

From Subjugation to Subjection: A Study of J.S. Mill's Feminist Text.

Dr. Chander Mohan

Assistant Professor Department of English Pt. C.L. Sharma Govt. College, Karnal

"Feminism" is not a new concept but the context in which it existed in the past has multiplied by passing through various levels of visions and revisions. It is a movement a revolution and an ideology. Women were considered inferior and incapable of doing anything rational or intellectual. They shouldered the responsibilities of wives and mothers always sacrificing their needs and desires, hankering for mental as well as physical freedom. They were attributed with the traits like emotional, weak, timid, passive and conventional. They were subjugated physically, economically and politically.

Contemporary Indian society is still structured to a patriarchal, male dominated system. A woman exists inside the boundaries of married life and motherhood. She exists only in a male-defined and male-related context. The social condition of women worsened over the centuries and women still struggle to free themselves from the bondage of gender, caste and class.

Feminism is a social and cultural movement. It is used with reference to women's equality in the society. It envisages the ideal phenomenon in which both the sexes can survive happily. A number of critics scholars and intellectual have benefited us by speaking in favour of the feminism. It has not been a hot issue of discussion for the writer's of the twentieth century literature only, but the writers of past centuries have also tried their best to bring this marginalized issue into limelight. J.S. Mill is such a kind of prolific writer who produced his

feminist text entitled "The Subjection of Women". I will focus in this article on a textual and contextual analysis of Mill's arguments which influence the real identity and existing identity of women. It may best be read and understood not only as a social, practical and political essay but as a wonderful real, and philosophical treatise.

J.S. Mill, a great scholar of visionary traits was a realist who perceived that the improvement of mankind could only come through giving a space to women to prove their worth socially, economically, culturally and politically. Mill was a firm supporter of women's rights. He published his first piece of feminist argument, an article attacking double standards in *The Westminster Review* at the age of eighteen. He began writing "The Subjection of Women" in 1860, yet, he did not publish it until 1869. During the period from 1865 to 1868, Mill was an M.P. in British House of Commons. Here he made a motion for granting suffrage to women.

The essay highlights a progressive theory of establishing equality for women in society. It is totally based on the basic idea of identity crisis in women. Mill struggles



hard to make women aware with their rights and duties on one hand and with their values and place in the society on the other hand. He feels that the position of women is not that of dependent identity but an independent one. He bitterly attacks the conventions that assign women a secondary place. He gives due emphasis to the mode of existence in which a woman is free of dependence syndrome. He has divided his essay into four major chapters. Well connected with each other with the single thread of 'equality' Mill in the first chapter sets forth a progressive theory of social, legal and cultural equality for women in society. He begins emphatically by giving the object of the essay

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality.(1)

Mill views that social and legal conditions restrict the liberty of women. It can be replaced by a principle of perfect equality which is difficult to establish because of the different opinion of the people which is deeply rooted in feelings. Therefore, resistance to changing this is almost impossible because it is based on feelings not on reason, so that as each objection is uprooted by rational argument, it always seems as if there is some deeper ground, which the arguments do not reach. He asserts that the present system is based on unverified theory which is not the result of hypothesis or deliberation, but simply an example of the way laws sanction existing states of affairs. In primitive times women's greater physical weakness put them in bondage to men, and this enslavement became regularized between

masters and slaves. But while the slavery of men has been abolished, women's which is ubiquitous has merely been softened and for them the law of the strongest continues.

The second chapter is chiefly concerned with the laws of marriage contract. Originally women were taken up by force, or regularly sold by their father to the husband at his own will and pleasure. She could invoke no law against him. She was the actual bond-servant of her husband. She has no right over her children. If she leaves her husband she can take nothing with her, neither her children, nor anything which is rightfully her own Mill seems to be very apt when he says, "If married life were all that it might be expected to be, looking to the laws alone, society would be a hell upon earth."(3 I)

The institution to be defended may be slavery, political absolutism, or the absolutism of the head of the family we should always judge it from its best instances. The tie of affection and obligation to a wife and children is very strong with those whose general social feelings are strong. There is another side of the question also. According to wife if she cannot effectively resist, she can at least retaliate and make the man's life extremely uncomfortable, and by that power is able to carry many points to prevail in. But this instrument of self-protection has the fatal defect and it is in favour of least deserving dependents. The amiable cannot use such an instrument.

In the view of Mill there are some other ways to temper the corrupting effects of the power and make it compatible. General tendencies of the situation should be



modified. The growth of personal affection with the passage of time should be increased. Their common interest in children, the real importance of the wife to his daily comforts and enjoyment should be emphasized. Moreover, the value he consequently attaches to her, on his personal account, should be felt more deeply. This feeling lays the foundation of carrying perfect relationship for her on her own. Through these various means, the wife frequently exercises even too much power over the man.

