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# The Patron Saint of Feminism: J. S. Mill on Women with Reference to ‘The Subjection of Women’

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*Abstract: Despite the recurring feminist onslaught targeting the canon of political philosophy due to the philosophers’ unrelenting refusal to acknowledge women’s rights owing to the former’s unwavering advocacy of the naturalness of gender-based differences, the paper argues that such a uniformly antagonistic attitude is only self-defeating. Thus, this paper has been written with the urgent requisite of reading and re-reading philosophical texts by employing what Jacques Derrida would understand as a double mode of reading, and taking into account Quentin Skinner’s emphasis on the need to take into account the stated intention of the author. With these methodological concerns, the paper undertakes a nuanced textual analysis of John Stuart Mill’s ‘The Subjection of Women’ (1869), providing an understanding of it in a fairly intelligible manner. The paper argues that Mills’s work sets a precedent for feminist foundational thought, not merely in his attempts to deconstruct the assumed inferiority of women as socially constructed—paralleling the concerns voiced by early figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft—but specifically in his incessant emphasis on the work being posthumously authored by his wife, Harriet Taylor.*

*Keywords: Mill, Women, Feminism, Equality, Social Conditioning.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The great tradition of political philosophy consists, generally speaking of, of writings by men, for men, and about men”, observes Susan Okin. For centuries, male theorists in the field of political philosophy, have marginalized women by placing them outside the public or the civic sphere in which men move and act politically. A common perception that is mostly shared by feminists is that men have accorded women fewer rights and obligations than what full-fledged citizens deserve and all this was done in the name of protecting women and children. Women were considered unworthy of any kind of theoretical treatment and thus they rested out of the purview of most political theorists. However certain male figures such as John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, and Jeremy Bentham have been included in the feminist pantheon. In this



essay, I shall be exploring the thoughts of Mill on women and views which were quite ahead of their times, concerning Mill's "Subjection of Women."

Born on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1806 in London, Mill was the eldest of the nine children of James and Harriet Mill. He is one of the few nineteenth-century intellectuals who have shaped the political opinions of contemporary British society and also transformed the then-existing framework of understanding liberty, through his major work "On Liberty". His works were translated into many European languages. At the peak of his career however, he suddenly fell from grace most notably because of his "Subjection of Women", which was quite revolutionary in the sense that it advocated perfect equality between men and women, and the society of his times was deeply entrenched into the ideas of patriarchy that it received such views with much criticism. Also, 'intimate relations', a theme discussed by Mill in the work, was not at all considered appropriate to be discussed on a public forum.

James Mill, being a close disciple of Jeremy Bentham, put Mill into a strict educational regime believing that given the right combination of rewards and punishment, even the dullest boy could become an important asset to society. His father held great contempt for passions and emotions and thus we could well predict that Mill had had a very "passionless childhood" it becomes quite a paradox that given such an upbringing, how did Mill end up advocating equality between the sexes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? He suffered from a nervous breakdown at the age of 20, from which he recovered by taking recourse to romantic poems, which his father heavily disapproved of. From then on he ceased to be his father's intellectual clone. The breakdown made him declare independence from his father if interpreted psychoanalytically. Bruce Mazlish had done a psychoanalytical interpretation of Mill's *On Liberty* which he claims is more of a declaration of personal freedom rather than an account of political work. His insight into the freedom of women was accomplished with help of Harriet Taylor, who made him achieve a certain degree of separation from his father as well as helped him to identify with women.

The political context which further inspired him to explore women's freedom was the emerging women's movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Speaking of the movement in England, it was led by the mother-daughter team of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, the Englishwomen engaged in violence, civil disobedience, street fighting, and hunger strikes. Distancing himself from such extremists, he did publish an article "The Enfranchisement of Women", and having been elected to the House of Commons in 1865, he submitted a petition advocating enfranchisement for women.

### **The Subjection of Women: A Nuanced Examination**

Mill's *Subjection of Women* is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, he gives his most fundamental argument that the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong and is one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, nor disability on the other. Thus he argues against the romanticism and the sentimentalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that linked feminine nature with whatever it saw in women. He claims that the present system of women's subordination to men is entirely based on a theory with no trials. And also the adoption of such a system of inequality was never the result of deliberation but was the result of the fact

that since the inception of society, women had been always found in bondage to men, owing to the value attached to them by men, combined by her inferiority in muscular strength.

