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John Stuart Mill and The Question of Women's Right: An Overview Shreya Biswas, *Research Scholar, The University of Burdwan, Bardhaman, West Bengal, India*

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Abstract

The 21st century has been abuzz with the issue of women's rights. From the ongoing movements raging in Iran where the protestors are clamouring for their freedom from the orthodox rule, to various political repartee regarding the rampant atrocities taking place against women. Similarly, the issue of granting political rights is still a matter of debate. Feminism, despite being a topic of febrile interest amongst scholars across the globe, political thought has always been shrouded by men. But polymaths like J.S. Mill stand way apart from the rest for professedly championing the feminine prerogatives. Mill basically, through this trailblazing work on women enfranchisement, championed the equality of the sexes in the most profound way. The very aim of this paper is to provide a brief overview of J.S. Mill's conceptualisation of women's rights. A significant tranche of this paper throws light on his ground-breaking work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and how he has conceptualized the women question in its entirety. His stance on marriage, property and career prospects of women explicitly makes him a feminist icon. To come up with such ingenious idea regarding female enfranchisement back then is a commendable job in itself. Today in this digital age, things centred on women empowerment or women's rights are discussed with much candour. But to talk about the same during his time despite resistance claims appreciation and accolades. J.S. Mill, will always be hailed as one of most significant feminist icons of all times. This paper is exclusively based on theoretical and analytical interpretation of Mill's work in order to provide a nuanced understanding of female enfranchisement as depicted by him. The very objective of this paper is to unearth those aspects of Mill's thought where he has focused on female empowerment. This paper seeks to explore how he has conceptualised the very institution of family and his take on public-private divide, property rights of women and marriage.

Keywords: J.S. Mill, feminism, political rights, women, enfranchisement

Feminism, despite being a topic of febrile interest amongst scholars across the globe, political thought has always been shrouded by men. But polymaths like J.S. Mill stand way apart from the rest for professedly championing the feminine prerogatives. This nineteenth-century person of erudite versatility had been instrumental in redefining the ideological persuasion of Britain back then (Eshika, 2023, p.02). Mill, being an adevtary of Jeremy Bentham, was deeply influenced by utilitarian ethics (Eshika, 2023, p.02). Another

individual played an instrumental role in helping him to connect with the women's cause happens to be Harriet Taylor (Eshika, 2023, p.02).

Coming to his epoch-making work, "The Subjection of Women", in the first tranche of his ingenious work, Mill talks about the specious tradition of "legal subordination" of women to their male counterparts, which is an all-pervading attribute of humankind since the ages (Eshika, 2023, p.03). He wanted to grant women equality in every facet of their lives (Eshika, 2023, p.03). He launched a scathing attack against every such misogynist and sexist stereotypes that remonstrated against granting equal privileges and rights to women (Mill, 1869). He shuddered at the preposterousness of the fact that since the very inception of humanity, owing to their enhanced physical prowess, the repression of women by their male counterparts has now been legitimized and labelled as natural (Mill, 1869). He goes onto point out that the excessive reliance of women on their male counterparts in all walks of life is tantamount to slavery (Mill, 1869). Slavery, according to him, may have ceased to exist in its inchoate way, but the marked sex-based asymmetry is based on "law of the strongest" (Mill, 1869). He adeptly depicted the absurdity of normalising certain hackneyed conventions just because it has become intrinsic to the society (Mill 1869). Similarly, the gross inequality and suppression of women have been naturalized as it has remained a perennial phenomenon for ages.

In the subsequent sections, he chronicled the unequal power dynamics within the very institution of marriage. Unconditional obedience to one's husband was nothing short of slavery to him (Eshika, 2023, p.03). He considered that both the public and private realms are intricately woven with one another (Eshika, 2023, p.03). A private sphere redolent of or characterized by equality would result in a much more egalitarian public domain as well (Eshika, 2023, p.03). In the subsequent sections, he mentions the career prospects of women as well. During that time, Victorian society was marked by gross inequality (Eshika, 2023, p.04). Despite having the same luminosity as their male counterparts, women were neither given the same opportunity nor bestowed with equal remuneration (Eshika, 2023, p.04).

Being deeply influenced by utilitarian perspectives, Mill believed that granting women with similar opportunities as compared to men was extremely necessary for the greater good (Eshika, 2023, p.04). The last segment of his book itself is a testament to the fact that he was the quintessence of feminism. In this tranche, he accentuated the perks or advantages that humankind would be bestowed with, once women acquire their freedom. Since justice is of central importance when it comes to regulating social dynamics; therefore, by providing women with their much-coveted freedom, there would be greater furnishment of proclivities necessary for altruism or humanitarianism at large (Eshika, 2023, p.04).

Mill can be eulogized as a "liberal feminist" for his earnest exertions for providing an equal level playing field for men and women in the public sphere (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 245). Yet there's a tranche of his literary oeuvre where his stance on women empowerment comes under scrutiny. For instance, in his magnum opus *The Subjection of Women*, despite advocating female enfranchisement, Mill did also opine that some women after being bestowed with the privilege to work in the public domain would prefer to remain confined within the four walls of private chambers, prioritising their role as mere house wives over their pecuniary pursuits (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 245). Susan Moller Okin in her ingenious work, "Women in Western Political Thought" scrutinized Mill's stance on the misogynist

sexual division of labour within the domestic hierarchy on which he remained unquestioning and tacit (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 245).

Mill believed a complete overhauling of the family structure, coupled with the complete paradigm shift of how society conceives stereotypical sexual archetypes, would finally obliterate the power imbalance between the sexes (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 246). Some radical feminists hailed him as their paragon as well for he had a strong conviction that "gender inequity" or sexual disparity is a quintessential form of vexation and every other form of injustice is deeply entangled with it (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 246).