In the third chapter Mill explains the equality of women and their approach to all the functions and occupations. This is again in the form of the monopoly of the stronger sex, because the generality of the male sex cannot tolerate the idea of living with an equal. This is a kind of injustice because we have excluded half of the people from the greater number of lucrative occupations and from almost all high social functions which have been kept preserved for the exclusive benefit of males. In the last two centuries the disabilities of women, it was believed, were grounded on their inferior mental capacity. The reason was not women's unfitness but the interest of the society, or in other words, the interest of man. In the present day when anything is forbidden to women, it is believed that they are in capable of doing it.

We should not assume that a smaller number of women than of men are fit for occupations and functions of the highest intellectual character. The reality is that "many women have proved themselves capable of everything, perhaps without a single exception which is done by men, and of doing it successfully and creditably."(49)

Women should be admissible to all other

occupations. Women require the suffrage as their guarantee of just and equal consideration. In accordance with the fitness women should hold offices or practice professions involving important public responsibilities. There are psychological considerations also which show that any of the mental differences supposed to exist between men and women are but the natural effect of the difference in their education and circumstances. We cannot infer that a women should be a Homer or an Aristotle, or a women can be Elizabeth or Queen Victoria. They had been because they had inherited the throne. A woman can do anything. She can write the plays of Shakespeare, or compose all the operas of Mozart. Women have been eminent rulers of mankind. French history counts two kings, Charles VIII and Lovis IX who have voluntarily given the direction of affairs to their mother and sister respectively.

The fourth chapter begins with two important questions "What good are we to expect from the changes proposed in our customs and institutions? Would mankind be at all better off if women were free?" (78) It is very interesting to exercise our brain here sin affirmation to ascertain the fact that change in our outlook and social system is possible on a wider scale and it has always ameliorated the general tendencies of the masses. If a boy thinks that by the mere fact of being born a male, he is by right, the superior of all, and he thinks that a woman cannot be equal in ability and judgment to him. He believes that he is entitled to command and she is bound to obey. "And men of the cultivated classes are often not aware how deeply it sinks into the immense majority of male minds" (79). When the feeling of being raised above the whole of



the other sex is combined into personal authority over one individual among them, then it becomes worse. This feeling should be abolished from the beginning to make a change in the existing system of the society. It is very sad that all that education and civilization are doing to efface the influences on character of the law of the force, and replace them by those of justice, remains merely on the surface. The principle in modern movement in morals and politics, is that conduct and conduct alone entitles respect, that not what men are, but what they do constitutes their claim to difference. We should realize that merit and not birth, is the only rightful claim to power and authority. If the child is trained in this way, and when he becomes old, there would be a chance that he would not depart from it.

The second benefit to be expected from giving to women the opportunity of free use of their faculties, by leaving them the free choice of their employment, and opening to them the same field of occupation and the same prizes and encouragements as to other human beings, would be that of doubling the mass of mental facilities available for the higher services of humanity. The greater accession to the intellectual power of the species can be obtained through the better and more complete intellectual education to women. Women should be brought up equally, capable of understanding business, public affairs and the higher matter of speculation with men in the same class of society. They should be given education to the level of that of men. They should not be given all the wider subjects of thought and action which men think are suitable to them only. This would alone affect the immense expansion of the facilities of

women, as well as enlargement of the range of their moral sentiments.

Also sufficient importance should be given to the opinion of women in all spheres of life as it would be more beneficial. The influence of mothers on the early character of their sons have in all times been important agencies in the formation of character and have determined some of the chief steps in the progress of civilization. The moral influence of women has also been very valuable. It makes the general human nature more soft and determines certain qualities of men. For example, courage and military values generally, have at all times been greatly indebted to the desire which men felt of being admired by women. From the combination of two kinds of moral influences thus exercised by women, arose the spirit of chivalry. "The chivalrous ideal", says Mill, "is the acme of the influences of women's sentiments on the moral cultivation of mankind and if women are to remain in the subordinate situation, it were greatly to be lamented that the chivalrous standard should have passed away."

Thus we see that the essay contains Mill's feminist thoughts and his purpose in "The Subjection of Women" is to promote equality between the sexes, and marital friendship between husband and wife. Women should not be denied the opportunity to establish themselves outside the home as equals with men. He emphasizes the contribution of shared experiences for the fulfillment of a common sensibility. We should try to know a woman's nature, economic need and her social necessities. Mill observes that it is important to promote women's equality independence and dignity and they should be given the same educational and employment

opportunities as men. Mill encouraged women to make themselves visible to the general public and to prove their worth in all fair field of competition. Mill claimed for women's suffrage. Throughout this feminist text Mill asserts his support for the notion that women should be given educational and career opportunities, otherwise it would be a kind of flagrant social injustice.

Work Cited:

- [1.] Clara Nubile *The Danger of Gender*, Sarup and Sons, New Delhi. Devi, Rameshwari, *Feminism in the World.*, Book Enclave, Jaipur, 2004. Elizabeth S. Smith, "John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*: a re-examination."(Source Net.)