He gives a social scientific method to solve this problem: the empirical test or a laissez-faire experiment. He suggests the trying of equality of women to see how it works in practice. But it was faced with certain practical limitations- who will decide whether women are good as men, and also the issue of what needs to be changed culturally, educationally, and economically to permit such a change remained unaddressed. Moreover, due to the forced nature of women, by way of their nurturing, who have been excluded from the competition with women for so long, cannot simply prove themselves as better as or at par with the men.

He believes that all causes, social and natural, work together to condition women in such a way that would be rebellious to men. Women have been compared to slaves in which the former is seen not as forced slaves but as willing and favorite ones too. Social conditioning and education were structured for this purpose. Moreover, Mill calls the so-called nature of women artificial. It is the nurturing aspect of domestic life that instructs the girl child to follow the status quo. Men fear the change in the system of education, lest the women would stop accepting that the 'nature' allotted to them is not real.

In the second chapter, he talks about the laws governing marriage, "marriage being the destination appointed by the society for women, the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them..." After marriage, men claimed the power of death and life over their wives, with the latter offering undying obedience to the former, who cannot do anything without their permission, and the wives were devoid of property, even those inherited from their parents. Mill says that, in this respect, the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many other countries.

The next voluntary partnership next to marriage is that of business and in such partnerships, it is never thought of one person having the entire control over the concern and the other simply bound to obey the former. Thus marriage too, if such of principle is followed, would be less oppressive to women. Mill does not deny that the things which need to be decided every day or cannot wait for a compromise, must depend on the will of one person. But it does not follow that this should privilege should rest on the same person every time.

Mill is also well aware that women's position in marriage and their status in public life are interlinked and that a marriage based on partnership and equality would transform not only the domestic but also the public sphere. His reflections on the relationship between the public and private world also "emphasized the extent to which the rights-bearing individual of much liberal political thought is constituted in important ways by an intimate as well as public relationships".

Towards the end of the chapter, he advocates the power of earning for women it is devoid of any independent property. This is essential for the dignity of the woman, which would be rendered useless if the marriage was an equal contract. He, however, concludes by accepting the conventional division of labor in the household, without considering that a woman's earning capability might lead to a redistribution of household and childcare duties.

The third section concerns the occupations of women outside marriage, mainly concerning women's work. In Victorian society, women were gradually entering the workforce, though



they were still excluded from many areas of work and were paid quite less for the same amount of work done. Again we see the reiteration of the emphasis on utilitarianism because allowing women employment opportunities would lead to the good of the entire society. More than sex, it is the capability that is of much greater importance. The reason for the exclusion of women in those days was not that they lack in capabilities, but was done in the interests of society, which of course can be easily translated as men. An unprejudiced view of women's competence will strengthen arguments against their subjugation. "History presents us with far fewer reigning queens than kings, but a talent for the ruling has been shown by a higher proportion of the queens than of the kings—despite the fact that many of the queens have occupied the throne in difficult periods", showing the superiority of women's intelligence and how it has already made its greatest contribution by 1860s.

Mill then says that the differences between the sexes may be the result of circumstances, and not of any natural differences in capabilities. One drawback in her abilities is her quickness in observation often leads her to make rash generalizations. The tendency of women to get nervous is more than in men, and this is the argument often put forward to disqualify them from certain occupations. But something like nervous temperament is hereditary, and this characteristic is not altogether bad because Mill found out that people with this temperament are usually suited for the executive branch of the administration.

Responding to the argument of a woman's brain being smaller than that of a man, Mill says that such a fact itself is doubtful and also that an organ's efficiency depends not on its size but on its activity. In fact, in prose and poetry, women have achieved as many high prizes as could be expected. But he points out that there is only one inferiority of women's works- they are based on the existing framework of thought. The reason Mill gives for women lagging behind men is that very few women have time for themselves because of the burden of the household they carry with them.

