
J. S. MILL and the Question of Subjection of Women

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Zillah R Eisenstein (1994) in her book argues that “Mill grounded his argument for women’s equality in nature while he associated inequality with unexamined social conventions.” Does her analysis, of J. S. Mill’s (1869) views in the essay ‘The Subjection of Women’, do justice to Mill’s contexts and intent? Eisenstein’s objection, if true, is a major liability for Mill’s philosophy. My project would be to examine if the text itself has enough potential to answer this criticism, if not, how much concession the author is going to have from his potential critic because of his significantly different social contexts and the potential compulsions in his imagined project of political activism.

A text can’t speak comprehensively unless it is situated in its contexts. A text has enough to answer the potential criticism but ‘how much enough?’ is the major question to ask from those who are proponents of textual interpretation of any text. An author’s text is a reflection of whole comprehensive attitudes, intentions, motives and hidden activism of author. Above description is true for J. S. Mill also, in particular, ‘The Subjection of Women’. Viewing this text solely as the philosophical product of a genius mind would be injustice towards the author where the author himself is a political activist and, it’s not that, the political activism is not exclusively experimented by the author from his philosophical analysis rather the other way around.

I

In the text ‘The Subjection of Women’, J. S. Mill presents a theory arguing for equality of women in society. Mill argues that social and legal conditions which restrict the liberty of women serve as one of the “chief hindrances to human improvement”. In the same text, he likens the position of women in society, and particularly in marriage, with slaves. Why he does this comparison is beyond the scope of this essay.

Mill considers various actual and potential defences of sexual discrimination, whether domestic or social. Mill argues that the subjection of women has been justified by the claim that women are naturally inferior to men, consequentially; it is natural for men to dominate women. The apologists claim that men possess some trait essential for normative competence that women lack. Mill, on the other hand, argues that it is impossible to know the true nature of women. Why, according to Mill, this is so?

For Mill women’s subordinate position in society is a remnant of the past practice of the rule of the physically strong over the weak. Though the conditions and compulsions of civilized society have obsoleted the continuance of rule of physically strong over the weak but the practice of men dominating women have become customary since then and has been mistakenly accepted as the ‘natural order’. Riding over the radical argument, Mill argues that this false imagination of ‘natural order’ has sustained because of the deep-rooted effects of socialization over the mind of women which have precluded any possibility of questioning of dominant social order by women, and in ignorance, it is accepted as ‘natural’. In brief, then, since women’s current behaviour is a product of social forces which have conditioned the true desires, inclinations and choices of women, Mill thinks, it would be a grave mistake to deduce the true nature of women from the past. Alternatively, women’s true nature cannot be known from the observance of current behaviour of women. Considering the emancipatory potential of this argument, I think, it is one of the earliest pro-women radical interpretation of women’s conditions.

There is, I think, not much objections regarding the Mill’s association of inequality with unexamined social conventions. This is proved by my earlier presentation of Mill in which Mill is presented as someone who argues against acceptance of women’s current and past behaviour as ‘natural’ since women’s present and past behaviour is/has been conditioned by male form of epistemology. The bone of contention is lying somewhere else, that is, at the Mill’s argument for women’s equality in or through women’s nature.

II

In this section I am going to discuss, briefly, the alleged contradictions in Mill’s writings, exclusively with reference to the demanded perimeter of the question mentioned in the first paragraph of the essay. Doing this, my prime focus will be to present few important criticisms thrown by commentators over the presumed perimeter.

In Chapter – 1 of ‘The Subjection of Women,’ Mill warns to look at women’s present behaviour as the sign of their ‘nature’ since women’s present behaviour is conditioned by society; it is merely as the structural consequence of the ‘structure’ in which women are embedded. However, then in chapter – 3, Mill proceeds to use examples of the behaviour of women to justify his argument for the liberty of women. He argues that women are more intuitive, more practical, more focused on particulars, and less rigid, which allows women to compensate for deficits in the way that men typically approach decision-making. Women are less likely to follow principle for its own sake and are more likely to test principles by their real world consequences. They are better able to multi-task and intellectually more open-minded. He argues that women's seeming inability to maintain a persistent line of thought (their flightiness or what Mill calls their "mobility of thought") does not detract from their ability to make intellectual contributions but merely means that they will make different kinds of contributions. However, he seems to concede that women are more excitable, less accomplished, and less original than men. He tries to explain these deficits in ways that do not presuppose women's natural inferiority.

