



REVERBERATIONS OF J S MILL'S *THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN* IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND TWENTIETH CENTURY FEMINIST TEXTS

DR. ASHISH PANDEY

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
The English and Foreign Languages University,
Lucknow- Campus. (UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the impact of J S Mill's seminal text *The Subjection of Women* in the development of the feminist discourse in Victorian Fiction as well as early twentieth century feminist criticism especially in the writings of Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter. It also proves with evidence from the Victorian novels like *The Mill on the Floss* and *Jane Eyre*. The paper also tries to prove that Mill was a visionary in terms of emancipation of women and that he was the bedrock upon which much of the Feminist discourse exists today.*

INTRODUCTION

John Stuart Mill was born in London on May 20, 1806, and was the eldest of son of the famous man of letters James Mill who along with Jeremy Bentham led the foundation of Utilitarian philosophy. Mill was educated by his father and at an early age he started writing articles almost without number and on an endless variety of subjects (philosophical, political, economic, social). They began with *The Westminster Review* and extended to other magazines especially *The London Review* and, afterwards, *The London and Westminster Review*. Mill also contributed to the fundamental problem of the ethical theory in his article on Utilitarianism which was published in *The Fraser's Magazine* in 1861. He also wrote a number of treatises including *Considerations on Representative Government* (1806),

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Thoughts on parliamentary Reform (1859), the essays *On Liberty* (1859) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869)

The Subjection of Women (1869) during Mill's lifetime was considered revolutionary and much ahead of its times. Overtime and especially in the twenty first century it is seen as the bedrock of woman empowerment. In the text Mill argues for women's suffrage which is an important step in the empowerment of women. Not only did Mill argue for the right to vote to be extended to women, but he also argued that women should also be allowed to contest elections and argued for their inclusion in the parliament

But, first of all an analysis of the relevance of Mill's statements in Victorian fiction has been attempted here. A woman author, who illustrates the significance of Mill's statement, is Mary Ann Evans or experience the entire range of marginalization common to the women in the nineteenth century.

There was a Feminist Movement building round George Eliot. John Stuart Mill had published his *The Subjection of Women* in which he had raised issues of repression of women and had advocated suffrage, educational and professional right for them. Many women like Margaret Fuller, Harriet Martineau and, Barbara Bodichon were also struggling to push for woman empowerment. Many Ann Evans who wrote under the pseudonym tried to show the moral dilemmas of young women in a patriarchal society. Victorian women writers adopted male pseudonyms in order to deflect attention from their gender because women's writing was not regarded very highly. George Eliot accepted the convention and in her literary career demonstrated its vacuity. Although her female identity became known after her first novel, she continued to write under the male pseudonym. At the height of her career, she was one of the most respected women in England and represented in her female person the "authority" that was earlier supposed to be a male prerogative.

1.0 Reverberations of J S Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in Victorian Literature

In *The Mill On The Floss*, she shows the rebellion in the mind of a young woman Maggie Tulliver who is not 'feminine' in the conventional sense of the word. Maggie's intelligence is aided by her unbound creative imagination, a trait that is distinctly inherited from her father. For her, a book, a picture, or even a spider is a subject appropriate enough for speculation. The trouble is that the moment she tries to make these stories a part of her life, she becomes miserable, finding reality totally intractable.

The education women received in Victorian times estranged them by assigning them socialized gender roles. In the book Tom's education at Mr. Stelling's is a complete failure. Aimed at making him masculine, it finally ends up making him more feminine. On the other



hand Maggie with her sharp intellect and inexhaustible stores of energy finds her life wasted, as she is not allowed to contribute positively to the family in deep financial trouble. Bonnie Zimmerman feels that both “Tom and Maggie represent the damage done to identity by education and by demands that the child polarize sexually and exclude those characteristics denied by society’s preconceptions about capabilities of men and women.” (Zimmerman 214). Jennifer Uglow believes that because of the traditional gender roles that are ascribed to the male and the female sex:

Maggie is ...caught in the strictures into which she was born...those are living structures, social bonds made up of chains and people, linked by complex ties. ...She is doublytrapped, by her own nature and by her position in society at that particular moment in history. She is thwarted at every turn – not only in the craving for education which is out of her properfeminine sphere, but also in search for romance and marriage, the roots through which women traditionally should achieve fulfillment (Uglow, *George Eliot* 598)

This opinion is supplemented with the instance when Maggie has to stop seeing Phillip Wakem not because she does not approve of it. She gasps in helplessness to Philip, “‘Not if I were free,’ said Maggie; but I am not – I must submit” (Eliot, 652). Mill had said that a woman is not taught free will but only submission. So is the case with Maggie Tulliver. That woman is a property and has no independent existence of her shown by the opinion of Phillip’s father Mr Wakem asserts: “We don’t ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to” (Eliot, 377).

Yet another evidence of discrimination and the innate sense of superiority inherent in the male child are noticed here. Mill said about the conditioning of the child from his infancy that he is superior to one half of the human race. When Tom returns home and Maggie offers him some money that she has saved. When Maggie tells Tom, “I think I’ve got a great deal more than that in my steel purse upstairs. I’ll ask mother to give it you.” “What for?” said Tom. “I don’t want your money, you silly thing. I’ve got a great deal more money than you, because I’m a boy. I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you’re only a girl.” (Eliot, 72) There is yet another instance that shows the views schoolboys had about women and girls: “Well, you’ll be a woman someday,” said Tom, “so you needn’t talk.” “But I shall be a clever woman,” said Maggie, with a toss. “O, I dare say, and a nasty conceited thing. Everybody’ll hate you.” (Eliot, 313)

This shows that a ‘clever’ woman was but a thing to be hated. Mill has talked about it that men did not desire a woman who was forced to act like a slave, but someone who was willing to act like one. It was only possible to have a willing slave if they did not have much intellect. It was the primary reason for women to be deprived of education.

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We come across one more incident in *The Mill on the Floss* which shows the prejudiced view of men towards women, when Tom asks Mr. Stelling to endorse his view that girls cannot do Euclid, and his reply is, ““They can pick up a little of everything, I dare say,” said Mr. Stelling. “They’ve a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn’t go far into anything. They’re quick and shallow”” (Eliot, 323). George Eliot seems to echo one of Mill’s views that a woman inferior in intellect to a man is a constant burden when she is talking about the inferior intellect of Mrs. Tulliver as compared to Mr. Tulliver. She writes, “The possession of a wife conspicuously one’s inferior in intellect is, like other high privileges, attended with a few inconveniences, and, among the rest, with the occasional necessity for using a little deception” (Eliot, 419)

Mill had discussed the possibility of women being more desirable to men if they were educated. This point of view of J S Mill is substantiated by not one but many Victorian texts. To name a few here we see that in *Jane Eyre*, two men desire Jane the protagonist because she has education and intellect even though she is not beautiful. In *Jude the Obscure*, the most prominent reason for Jude to like Sue and not Arabella besides sensitivity being a part of Sue’s character and Arabella being callous is the education Sue has and Arabella lacks. In *Tess of the d’urbervilles*, Angel Clare admires Tess because she is educated, besides the feminine beauty.

Henrik John Ibsen gave the concept of independent women in his play *A Doll’s House*. It dealt with the economic independence of women. The heroine Nora realizes that she is a property in the hands of her husband Torvald Helmer that has been transferred to him by her father. In the third act, Helmer gets annoyed on Nora because she acted on her own will in money matters. He threatens her that he would not allow her to touch ‘his’ children. Nora decides to educate her and leaves the house of her husband because she finds him unfit to help her in this endeavour. The play, therefore endorses the argument of Mill about the custody of children, that they are by law ‘his’ children.

