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The Book – a Meaning Construct or a Vehicle for Social Change? Deconstructing Liberal Feminist Discourses – John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women

Introduction

John Stuart Mill's, The Subjection of Women (1869), remains one of the harbingers of women's emancipation and presents a strong moral argument in support of the suffrage movement in late 19th century Victorian England. His work launches an urgent appeal for the need to provide freedom, equal treatment and opportunities to women, so that they can develop their capacities for the full benefit of a liberal democratic society.An imaginary dialogue is established between Mill's significant statement of liberal feminism and his audiences at the time of publishing of the book as well as the new generations, with the purpose of tracing the significance of his book in challenging social structure and discussing crucial problems of social justice, such as gender equality and freedom. Reading the book requires a contextualist approach regarding the historical context as well as dominant political and ideological discourses. Such an approach may also explain many of the perceived 'shortcomings' of his work, as often stated by critics, which can be explained to a great extent by its rootedness in the social structure and moral fabric of Victorian society and the failure of later generations of feminists to account for the influence of this context on the formation of Mill's worldview and on the choice of rhetorical strategies.

More generally, the paper aims to study the creation and interpretation of a book, as an intellectual and philosophical endeavor, embedded in the socio-historical, intellectual and political environment of its time. The interpretation of a literary discourse can be viewed as contextually determined by the power relations existing in the social structure and the various actors involved in its creation,

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publication and consumption/interpretation, not to exclude the existing gatekeepers of ideas, such as publishers and critics. Within this context, it is necessary to point out that book publishing in late nineteenth-century England was a thriving business, providing for the expression of various ideas, to a great extent for women as well, which as a fact could be interpreted as a precondition necessary for the existence of a vibrant public sphere. Or as Schlesinger reflects (87-88) on the contribution of Bourdieu (163-4) in the analysis of the intellectual field, the development of literary and artistic markets created the necessary conditions for "the establishment of properly intellectual professions," which were granted certain autonomy, freed from the oppression of a particular patronage. These new modes of autonomy, provided by the particular state of development of Western capitalist markets, completely changed the role of intellectuals as social critics, moral guardians and active participants in societal reform, especially before the substantial growth of the entertainment market, which started exerting significant pressure on intellectual work and the public sphere (Schlesinger 88).

Methodologically speaking, the analysis of the reception and interpretation of meaning will be based on Stuart Hall's famous essay "Encoding and Decoding" (1980) applied to similar process in media texts and audiences. The essay asserts the polysemy of meaning interpretations of a (media) text. Both encoding and decoding processes, by the producers of a particular discourse and its interpretation by audiences respectively, are seen as related to the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure. Similarly, the reception and interpretation of philosophical ideas disseminated widely through the thriving book-publishing industry of late nineteenth-century England could be seen as related to the cultural and political dispositions of the readership (of the time and of subsequent generations) and their relation to power and access to such intellectual work. As a result, depending on such structural positions and on the ability to recognize particular cultural codes within a specific dominant framework, we could distinguish between a dominant hegemonic meaning (i.e. one that is the preferred meaning suggested by the text), a negotiated one (accepting the message as a whole, but creating a contradictory understanding and allowing for certain reservations), and an oppositional reading (completely disagreeing with the proposed ideas) (Collins 42).

Therefore, in order to deconstruct the meanings “encoded” by authors and account for the interpretative “decoding” strategies of audiences, as well as for the conditions providing for certain interpretative “codes”, it would be necessary to answer some questions, such as the following:

To what extent is a book the product of its time and to what extent does its interpretation belong to the reading of each subsequent generation of audiences?

How is a process of literary production related to audience reception and interpretation?

What is the role of a liberal feminist intellectual, such as John Stuart Mill, in challenging social attitudes and what is his vision of and capacity for transforming social structure?

Which of his ideas have remained rooted in the social, cultural and political milieu of the historical setting and which of them have succeeded in outliving their times, matching current developments in 20th century feminist discourses?

What will be maintained is that judgment of the value and impact of the ideas expressed in a book should be equally based on careful analysis of the social, political and historical milieu of production-consumption processes, on the intellectual history of ideas and that of the interpretation of subsequent generations in novel social contexts. Therefore, a careful balance should be stricken between the extent to which a book has succeeded in challenging the power relations embedded in the social structure of the time of its production and the extent to which its discourse has managed to voice universal ideals that are capable of transcending any historical, cultural and ideological boundaries of interpretation.

