after its publication, Emile was banned partly because of its political and religious contents and partly due to its controversial ideas on women and their status in male-dominated societies. This paper questions Rousseau's philosophy of the perfect educational system intended to form a blueprint for envisioning a better future for both men and women. I contend that 'the ideal' women's education, as the book describes it, fails to place the female anywhere other than being a wife or a mother, creating a gender-biased ideal society where intellectual endeavors, particularly for women, are considered trivial or even inappropriate. As the research proceeds, it shows how the female protagonist's right to education underlines another agenda to fulfill her duties toward the male character, regarding women's intellectual aspirations as inconsistent with conventional social norms.

© 2025 wjfh.Wasit University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss1/Pt1.834>

دور تعليم المرأة في رواية إميل لجان جاك روسو

م.د منى عبد الكاظم نعمة
قسم اللغة الانجليزية - كلية اللغات
جامعة بغداد

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية رواية إميل (1763) للكاتب جان جاك روسو التي قدمت نظامًا يعد مثاليًا لتعليم النساء في فرنسا وأوروبا. وقد تم حضر الرواية بعد فترة وجيزة من نشرها بسبب محتواها السياسي والديني وكذلك بسبب أفكارها المثيرة للجدل حول النساء ومكانتهن في المجتمعات التي يهيمن عليها الذكور. يطرح البحث مشكلة النظام التعليمي المثالي في فلسفة روسو والتي تهدف إلى رؤية مستقبلية أفضل للرجال والنساء على حد سواء ويناقش مبدأ تعليم النساء 'المثالي' كما يصفه الكتاب والذي لا يمنح للأنتى أي منزلة أخرى سوى أنها زوجة أو أم؛ مما يخلق بيئة متحيزة بين الجنسين حيث تعتبر المساعي الفكرية، وخاصة بالنسبة للنساء، غير مناسبة وعديمة الجدوى. يستنتج البحث أن التأكيد على تعليم بطلة الرواية ماهو إلا برنامج أخرى للوفاء بواجباتها تجاه البطل، كما أن التطلعات الفكرية للنساء تتعارض مع المعايير الاجتماعية التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التربية، تعليم المرأة، روسو، رواية إميل، النسوية

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) philosophical and political writings greatly influenced Western philosophy, especially in France. *Emile* (1762) was once considered a “gospel” and “a pedagogic romance” because of its impact in Europe, where many reformers and philosophers adopted his ideas in education (Worthington, 1889, p.1). However, upon its publication, the half-novel, half-treatise caused controversy due to the church's announcement of it as being “dangerous,” “mischievous,” and “heretical” (p. 3). The archbishop disapproved of the book for containing a detestable belief designed to dismantle basic principles and jeopardize the core beliefs of Christianity. Moreover, he considered its proposed educational plan unsuitable for individuals, exposing its author to the public as unfaithful and dishonest. Because of these serious accusations, Rousseau had to flee Paris, where the parliament ordered his arrest, and his book, *Emile*, was set on fire. As a fugitive, Rousseau did not find a secure hideout in many cities like Berne and Geneva (Worthington, 1889, p. 2). Unexpectedly, the negative reception of the novel by well-known public figures helped draw the public's eye toward it, showing positive outcomes in European societies. For example, physical education gained popularity, noblemen were interested in mastering different trades, similar to the novel's fictional students, and mothers were convinced to care for their infants instead of hiring nurses (p. 3).

It is worth mentioning that when the novel appeared in the 18th century, some upper- and middle-class families named their children after Sophie and Emile because those families endorsed many of Rousseau's educational practices that they found appealing (Fuchs, R., & Thompson, 2004, p. 87).

Despite being widely received and read, critics have both praised and criticized Rousseau's *Emile* in terms of education. For example, Katharine J. Hamerton (2009) draws a connection between Rousseau's opinions on women's preferences and the cultural backdrop of the mid-18th century. She emphasizes how Rousseau's thoughts transformed the perception of feminine taste, relocating it to the domestic rather than the public sphere. While Griffiths (2014) highlights the significance of gender

dynamics and disparities in comprehending Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Rousseau's *Emile*, Veena Poonacha (2016) compares the educational beliefs of both writers in terms of gender and education, contrasting Rousseau's concepts of patriarchal systems with Wollstonecraft's theories of women's rights and societal transformation. Gallagher (2019) examines the effect of politics, nature, and society on Rousseau's concept of education, describing women's education as "a prison of vanity" because it self-objectifies their worth to merely looks and appeal.