Mill’s sudden shift, that is, from methodological to empirical can be clearly observed as we shift from Chapter-1 to Chapter-3 of the text. In Chapter-3 Mill uses the women’s past and present behaviour to argue for the utility of women’s equality and liberty which is heavily criticized by modern commentators. The centrality of the alleged criticism is that Mill is accepting the very same women’s behaviour/nature as their abilities and strengths to argue for women’s equality which he had denounced in the Chapter-1 as the consequences of social conditionings.

Jennifer Ring (1985) says, "It is the chapter [three] in which Mill falls back upon an unexamined use of feminine 'nature,' in spite of his earlier denial of such a concept". According to Ring, Mill is inconsistent, because he holds that it is impossible to know the true nature of women as their present and past behaviour have been conditioned by society, and yet, he is forced to fall back on empiricism to argue for utility of women’s equality through empirical evidence of women’s present behaviour.

Julia Annas (1977), on the same line of Ring, argues that despite Mill's more radical argument that we cannot know women's nature until they are free, in his desire to also make a utilitarian appeal he points to the example of women's present behaviour to show that women's freedom would bring the greatest happiness to all.

Both Ring and Annas argue that Mill fails in his project because of his love for empiricism to know the observable world. Empiricist approach forced Mill to present a utilitarian argument for women’s equality by generalization of few women’s experiences.

But, are Mill’s text/texts and contexts able to defend it from the above criticism? Elizabeth S. Smith (2011) peeps into the text and argues that it is well defensible from the text itself. She does not deny Mill’s examples of women's behaviour and temperament as a means to prove the utility of a society where women are treated as equals. Rather, she argues that Mill never retracted from his position of claiming that women’s true nature cannot be known as it is conditioned by society. Smith writes,

Repeatedly throughout Chapter Three, Mill reminds the reader that he is merely hypothesizing (i.e., speculating about) what life would be like and how women might extend the abilities they have shown already in a future free society. He is not arguing, though, that the behavior women have shown in their present condition will persist in a society where women are treated as equals.

Elizabeth argues that when Mill uses the women’s present and past behaviour, he is using only as a possible sign of women’s future abilities in a free society, Mill does not believe that women's behaviour will necessarily remain the same in a free and equal society, that is, Mill does not essentialise, as critics have argued, empirical evidence. This seems a valid defence of Mill, unless, we focus on the very base of defence. Mill could be defended if he mere speculate the women’s nature and not essentializes the speculation. But the important question is about the nature and subject-matter of speculation. What is the subject matter of speculation?

‘Law of causation’ states that cause and conditions, together, produce effect. Cause is necessary but to speculate the different form of products, it is necessary that cause should be placed under different set of conditions. It is true for both empirical and non-empirical world. Unless human could have been placed in society we could not have known, whatever we know today, the nature of the same. If one person is kept alone with all the luxurious as well as non-

luxurious items of life we could not know the proper behaviour of him/her. He/she would be behaving nicely unless other conditions are not changed. Conditions of scarcity, physical harm, disrespect and many others can show the fact that human can even be violent. This example is just to show that how the differential conditions can produce different results from the same cause. Mill is, as Elizabeth thinks, speculating the causes through conditions. It is absurd to speculate cause without conditions. And, of course, Mill is not falling in this trap. He is just saying that till now the constrained conditions have shown the women's natures like- intuition, mobility of thought, open-minded, and many others as talked by Mill, if opportunity is provided we can know many other aspects of women's nature and consequentially it would also depict the true nature of men.