In describing women as practical and more attracted to the actual, real fact, he is unwittingly taking a biased stance: women are regarded as capable of equality because their stereotypically defined nature will prove a useful complement to men's natural capabilities.

The last chapter opens with a question of what would be the benefits to mankind if women were free. He notes many such benefits: human relations being regulated by justice, doubling the supply of abilities available for the service of humanity, and increased chivalry and charity. Jennifer ring suggests that Mill wants predictable results from liberating women, which will entail a change in their roles according to his own choosing. Thus, women remain objects of manipulation for Mill. He does not allow them the subjectivity to decide on their own the needs and the needs of society. She further says that we can see class biases in Mill's perspectives and that he is concerned with men and women of the enlightened class and race only. He might even be advocating the full participation of an elite group of women to nullify the political influence of uneducated working-class men. While such criticism may be too radical in nature, it is significant in altering the façade of Mill as the advocate of women's rights and freedom when we read his *Subjection at face value*.

### **Mill a Clever Propagandist of Patriarchy?**

While one may undoubtedly support Mill in the defense of women's rights, *Subjection of Women* is not entirely free from criticisms from contemporary feminists. His social-scientific



methodology is one major area of concern. The political limitations of the method are glaring when Mill suggests that men might have learned a lot by studying their wives. The men immediately become the controller of the social experiment to decide whether perfect equality should be extended to women or not. He assumes that women must develop their abilities in terms of male standards, which will be used to evaluate their performance. There is a very slim chance of women emerging as more capable than men in the experiment because they are a group subjected to centuries of exclusion and subjugation.

Another limitation of his proposals for emancipating women is that he simply advocates eliminating laws that restrict women's choices in life and does not include affirmative action, without which the freedom and the rights of women that he so wanted to see flourish in society would become impossible to sustain.

His views on the domestic functions of women have come under criticism by contemporary feminists. He considers these functions as natural, as when he describes them as 'animal functions'. Mill does then oblige to the traditional and masculinist view that assigns the traditional roles of women into the realm of nature, which needs to be progressively overcome by rational activities.

Moreover, while he is against the traditional marriage contract that subordinates women to men, he nevertheless accepts the traditional division of responsibilities between men and women in a household. Despite his advocacy of women possessing high intellect and rationality if proper nurturing and opportunities are extended, he believes that after marriage, women would generally choose the management of the household and the upbringing of the children as the priorities and thus would renounce all the other occupations not conducive to the above-mentioned role. Jean Bethke Elstein, in *Public Man, Private Woman* says there is a discrepancy in Mill's treatment of women in private and public life.

## **2. CONCLUSION: GIVING MILL HIS RIGHTFUL DUES**

Notwithstanding the limitations and criticisms that Mill's *Subjection of Women* is subjected to, his effort must be appreciated because no theorist of his time has produced such a brilliant work entirely dedicated to sensitizing the public to the political plight of women. Susan Moller Okin in "Women in Western Political Thought", regarded Mill's utilitarian approach in the essay as quite appreciative since, even though it was explicitly aimed at improving the conditions of women, it nevertheless promoted the well-being of society as a whole. Even though she too sees in the essay certain inconsistencies which we have discussed, she appreciates Mill's emphasis that moral excellence must be regarded as the same in both men and women, which immediately challenge the view held by classical political theorists from Aristotle to Rousseau. Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman believe that Mill's originality lies in the advocacy of spousal friendship, and not legal equality, which would be simply a means to the idealistic end of a friendship and real partnership between the two sexes. Thus, to conclude with, while Mill's *Subjection of Women* might seem very revolutionary and radical in nature as a result of which he entirely fell from grace and was highly critiqued by the orthodox elements of his times, it is infested with various contradictions, inconsistencies, and of course limitations. However, Mill is not entirely to be blamed for the same and there is no scope of doubting his sincerity in trying to bring about a radical change in women's lives



because it may be argued that he was no exception to all those who, through extreme social conditioning, was made to believe in the weak and ignorant nature of femininity associated with women. But what must never be overlooked is the fact that Mill transcended his own times, and many of his views hold relevance to this day. His essay has remained a major statement and a classic treatise of liberal feminist thought.

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