The Subjection of Women (1869): Moral Input, Strategic Targeting and Public Reception

A discussion of some issues concerning the intellectual genesis and evolution of Mill’s ideas with particular rhetorical and publishing strategies can throw some light upon processes of establishing proper rapport with his audiences. An important fact that deserves attention is that Mill purposefully chose the time for publishing The Subjection of Women (1869, but written in 1861), as mentioned in his Autobiography, to serve as a vehicle to promote certain ideas in support of the suffragist

movement that was gaining power at the time and meeting more favorable responses (Collini xii; xxxi). Mill himself was one of the founders of the Women's Suffrage Society and an advocate of the cause in the House of Commons. It is true that his liberal feminist convictions pre-date his marriage with Harriet Taylor (Collini xxx), although as he himself confesses, he owes much of the intellectual strength to her ideas and regrets his inability to express them duly in the book, which was perceived by him as their joint work (Robson lxx). The book appeared nine years after Harriet's death, waiting for more favorable times and also after her publication of "The Enfranchisement of Women" in the Westminster (1851), which exerted a profound effect on both sides of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, it was mistakenly taken for Mill's work, or as suggested, its authorship might have been judiciously concealed from the editor (Robson lxxvi-lxxvii), in order to gain wider publicity. In fact, Mill has frequently stated the mutual influence and co-operation with Harriet on shared moral views and ideas. Individual authorship and originality of ideas was for him of "little consequence," as he wrote in his Autobiography (251), since it simply boiled down to "which of them [held] the pen" (ibid.) in putting down their conjoint intellectual effort. After Harriet's death, her daughter, Helen, took over her mother's role and helped Mill complete the book. The idea of bringing to public attention the need of reforming British society and granting women freedom and equality was a revolutionary one and extremely radical within the context of Victorian society even for a social reformist of the stature and reputation of Mill. Many a time has Mill expressed his apprehensions regarding the difficulty of promoting such ideas and stressed his solitary position in opposing dominant discourses (Collini xi-xiv). One of his strategies in overcoming resistance was to appeal to the special role that was to be played by the more liberally-minded within the ruling class in England (ibid.). He also stressed his belief in social progress and the need to wait for the right moment to come for voicing such ideas. Writing The Subjection of Women has actually been a continuation of his life-long interest in principles of equality, law and social justice and part and parcel of his involvement as a Victorian public moralist and social figure with a number of political and moral causes. The 1860s marked the heyday of his reputation and public career and had he published the book earlier, it would have remained unnoticed (Collini vii-viii). We can consider that this was the right time to put the matter of women's emancipation on the public agenda and reach the widest possible audiences achieving the utmost effect of the specific mode of argumentation that he applied (ibid.). Mill's style of writing and particular rhetoric was a school for younger

generations of writers and journalists in Britain and abroad, as written by John Morley in the Fortnightly Review (June, 1873), shortly after his death (cited by Collini viii). It was easily accessible despite the abstract subjects discussed since his language was strong, eloquent and persuasive and the treatises were quite affordable in price, as they were "published at the price of railway novels," in the words of Morley (ibid.). Mill himself was well aware of his growing influence in "getting the ear of England," as he wrote in a letter to Max Kilmann (May 30, 1860) (cited by Collini ix). His thought had previously been considered too radical and sophisticated in expression to gain wider publicity. His conviction as a writer and intellectual in promoting particular moral issues are expressed in his reply to the Neophyte Writer's Society in 1854 to an invitation to become its member:

"Now I set no value whatever on writing for its own sake and have much less respect for the literary craftsman than for the manual labourer except so far as he uses his powers in promoting what I consider true and just. I have on most of the subjects interesting to mankind, opinions to which I attach importance and which I earnestly desire to diffuse…" (cited by Collini x).