Mill had penned down that the state doesn't have to assume the onus of change single-headedly. Change within the domestic configuration and the workplace would emanate once the plebeians are appropriately erudite, coupled with the existence of appropriate institutions (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 246). Mill never confined the importance of women within the private sphere of her own backyard. He limned over the importance of family and women being the domus head had been assigned a pivotal role in preserving "political virtues of equality and justice" (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 246).

Family during the 19th century was perceived by Mill as a place of bondage and enforced maternity. He opined that women were conditioned in such a way back then that choosing to remain unmarried or married was not their own choice. (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 252). His ingenious comparison of wife with that of a slave reflects his stark resemblance with radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 253). He had drawn the analogy of slaves to show the sheer helplessness of women. Just like the slaves are endowed with a life of bonded labour bereft of personal freedom, a wife according to Mill had to seek requisite approval even for the mundane trifles (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 253). According to Mill, women were conditioned to become subservient to men. Such an unequal power imbalance was detrimental to both the sexes and was a major obstacle in their path to thrive into an embodied entity (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 254). Being a proponent of utilitarianism, Mill states that the ethico-intellectual enhancement of the society will result from "doubting the mass of mental faculties" dedicated to greater good (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 254). Progress in true sense of the term would emanate when the unequal power dynamics between the two sexes would be obliterated. Yet, Mill was not in favour of ironing out the inherent differences between the sexes. Rather, in his letter to his amicus Thomas Carlyle, he beautifully penned down the importance of the existence of both feminine and masculine qualities and he chronicled that women who are the archetype of feminine virtues have subsumed within them masculine faculties as well (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 255).

He believed that everything starts right from home and both the spheres cannot be compartmentalized into watertight niches. The gross gender inequality within the private sphere needs to be addressed as well. The inequality within the familial edifice, marriage as well as in the workplace, needs to be fixed so as to ensure equality in the public realm (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 256).

Polymaths like Carole Pateman pointed out that Mill despite being a chief advocate of sexual equality, he did legitimise the sexual division of labour (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 257). On the other hand, theorists in support of Mill put forth their ingenious argument that through his stance on sexual division of labour, he stands completely inconsistent with his thinking but Mill was very sagacious enough to consider the notion of domestic toil as

a remunerative endeavour, which would enable them to acquire property (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 258).

As already stated, Mill didn't denounce the institution of family at the very outset. But a family rooted in misogyny and exploitation and ruthless suppression of women would be detrimental. (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 258). He had a strong conviction that domestic affiliations would improve as it was during the 1860s (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 258). He was quite ahead of his times because he believed that fostering and nurturing offspring should solely be the choice of mothers and not an imposed obligation (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 259). The home shouldn't be relegated to the background as a mere 'pied-as-terre', rather Mill wanted to visualize it as an institution of prime importance which would advocate equality and justice. Another point was skilfully mentioned by Mill that since the entire onus of household and family rest with women and they were generally overtaxed with domestic ministrations, women suffered from a dearth of temporal and vital wherewithal which created a huge obstacle in their creative endeavours or aesthetic avocations (Mann & Halev, 2010, p. 261).

To sum it up his ground-breaking work, "The subjection of women" created a huge stir across the hallowed halls of learning. He became a paragon of female enfranchisement when he unapologetically clamoured for "legal and political rights" for women (Mishra, 2020, p. 807). He stated that women are entitled to equal privileges as men and their age-old repression doesn't bespeak from rationality (Mishra, 2020, p. 807). Rather, he stipulates that such suppression is the result of perfidious and "pre-modern law of force" (Mishra, 2020, p. 808). Just like the slaves even wives have been entrained to acquiesce (Mishra, 2020, p. 808). He championed the holistic development of women and opined that their freedom would result in overall societal development in true sense of the term. (Mishra, 2020, p. 808). The grand arc of human advancement he believed goes hand in hand with the development of women (Mishra, 2020, p. 808). Marriage according to him ought to be built on equality which would lead to greater intellectual compatibility between the spouses (Mishra, 2020, p. 809). Besides clamouring for political rights for women, Mill did press for their property rights as well; for instance, he advocated "Married Women's Property Bill" (Mishra, 2020, p. 809). He had this conviction that unless and until women are given the chance to voice their grievances and assert their civic entitlements, men will continue to predominate over them (Mishra, 2020, p. 809).

The 21st century has been abuzz with the issue of women's rights. From the ongoing movements raging in Iran where the protestors are clamouring for their freedom from the orthodox rule, to various political repartee regarding the rampant atrocities taking place against women. Similarly, the issue of granting political rights is still a matter of debate. Even a section of feminists believes that under-representation of women in the esteemed deliberative bodies will not lead to female enfranchisement in true sense of the term. Mill to claimed that women should be granted with political rights and only then the society will prosper and holistically develop. Now movies championing matriarchal equity and gender parity are made to sensitize the masses about multifarious issues. Even social media is abuzz with content that cater to the needs and problems faced by women. But J.S.Mill was a visionary ahead of his era who had relentlessly advocated gender equality. His stance on marriage, property and career prospects of women explicitly makes him a feminist icon. To come up with such ingenious idea regarding female enfranchisement

back then is a commendable job in itself. Today in this digital age, things centred on women empowerment or women's rights are discussed with much candour. Now social media influencers talk so much about equality in marriages but to conceive such an idea back in 1869 requires a lot of prescience and prudence. Similarly, now feminists hanker after the property rights of women and John Stuart Mill had focused on that as well. But to talk about the same during his time despite resistance claims appreciation and accolades. J.S. Mill, will always be hailed as one of most significant feminist icons of all times. His profound knowledge and nuanced understanding of feminism will always remain a compendium for feminist scholars of later ages.

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