In his play *Candida*, George Bernard Shaw takes the issue of independence of women and gives the concept of ‘New Woman.’ Shaw tells us what a man has done to a woman through the unraveling of the thought process of the character Marchbanks. In the first act Marchbanks says to Morell, Candida’s husband, “It horrifies me when I think of the doses of it she has had to endure in all the weary years during which you have selfishly and blindly sacrificed her to minister to your self-sufficiency—you (*turning on him*) who have not one thought—one sense—in common with her. (Shaw, 77)

Shaw also tells us that woman was not an object or a property that needs to be protected; in fact the situation was just the opposite. As Marchbanks states in the final act, “It is she who wants someone to protect, to help, to work for: somebody to give her children to protect, to



help and work for” (Shaw, 83). Here *Candida* is not only a faithful wife but also the strongest character in the play. She is guided by common sense and not by emotion or passion. Instead of accepting the old theatrical role of a woman who allows herself to be quarreled over by two men and passively disposed to one or the other, *Candida* takes the situation under her own control, brings the dispute to an immediate end, and imposes her own will upon both men. So a new concept thus emerges in *Candida* that is carried further in *Man and Superman*; that is the concept of the life force. Earlier women played the victims being trapped by men into marriage, but Shaw showed that it was the woman who had the superior life force and ‘she’ selected the suitable man to fertilize her and trapped him into marriage. Thus Shaw was much ahead of the concepts given by Mill.

Many Scenes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* also make a strong case for Mill’s assertions. The powerful impact of the opening scene in which Henchard sells Susan and his daughter for 5 guineas show that women were treated as mere property. The novel also focuses on Elizabeth Jane who is strong willed and has a will of her own later. It is the treatment of his wife and daughter that we must concentrate upon. Selling one’s wife just for five guineas as if she were a piece of clay or an animal or if in the ancient time a slave. This is what Mill has talked about; the position of wives being worse than Athenian slaves. Mill also alluded to the possibility of some wicked man entrapping a girl into marriage for the piece of her share in her father’s property. The property laws were such that whatever belonged to the wife would be transferred to the husband. That was the reason why Mill advocated the rights of a woman. This is further substantiated by Emily Bronte in her novel *Wuthering Heights* where Heathcliff married Isabella because he wanted to take revenge on Edgar Linton by acquiring the portion of property which belonged to Isabella. He also plays a trick by getting his son Linton married to Cathy, the daughter of Edgar, thereby acquiring a portion of the share that belonged to Cathy. Heathcliff’s barbarous treatment of Isabella also endorses the absolutist and the cruel treatment of husbands over their wives.

Another novel by one of the Bronte sisters, Charlotte Bronte, also deals with some of the issues raised by Mill, in her masterpiece *Jane Eyre*. After an analysis of the novel we find that it is full of intricate details. Mill (2008) has talked about the ability of women to describe the details. He writes, “They perhaps have it from nature, but they certainly have it by training and education; for nearly the whole of the occupations of women consist in the management of small but multitudinous details, on each of which the mind cannot dwell even for a minute, but must pass on to other things, and if anything requires longer thought, must steal time at odd moments for thinking of it.” (Mill, 113)

The next thing that is to be seen is that of property rights. Rochester is shown to be deceived into marrying Bertha Mason, a Creole and a madwoman by his relatives for the sake of property. We see the way she is kept in the house, locked all the time on the pretext that she

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is mad. It is a mystery to the reader whether she is finally killed. One is intruded by doubt if it was a conspiracy by Rochester himself to remove her from his path so that he may marry Jane. The issue of boys having innate superiority over half of the human race is also dealt with. Master John, Jane's cousin behaves badly with his mother Mrs. Reed. In the same novel another statement of Mill is endorsed that women acted as agents of men to exploit women. We see an example of this in a critical essay on *Jane Eyre* by Elaine Showalter in her seminal book *A Literature of their Own*:

Whipping girls to subdue the unruly flesh and the rebellious spirit was a routine punishment for the Victorians, as well as a potent sexual fantasy; as late as the 1870s the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* conducted an enthusiastic correspondence column on the correct way to carry out the procedure. It is interesting here to note that sexual discipline is administered to women by other women, as agents for men. Bessie (Jane's favorite servant) and Miss Abbot, acting on behalf of Mrs. Reed, who in turn is avenging her son, lock Jane up; at Lowood the kindly Miss Temple starves the girls because "she has to answer to Mr. Brocklehurst for all she does"; at Thornfield Grace Poole is hired by Rochester as Bertha's jailor. Thus the feminine heroine grows up in a world without female solidarity, where women in fact police each other on behalf of patriarchal tyranny. (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* 116-17)

Abuse of religion by men in order to threaten women is also shown in the novel. St. John tries to force Jane into marrying him in the name of religion. Mill said that women were not educated and this resulted in their not being able to express useful opinion on various issues. Mill also said that as a result of this, the women are confined in their daughters a good house to get married. This is the case with Mrs. Bennett who is always occupied with the idea of finding an eligible bachelor for her daughters.

Jane Austen confronts the divide between public and private when her characters are seduced and abandoned (Colonel Brandon's ward in *Sense and Sensibility*, Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*); she confronts domestic abuse in *I* (1818) with General Tilney and in *Mansfield Park* (1874); Elizabeth and the Bingley circle discuss women's intellectuality in *Pride and Prejudice*; and all of her heroines must resolve the dilemma of being subjects when they are, for the most part, only wanted as objects. Because Austen highlights these concerns, she has until recently been interpreted as domestic novelist of limited range whose works shed no light on more important issues such as politics and war. Never travelling widely herself, Austen could exhibit knowledge of the world in her novels that extended beyond the seeming limitations her life imposed on her. This was the reason that Mill gives for women to be given more freedom so that they could get more exposure in the University of Life. Virginia Woolf endorses this in *A Room of One's Own*: "Had Tolstoi lived at the Priory in seclusion with a



married lady 'cut off from what is called the world', however edifying the moral lesson, he could scarcely; I thought have written *War and Peace*." (Woolf 82)

Austen's heroines experience life within the privacy of the home; public affairs- politics, business, war have relevance only in how they affect the men in these heroines' lives. So women do not have any independent existence because they are not educated.

In the feminist interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice*, we have at its centre two women who together represent a kind of disorder: one from the old regime, the other from the economically unstable middle class, and both depicting ineffectual models of maternity. Once viewed in this way, it then becomes clear that Austen is making a case for a new social order based on self worth and emotional stability over the present disorder, caused by the abuses of rank and emphasis on financial gain that these two mothers evince. The un-motherly mother symbolizes the large social issues blocking younger women from going beyond what society dictates or their gender. By criticizing the mother, Austen shows how everyone including powerful parental figures, contributes to the sexual politics that force women to act or to refrain from acting in particular ways. One example of this is Mrs. Bennett's anger with Elizabeth when she refuses Mr. Collin's marriage proposal, even though the terms of his suit are humiliating to her pride, while he himself is blind to her intelligence, ignorant of her pride, while he himself is blind to her intelligence, ignorant of her personality, and lacking in any emotion beyond his own self-love. As Charlotte's experience shows when she does marry Collins, such marital arrangements serve only to confine and repress women further, and worse on domestic abuse. In *Tess Of The d'Urbervilles* Hardy remarks: "Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects – as nearly as humanity can supply the right and desired." (Hardy, Tess 35)

This statement proves that the fate of women depended on the patriarchal gaze that fell on women. This shows that Hardy depicts that the fate of Tess is to be doomed because the first patriarchal gaze that falls on her is that of Alec and not that of Angel Clare. So the fate of a woman depended on the man that fell on him and not what she did. The actions of a woman did not affect her fate but the kind of man that entered her life. Later Angel tells Tess, "It is in every way desirable and convenient that I should carry you off then as my property." (Hardy 115) A woman thus was not a life partner but a property. In the same novel we see the economic exploitation of women. They are not given equal treatment for the same amount of work that they perform. Hardy tells the reader, "Female field-labour was seldom offered now, and its cheapness made it profitable for tasks which women could perform as readily as men." (Hardy 125)