The combination of an idealistic credo with moral responsibility and good knowledge of the publishing market and audience demands provided Mill with fruitful results in terms of the favorable reception of The Subjection of Women by readers and critics. We could consider that the popularity of Mill's work was further enhanced by the variety of audiences he could reach. He studied carefully and was well acquainted with the individual preferences of the audiences of particular periodicals, such as the Westminster, The Saturday Review and The Edinburgh Review, which he selected as a means of communication to target wider readership (ibid.). The book itself appeared in three British editions, each of 1500 copies in May, June and October 1869, which were quickly exhausted (Robson lxx). After conquering the domestic market, Mill reached international renown, publishing the book successfully in the U.S. the same year and having it translated almost simultaneously into German, French, Danish, Italian, Polish, and Russian (ibid.). Of the immense popularity of the book also testifies Mill's rich correspondence, consisting of readers' responses that none of his works previously received (ibid.). As an intellectual and politician he demonstrated successfully a sense of moral responsibility both in writing and in active policy making. We could say that Mill remained strongly involved with problems of the suffrage movement until the end of

his life. One shouldn't avoid the fact that he was a staunch supporter not only of women's suffrage, but also of important legislation, such as the Married Women's Property Bills, the Divorce Act, and the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (Shanley and Pateman 169). In other words, Mill was capable of making full use of his intellectual capacity, public reputation and political influence in order to challenge dominant beliefs and promote important ideas and legislation. In this, he applied a full-blown strategy for reaching particular audiences. This helped to establish The Subjection of Women as an important symbol in the struggle for women's emancipation for generations to come and as an intellectual tool for challenging patriarchal discourses, promoting egalitarianism and the principles of liberalism and social justice.

The Intellectual Genesis of Mill's Ideas

Let's focus in more detail on the particular ideas and philosophical tenets expressed in The Subjection of Women. We could say that Mill's contribution to a field of knowledge should be ascribed to his successful entwining of liberal with feminist ideals, wherein the significance of his work lies.Liberalism was developed as a doctrine in the early 17th century in the works of Hobbes, Spinoza and Locke. They forwarded the ideas of freedom, individualism and equality, reacting against the Aristotelian vision of society as a static hierarchy in which an individual could fit only in the particular niche provided for a social stratum. Despite the fact that the founding fathers of liberalism might have been critical of the Aristotelian vision of a fixed stratification of society, they failed to recognize women as equal individuals (Pietarinen in Arnaud and Kingdom 125). This can be concluded from the division between public and private domains, which is very clearly outlined in their philosophy, as well as from the pre-eminence they gave to male patriarchal power. For Hobbes, for instance, family was considered only to be an example of a patriarchal institution. In a similar manner, Locke ascribed the legal and customary subjection of women to nature (Okin 200). In this sense, The Subjection of Women can be deemed to be one of the important links that had to be established between liberalism and feminism.

Mill's work made significant observations on the nature of gender inequality in society, its origins, sources of legitimizing, and means of improving the social system by providing women with an equal status. For Mill, freedom and equality between the sexes could be achieved first and

foremost by establishing the necessary conditions for equal opportunity. He explained the differences between men and women not by using the arguments of biological determinism, but as the result of socialization, poor education and narrow opportunities within a male-dominated society. For Mill equal opportunity means women's legal right to vote and participate in social and political life, the control over property, the right to divorce and to develop in any professional field. Such observations on the nature of gender inequality are key arguments in contemporary feminist rhetoric, ascribing gender differences to processes of socialization and the exercise of domination by various forms of patriarchal power.

Mill's active engagement in drafting particular legislation to support gender equality, as well as other works on social progress and change, testify to his conviction that a serious legal and institutional reform is needed to guarantee equal rights, not to the exclusion of state participation. In such terms, he comes even closer to conflict perspectives in gender sociology, reflecting on the maintenance of the structures of inequality in society and the need for institutional reform. Much closer to functionalist perspectives, however, is Mill's analysis of the roots and nature of male domination, which is presented in the first part of the book. For him, as an empiricist, it was important that the exercise of patriarchal tyranny was justified. The oppressors, he claimed, should provide proof of the right to wield power over women and suppress them to the state of slavery. This very literary parallel of the condition of women with other marginalized social groups, the direct association between subjection and slavery, can be found in the works of other early feminist writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Astell (Arnaud and Kingdom 141). The nature of such oppression, according to Mill, is legal and customary, but also theoretical in character. For him it is an obvious fact that the legal system simply mirrored the long-established status quo and the relationship between men and women, which relied heavily on arguments about physical inequality and biological differences. Given that an ideal state of equality between the sexes never existed, Mill considers that people have never been able to understand what benefits a society could gain from women's emancipation. Nevertheless, such a system of inequality is not perceived by him as intentional. There is no "deliberation" or "forethought" in it, Mill concludes (Mill in Gray 475), but the "law of the strongest" that is particularly functional in gender stratification (ibid. 476). This law is provided with durable institutional support to guarantee its continuity, but power is

diffused in intricate ways, so that such bondage is seen as accepted voluntarily by women, without any protest (ibid. 484). As a result, Mill establishes that men are the ones who reap the benefits of the services provided by women both physically and mentally. Consequently, he proposes one means of resistance against this form of oppression – the professionalization of women and, especially, their growing prominence in the literary field. Gaining such a position in society could be considered not only a good means of subsistence for women, but also a tool for voicing particular problems in the struggle for equality.