This research shows how Rousseau's educational system failed to relocate unmarried women to the promised ideal society while promising the married ones a well-educated future that should not make them dream of a life outside their prescribed domestic roles. Rousseau's indulgence in providing the ideal educational system for men and women did not prevent him from overlooking the fact that some of those women, willingly or unwillingly, might refrain from marrying or having children. As a result, their lifelong preparation to fit into household life would be in vain, not to mention that they would be unqualified to explore outdoor activities or pursue higher studies.

Emile is divided into five books that trace the life and education of an orphan named Emile. The first three books trace the upbringing of the child, who is reared by a tutor who narrates the story, while the fourth book follows the protagonist's adolescent years. The fifth book, which is the main concern of this research, deals with Emile's education, from the age of twenty to twenty-five, and introduces Sophie, Emile's future wife, focusing mainly on the ideal education to prepare her for this marriage.

In order to draw the perfect image of this exemplary wife, Rousseau assigned Sophie the following desirable traits: she is clever, vigorous, healthy, reserved, modest, virtuous, skillful in flirting, and passionate about adornment and house chores. Some of these characteristics arise during childhood, while others are present at birth (Rousseau, 1763/1892, pp. 260-268). As the book proceeds, Rousseau focuses on

implementing and nourishing these traits in Sophie in accordance with her family's needs.

Discussion

In *Emile*, Book Five begins with establishing “the law of Nature,” as Rousseau puts it, which highlights the different roles assigned to both men and women based on their nature. Men should be dynamic and possess power, while women must be submissive and feeble because they are “specially constituted to please” men. (1763/1892, p. 260). Accordingly, and by this law of nature, women's educational system is designed to meet men's needs, to “please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, and to make life agreeable and sweet to them” (1763/1892, p. 263). While Rousseau's ideas on education may seem progressive for his time¹, his thoughts on women's education were still deeply rooted in the patriarchal ideals of Greek philosophers. For him, in an ideal society “in which no one was to be a servant of anyone else or lesser than anyone else, women would not be counted” (Nye, 1989, p. 8). Rousseau shares the ancient thinkers' belief that women, by nature, are the weaker sex². Thus, Sophie must compensate for this fault by mastering certain skills in the art of coquette. Because women are good observers, Sophie should learn how to lure Emile by mastering gestures, appearances, actions, and speech to maintain sexual passion during the marriage (Rousseau, 1763/1892, pp. 281-282). On the other hand, Emile must also possess appealing qualities like good manners and taste as well as experience in agriculture and trade.

¹ A century later, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley valued Rousseau's contribution to education and the preservation of family dynamics as she argued that responsible parents would “readily acknowledge the deepest obligations to the author of ‘Emile’” (163). Moreover, John Darling considered Rousseau a “progressive instrumentalist” for engaging children's education with progressive pedagogy like critical thinking and problem-solving. (1993, p.35).

² Though reaching different conclusions, both Aristotle and Plato adjusted women's social rules based on their weak “nature.” Aristotle regarded men as superior and women as inferior; therefore, one is the ruler and the other the subject. See (Smith, 1983, pp. 467-469). It is worth mentioning that this negative view of women persists to this day, where patriarchy becomes inseparable from the fabric of society. Women still face many challenges that obstruct their capability to fulfill their biological and social roles (Abdulwahhab & Ziad, 2024, pp. 282-283).

He must also be physically attractive and in good shape, and he must treat Sophie respectfully and faithfully (1763/1892, p. 337).

While such qualities seem to be desirable for any educational system, the main problem lies, one may suggest, in placing the responsibility of sustaining a good and healthy marriage on women. Rousseau states that Emile, despite being eloquent and well-educated, “speaks little, because he does not care to occupy the attention of others,” whereas Sophie’s task is not only to attain Emile’s attention, but also to make herself “acquainted with him, and him acquainted with” her (Rousseau, 1763/1892, p. 243, 298). There is an interplay here between a woman’s role as being outspoken and demanding and her being submissive and shy.