Tess is raped while she is asleep and this makes Alec her master. Hardy shows us the weak position of women that a rapist could become the master of the woman he has raped. Alec forces Tess to live with him just because he had sex with her when she was asleep. The way he remarks the following words is utterly disgusting to a modern reader, “Remember, my lady, I was your master once! I will be your master again. If you are any man’s wife you are mine!” (Hardy 155)

For women, love was not seen as a precondition for marriage but a consequence of it. Jenni Calder believes that Dickens finds little interest in women who “are trapped by circumstances”. Dickens is good with theme of nineteenth century fiction that it was the parent’s responsibility to get their daughters into a financially secure marriage. Till they got comfortably married, education for women was seen as developing skills to develop themselves against the predatory instincts of men. Gradgrind finds no trouble with the idea of marriage as a financial transaction.

After examining the significance and relevance and relevance of John Stuart Mill’s statement in the various works of fiction we shall see the influence of Mill in the three major seminal works in feminist movement and see how the feminists after Mill carried forward the things he mentioned in *The Subjection of Women*. But before that it is necessary to mention that the greatest psychoanalyst of all times Dr. Sigmund Freud translated some of Mill’s into German. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud argued that there are fundamental differences between men and women that Mill had not recognized. This contrast between Mill and Freud is reflected in late twentieth century feminist thought in the contrast between those feminists who believe the male and female minds are different.

Freud was bitterly critical of Mill’s analogy of women with that of Negro slaves. In this regards he remarks, “He finds the suppression of women an analogy to that of Negroes. Any girl whose hand a man kisses and for whose love he is prepared to dare all, could have set him right.” (Freud 35) Freud felt that no matter what was the position of laws and customs, men and women would always remain to be different. Thus he was fundamentally in opposition to most of the ideas propounded by Mill in *The Subjection of Women*. He asserts, “I believe that all reforming action in law and education would break down in front of the fact that, long before the age at which a man can earn a position in society, Nature has determined woman’s destiny through beauty, charm, and sweetness. Law and custom have much to give women that has been withheld from them, but the position of women will surely be what it is: in youth an adored darling and in mature years a loved wife.” (Mill 181)

Now we move to the feminist texts. The first piece of work we consider is *A Room Of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf. It is the first sustained essay on Feminist literary theory. This room is not literally a room. It means ‘space’, economic freedom, identity, women can write when



they are educated. By educated we do not mean classroom education. It means ‘women’s culture’; she must be educated, given freedom. Virginia Woolf was asked to deliver a lecture on women in fifteenth and sixteenth Century. In this way she answers the question raised by J S Mill as to why there was no female Shakespeare.

Virginia Woolf says that William Shakespeare had a sister; she was as talented as him. Shakespeare was sent to Grammar school for education. His sister was not, but she had the natural talent. When Shakespeare’s sister grew up, her father said that he had found a boy and if she did not marry him he would commit suicide. Women were considered to be property and she was the property of her father. He wanted to transfer that property from himself to the boy he had chosen for Judith. Judith did not like this idea. She felt that property must be consulted. Today we have the concept of new morality. In older times marriage was nothing but transfer of property. Property belongs to one who takes care of it. She had only two ways – either to accept her father’s will or to run away. So she ran away and reached London. There she was befriended by an actor-manager who promised to make her a dramatist (as Mr. Gupta promises Lalita in *Two Virgins*) Later on Judith committed suicide. Virginia Woolf says that this is why we do not have any female Shakespeare. She also gives the reason for the absence of female writers during the earlier times.

John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women* had talked about a woman’s right to her own property. Virginia Woolf also takes up this issue. She relates this with the literature that women created. She assigns the poverty that women had to face as the primary reason for the failure of women to write poetry. “And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry.” (Woolf 78) Mill had given the term ‘a literature of their own’. It is perhaps this phrase that she has modified and named her essay *A Room Of One’s Own*. She again talks about the same idea given by Mill i.e. a woman’s right to her own property.