For me, Mill is not essentialist, rather a sequentialist who thinks that with present available nature of women (that is cause) if we change the set of conditions (that is availability of equality, liberty and franchise) we would know some other aspects of nature, and it would carry on continuously. The only problem I think is that Mill takes men's nature for granted and speculates more about women's nature.

III

Many other commentators have criticized the limit of the substance in Mill's writing on women. The crux of this criticism is just opposite of the criticism of previous section. Here, for critics it is not the women's role and achievements through which Mill essentialized women's nature (as argued in the earlier section), rather through presumed women's nature Mill, intentionally or unintentionally, tried to establish the unexamined social conventions.

In Chapter-2 Mill goes on to say that once a just and equal society is created the best division of duties between man and wife will be that the man working outside the home and the woman taking care of the family and home. Mill writes, "In an otherwise just state of things, is not, therefore, I think a desirable custom that the wife should contribute by her labour to the income of the family".

Susan Okin (1979) argues that that Mill is denying women the opportunity to establish themselves fully as equals with men through outside employment. Similarly Gail Tulloch (1989) sees Mill as someone who did not question the traditional division of labour as the division of power despite arguing for women's political equality. For Okin, Mill also asserts that women should only have a right to that property which she brings to the marriage or earns herself, not that which is brought in by her husband while she is at home running the household.

Mary Shanley (1981) sees the hypocritical attitude of Mill when he argues for 'marital friendship' but does not question the traditional division of labour. According to Shanley attitude of Mill's men towards the sharing of household duties is far from building any genuine form of friendship between married couples for which Mill is arguing.

In short, the criticism is that Mill argues for equality and freedom of opportunity for women and, yet, he asserts that the best division of labor is for women to stay at home-thus, denying them the opportunity to establish themselves as equals with men and denying women the right to a share in the income earned by their husband.

Elizabeth S. Smith tries to defend Mill by pointing that for Mill traditional division of labour is not the only way rather it is the best way of division of labour. Arguing on the logic of pragmatism Smith tries to defend Mill from his many other writings and his political contexts. First, she thinks, for Mill, allowing women to work outside the household would place women in the situation of 'double-burden', which is unjust. But this logic presumes the primary and essential duty of household to women and will not digest many feminist thinkers. Second, she cites the Mill's book 'Principles of Political Economy' and argues that, for Mill, appearance of half of more human force, women, would place high burden on the available resources and also, consequentially, would reduce the average income gained by a family in which men is the only income generator. Smith acknowledges the weakness of this reasoning as it would be far from achieving a situation of economic independence for women. Both these arguments are very weak defence of Mill and it further generates new liabilities for Mill's philosophy.

Smith's last defence is through political and social contexts of Mill. She sees 'The Subjection of Women' a text not only of philosophical rather political necessity as far as Mill's motive of political activism was concerned. She brings

the issue of enfranchisement of women which were hotly debated in Mill's time and in which Mill was the prime important figure. But at the same time 18th century England was not much rid of deeply patriarchal assumptions. Smith says, for Mill, enfranchisement of women was prime concern and he was pushing hardly for it. Mill published 'The subjection of Women' but not with any less political motive. He knew the potential reaction of the fellow English-people. Therefore, Mill forced himself to be soft on several other more important women's issues like-questioning of sexual division of labour, to build a suitable atmosphere for legalization of women's enfranchisement right.

I think this is a possible good defence of Mill on the line of sequentialist logic where Mill thought that the opening of one sphere will lead to others. At this point one could, if aware of socio-political contexts of 18th century England and of Mill's activism, give concession to Mill, I think one has to give. This seems enough to prove that he was not essential is in gender roles rather his other preferences, that is enfranchisement, stopped him to come out publicly with other important issues in a society which was even so much hostile to relatively less important gendered issues. Finally, it is worth to examine the Mill's speculative logic to understand the true methodology of Mill regarding his attempts to understand women's nature and bring gender equality. Unless one does not falls back to text and the relevant contexts, unimportant confusions are bound to occur.

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