Some critics argued in favor of this interplay as a necessity for Emile and Sophie to continue their sexual passion during marriage. Jonas (2016), for example, verifies that Sophie’s simultaneous act of appearing physically weak and vulnerable while also exhibiting moral strength and unwavering integrity captivates Emile both sexually and morally and draws him fondly towards her. It is to women alone that such a combination is possible and desirable; only a properly educated woman has the psychological and moral wherewithal to strike this balance (pp.157-158).

From a feminist perspective, Gallagher (2019) describes this portrayal of women’s education as “both Marxist and utilitarian in implication, “the former through their objectification and alienation, the latter by defining women in terms of their means” (p. 91). Sophie’s education is tailored, so to speak, to suit Emile’s needs; dolls and jewelry are given to the young Sophie to promote recognition of being attractive to men. Moreover, the objective of her education is to stress that “almost all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance; but as to holding the needle, they always learn this willingly” (Rousseau, 1763/1892, p. 299).

Regarding reason and emotions, Rousseau posits a clear distinction between the education of boys and girls. He believes that the “education of girls is not a matter of forming their minds... Their business is to regulate their hearts and to correct their actions.” (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 287). While Emile’s schooling focuses on

cultivating rationality and self-reliance, Sophie's education is designed to manage her feelings and shape her actions in line with social expectations. A woman's "business" is to control her emotions and "correct" her social behavior; therefore, she does not have to be engaged in social life and intellectual pursuits. This implies that women's functions focus mainly on domestic responsibilities, whereas men are trained for a more wide-ranging social role.

There is a distinction between emotions and reason; Rousseau's focus on cultivating the "heart of a woman... for it is by the heart alone that she will know how to love" reflects Rousseau's understanding of women as inherently emotional individuals whose purpose and value in society are determined by their capacity to cultivate emotional attachment and love (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 295). Developing emotional intelligence is crucial for women's satisfaction, yet it constrains their participation in the realm of logic and societal involvement, a sphere Rousseau believes is reserved only for men (Popiel, 2008, p. 110).

In her examination of the correspondence between Rousseau and Henriette, an educated single French woman, Trouille (1991) proposes "the failings of Rousseau's teachings on women" (p. 455). The letters convey Henriette's frustration with Rousseau's rigid system because she does not fit into the assigned roles of being a mother or a wife. She wrote that she replaced women's domestic chores with men's "tastes, activities, way of thinking, and social behavior. I tried to rid myself of women's problems and petty concerns, and above all of that coquettish air that signals a desire to please" (as quoted in Trouille, 1991, p. 456). Henriette did not adopt a feminist approach to defy Rousseau's educational system; she was a woman who could not marry due to the lack of dowry and her father's bankruptcy. In her mid-thirties, she had to give up her lifelong dream of having a husband and children. Henriette could be seen as the voice of many women whose lives were centered around the same dream as they grew up, yet they could not achieve it. Indulging them in the same domestic tasks would only heighten their awareness of solitude and marginalization.

Placing women in a subservient position because they are “made to please, and to be loved” highlights the primary focus on their education to rely on men’s affection with less concern for enhancing their intellect (Rousseau, 1762/1979, p. 295). The main role of women is to experience love and to reciprocate it. Rousseau gives the reason behind this negligence of women’s intellectual pursuits as follows:

Which gives you a better opinion of a woman as you enter her room, which makes you approach her with the greater respect: to see her occupied with the duties of her sex, with her household cares, the garments of her children lying around her; or, to find her writing verses on her dressing-table, surrounded with all sorts of pamphlets and sheets of note-paper in every variety of color? If all the men in the world were sensible, every girl of letters would remain unmarried all her life. (Rousseau, 1763/1892, p. 303)

The text suggests that an intellectual pursuit is the main obstacle to a woman’s goal (to get married). However, intellectual endeavors were deemed unsuitable for women even after confining them to household duties. Given that men and women are naturally different, “either in character or in the constitution,” Rousseau concludes that they must not receive “the same education” (p.261). If educated women were seen as a challenge to conventional social norms, why would Rousseau educate them in the first place? It is because marriage and household life are viewed as the height of a woman's existence. The ‘fair’ educational opportunities for both men and women are unequal because they aim to prepare them for domestic and public spheres, respectively.