The period from 1880-1910 was an intensely feminist one. Much of the writing in this period both in America and England, were characterized by a thematic exploration of an *Amazon Utopia* (an imagined place where only women live). They imagined a country fully populated by women and completely isolated from male presence. Elaine Showalter is critical of a fantasy of the autonomous isolated female communities. It is a feminist Utopia that Mill and others are introducing. These utopias are not visions of primary womanhood, a womanhood that is free to define and cultivate its own culture and nature. But these utopias are flights from the male world to culture defined in opposition to the male tradition.

The whole tradition in which nineteenth century women were writing was overshadowed by the male literary tradition. So emancipation from this was a goal of people like J S Mill.

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Writing in 1869, this goal of emancipation triggered an intensely feminist phase, 1880-1910. This was the period in which the writers started imagining an Amazonian female or the theme of *Amazon Utopia*.

Taking into account the argument that the women novelists were trying to outgrow their Victorian women, Showalter criticizes J S Mill. It was actually an act of rescuing women writers for eminent oblivion. So what was emerging was a range of women novelists. As a result of this act the rescuing of stream of minor writers there emerged a prominent stream of women writers. Elaine Showalter says that they were rising like Atlantis from the sea of British Literature. And with this she illustrates that women have had a literature of their own all along. And she also claims that a female imagination emerging from a network of influences. Operative relations between women and their society were important. J S Mill mentioned that we couldn't know without women's literature what women actually felt and wanted because they did not write their innermost feelings. Elaine Showalter supports this observation. In Literature, says Elaine Showalter, "We are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be." (Showalter 99)

She has called the criticism and analysis of the texts written by men by women as feminist criticism. She does not approve of this and says that women should be writers and the critics of that writing. This she has termed as Gynocritics. Discussing Gynocritics she remarks, "The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adopt male models and theories." (Showalter 102) In this way she talks of a critical theory that is independent from all the male influence. This is what Mill, the visionary, had envisaged in the year 1869 and Showalter talks of its realization in 1979. Simone de Beauvoir, has remarked in *The Second Sex* that every man feels himself superior to half of the human race.

3.0 CONCLUSION

In literature the realization of Mill's statement the women should recount their experiences is finally being realized in the various gynopoems and '*bildungsroman*'; e.g. Judith Wright talks about pregnancy and childbirth in the poem "Woman to Man." In another poem "White Asparagus", Sujata Bhatt talks of having sex during pregnancy. Mill has talked about women having a literature of their own in order that the society may be able to know what women think. Most of the novels written by women prove this fact. Though D H Lawrence tried to portray the emotions of women in *Lady Chatterly's lover* and Daniel Defoe tried so in *Moll Flanders*; so did Samuel Richardson in *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded*, but all this was a second hand approach and nobody understood really what women wanted and felt. After the arrival of women on the literary forum, we see that woman are writing what they actually feel. They

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have started writing what they feel in the core of their heart. The French critics say that women should explore their body. According to them women have a thousand pores in their body through which creative fluid oozes out. They feel that this fluid should find expression in literature by women. In this manner we see that these days women are coming forward and talking about their intimate experiences in literature; even about those experience about which they were forbidden to speak about. Now a day's even 'lesbian literature' has come to the fore. It is a whole new genre open before the world. Now women can talk about love, sex, jealousy and fulfillment in love. They freely talk about sexual frustration and desire for the other man.

Most thoughtful people today believe that individuals, both men and women should be valued for their total personality, of which sex is only one, albeit an important part. It is with this perspective that Mill's views should be viewed. In Literature, there are a lot of women writing but as Virginia Woolf said about Shakespeare's sister, "Give her another hundred years.... She will be a poet....In another hundred years' time." (Woolf 102), it did take exactly a hundred years and we have the birth of J. K Rowling who surpassed most of the male authors in terms of popularity, readership as well as net worth.

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