

JOHN RUSKIN AND HIS DEMARCATION OF EDUCATION CONDITIONAL TO GENDER BIAS

Jesna Mariyam Johnson, Madras Christian College, East Tambaram, Chennai

Abstract:

John Ruskin's Sesame and Lilies (1865) is a compendium of two lectures, "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Gardens," that was delivered in December 1864, and published in 1865. Although these lectures emphasize the connections between art, nature, and society, and concerns itself with good education and ideal conduct, the work is also known for its critique of ideal manhood and womanhood. While the first half of the book, "Of Kings' Treasuries," is a critique of Victorian manhood, the second half, "Of Queens' Gardens," is an exhortation to womenfolk to act as moral guides to men, and urges parents also to educate them in like manner. This paper intends to focus on how well John Ruskin has propagated the notion of women being inferior to men even in the field of education with a mesmerising veil, where the Victorian readers failed to understand the real aim behind his beautifully concocted and crafted word.

Key Words: Gender bias, demarcation of education.

Introduction

As Oscar Wilde rightly points out, "Literature always anticipates life..." Moreover, according to the French critic Hippolyte Taine, Literature "was conditioned by three earthy elements: race, milieu, moment" (52), which are also known as the three principal motives or conditioning factors behind any work of art. As such, there exists a close connection of a work to the milieu of the Age to which it belongs. The paper proposes to introduce the topic in the light of the Victorian Age. It was during the Victorian Age, Ruskin delivered the lectures, 'Of King's treasuries' and 'Of Queen's garden'. Victorian Age was an era where power was reserved for men and looking from that context even the accession of Queen Victoria was a paradox where a woman was privileged to rule over the Great Britain. Women were viewed as weaker sex and were subjected to her father, brother, husband and even to the elder son in the private sphere of her life and thus was subordinate to the male authority.

In the public sphere it was always men who made decisions. When the era was dominated with the life stories of Great men in the National Portrait Gallery and the Dictionary of National Biography, women were associated with the subsidiary roles and feminine virtues. They considered men as industrious bread winners and women as their help meets.

'Of King's Treasuries' and 'Of Queen's Garden'

Ruskin states his title 'Of King's treasuries' as a "slight mask" (2). He speaks about the real treasures which are hidden in the books. In the lecture he criticizes English people for wasting money and time in horses rather than on books. He was of the idea that a nation rich in literature would be the best in the world. He advocated clever men to raise their status through sincere and good friends and in this context good books are the good friends. Alongside another important idea that Ruskin propagated was the proper education of boys and the imparting of true masculine virtues.

In 'Of Queen's garden' Ruskin asks women to educate the children, to leave their "park walls and garden gates" (187) to help the sisters in terrible streets and ultimately to transform the world's wilderness into a garden. He says Shakespeare views women to be more capable than men. He quotes women characters of Walter Scott, Dante, and Chaucer. Though he advocated girls' education as same as that of

boys' he believed her work has to be contributed to the social good and not for her personal development.

Thus when 'Of King's Treasuries' was about the proper education of boys and Ruskin's critique of masculinity, 'Of Queen's Garden' is about the education of girls and his notion of ideal femininity. But more than that, 'Of Queen's garden' is described as a honey-tongued defense of the subjection of women.

John Ruskin and His Demarcation of Education Conditional to Gender Bias

Though Ruskin preached and advocated in favour of women's education, there was still a Victorian in him who knowingly or unknowingly supported the subjugation of women's power. There are many instances where he proves that. As mentioned earlier, Ruskin advocated the same curriculum for both men and women. But he gave the freedom to choose about what to read for men and he just guides them whereas in terms of women he brought many instructions like she should read history, she shouldn't read theology because it can make her superstitious, she shouldn't read romantic novels and poetry as it has falsehoods in it, she shouldn't specialise in anything etc. Thus the list of do's and don'ts goes further without giving her the right to opt her choices. Ruskin was also of the opinion that men and women are complementary but men read and studied for his and his own country's benefit whereas he asked to educate women as a source of assistance to men. Her education had nothing to do with her own self or personal development. He further claimed and advocated that there is no need of developing inferiority or superiority complex. Even then he assigned all inferior works to women when compared to men. Ruskin considered women as the mistress of home who creates good atmosphere at home for men who work outside and are forced to face troubles. When men was given the right and freedom to defend the country, she was asked to defend the family economy. She was instructed to study music as it is blessed with its healing power which in return can also create a good atmosphere at home. She was more like a decorative trophy and so as to maintain her beauty she was also asked to train herself in the field of physical education.

'Sesame and lilies' was interpreted by different audiences in different ways. Victorian parents offered it to their daughters as a primer for virtuous behaviour. Schools gave it as an award to promote academic seriousness and success. Women activists of early period found it as a justification to work outside home whereas the twentieth century feminists derided it as a patently anti-feministic work. Thus it's clear that Victorians accepted and eulogised the work whereas the later critics especially feminists despised it. The main reason behind the huge appraisal of the work by Victorians especially the women was because they didn't understand it as a "honey-tongued defence of the subjugation of women". Though we regard Ruskin today as the opponent of women, anti-feminist, enemy of women etc. for Victorian feminists he was the champion of educational reforms.

Conclusion

In 'Of King's Treasuries' men were connected to public spheres but never to the personal or familial spheres whereas in 'Of Queen's garden' women were wholly offered within the framework of personal and familial relationships. Thus to be precise, his concern was not the schooling of girls but the approved model of femininity, thereby promoting the idea that girls should never be superior in knowledge and she should know only as far as it may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, in such beautifully concocted and crafted words.

Works Cited

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