This research has examined Rousseau’s views on the educational system designed for his fictitious characters, Emile and Sophie, highlighting the various models of independence and compliance introduced to males and females, respectively. In his book *Emile*, Rousseau offers a gender-focused perspective on education that differentiates men's functions from women's. He stresses that women should be educated to fulfill their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

Conclusion

In *Emile*, Rousseau combines elements of a novel and a treatise to explore the creation of an ideal educational system for citizens, aiming for a utopian society. The book follows the development of the fictional character Emile from childhood to adulthood. Although Rousseau's ideas on education may appear modern for his era, his beliefs about women's education were still heavily influenced by the patriarchal principles of Greek philosophers. In discussing the concept of the perfect society, Rousseau echoes Plato's belief in the inherent physical inferiority of women to men (Nye, 1989, p. 6). Despite acknowledging that Plato's *The Republic* was "the finest work on education ever written," Rousseau dismisses its advocacy of "the same employments, [and] the same duties" of men and women (Rousseau, 1762/1979, pp. 6, 260).

Rousseau emphasizes the crucial role of the educational system in shaping an ideal virtual society. However, as the research has shown, the system's 'perfect' implementation prohibits females from going beyond their socially prescribed roles as wives and mothers.

We can summarize Rousseau's philosophy of women's education as one that follows the "law of Nature," as he puts it. It considers women as beings derived by their emotions rather than reason, and thus the need to control them. They should not pursue higher studies as they must always be inferior to their spouses. Women scholars must remain single or excluded from Rousseau's ideal society. However, what Rousseau seems to overlook is the individualistic differences in the same sex, for example, the fact that some women willingly refrain from being pursued for marriage or show a lack of interest in domestic life concentrating on their domestic and ethical obligations. Rousseau supports a gentle and passive education for women that corresponds with their assumed role as nurturers.

References

Abdulwahhab Ismail, Reem & Ziad Muhammad, Hind (2024). The Problems that Face Women in Supporting Family and Society: An Analytical Study. *Journal of*

Wasit for Human Sciences, 20(3), 290

273. <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol20.Iss3.590>

Darling, John (1993). Rousseau as progressive instrumentalist. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27 (1):27–39.

Fuchs, R., & Thompson, V. E. (2004). *Women in nineteenth-century Europe*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gallagher, K. M. (2019). From Girls to Slaves: Rousseau, Gendered Education and the Prison of Vanity. *Studies in Linguistics and Literature*, 3(1), 84-94.

Griffiths, M. (2014). Educational relationships: Rousseau, Wollstonecraft and social justice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(2), 339-354.

Jonas, M. E. (2016). Rousseau on sex-roles, education and happiness. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 35, 145-161.

Hamerton, K. J. (2009). Rousseau and the New Domestic Art of Women's Taste. In *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* (Vol. 37). Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library.

Nye, Andrea (1989). *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*. Routledge.

Poonacha, Veena (2016). Framing gender identities in education philosophy: Jean Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(3), 415-436.

Popiel, J. J. (2008). *Rousseau's daughters: domesticity, education, and autonomy in modern France*. UPNE.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1892). *Rousseau's Émile; or, Treatise on Education* (W. H. Payne, Trans.). D. Appleton and Co. (Original work published 1763).

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft (1840). *Lives of the Most Eminent French Writers*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard.

Smith, N. D. (1983). Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 21(4), 467–478.

Trouille, M. (1991). The Failings of Rousseau's Ideals of Domesticity and Sensibility. *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 24(4), 451-483.

Worthington, Eleanor. Trans. and intro. (1889). *Émile; Or, Concerning Education: Extracts Containing the Principal Elements of Pedagogy Found in the First Three Books*. DC Heath & Company.