A certain Weberian stance could be traced in Mill's arguments regarding the wielding of patriarchal power, its legitimizing through rational legal and traditional customary authority. Weber's understanding of domination could also be applied in the sense that its imposing should be seen as relational, requiring at least a minimum of voluntary compliance and obedience on the part of the oppressed (Weber 212). Similar arguments are expressed by contemporary feminists, who analyze processes of submission through ideological power maintained by patriarchal values and traditions. They develop the argument towards the internalization of such ideology through socialization processes, keeping women perpetually at a disadvantage. Socialization can be seen, in such terms, as affecting different cognitive structures in processing information, the internalization of social roles and expectations, as well as the formation of a self-image in women, which is always inferior to that of men (Hess, Markson and Stein 198-201).

Analyzing structures of inequality and the maintenance of power is for Mill done with the purpose not only of achieving social justice, but also reforming society as a whole for the mutual benefit of everyone. The origins of such ideas could be traced to other important sources of influence on Mill's writing, such as the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, his father, James Mill, the association of the Unitarian Radicals and the ideas of the early socialists. Mill and Harriet Taylor were equally involved in the association of the Unitarian Radicals in the 1830s in their intellectual and artistic pursuit to reform society. One of the ideas they were most particularly interested in within this context was the relationship between men and women. The Unitarian journal, The Monthly Review, published some of the works written by Mill and Taylor on gender equality and also those of other prominent feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Martineau. The Unitarian Radicals are considered to have played an important role for the change of heart that occurred in Mill's

utilitarian thought after the identity crisis he suffered in 1826 (Rossi 37). Critics consider this to be the watershed period for him, during which he managed to overthrow the authority of ideas of his father, a follower and a close friend of Jeremy Bentham. In an attempt to diverge from his previous dependency, Mill succeeded to infuse his utilitarian beliefs with more idealistic fervor. However, there is something that he inherited from Bentham, which is namely, the denial of the innate differences between men and women and the support of the female vote (Okin 204). As for his father, although he did not subscribe to the idea of female suffrage, he also demanded more freedom for women. Apart from utilitarian reasoning, the idea of equal rights in Mill's writing could be traced back to the influence of the early French and English socialists, such as Thompson and Enfantin. However, it is Mill as a utilitarian thinker, who wrote that women should be released from the shackles of legal oppression. As a result, their liberated spirit and unexplored capacity in different social fields might yield the cherished utilitarian maximization of happiness as the utmost social benefit. The increased happiness of women was interpreted by Mill as contributory to the overall improvement of humanity. It would also help create a society that relies on justice as one of its primary virtues. The liberal ideals of individual freedom for both sexes and their unrestricted competition in the public sphere were seen by Mill as supplementary prerequisites in this process. Nevertheless, some feminist critics, such as Gatens (30 cited in Szapuova 188), find this argument deficient, as Mill seemed to neglect women's equality "per se" in favor of the social benefits that could be achieved as a result of the change of the traditional roles of women. As a means of comparison, we could point out that contemporary minority discourses seem to have appropriated the same rhetoric of equality as beneficial to society in general, as a strategic tool in policy making.

Mill was also adept in analyzing the women's social movement's potential for attaining favorable results in Britain of his time. He duly accounted for the advance made by organized protest for extending parliamentary suffrage to women, which was gaining towards its collective and international momentum (Mill in Gray 484). However, in Mill's opinion, the conditions, which enslaved women, such as the use of sentiments, poor education, religion and fear, were so strong that he was led to the conviction that there was little possibility for women to rebel collectively, unlike other oppressed classes, due to deeply inlaid structural presuppositions (ibid. 480).

Mill commented on the constructedness of the female image, quite similarly to contemporary feminists. Social customs, apart from legal inequality, according to Mill, created the fake ideal of the female character of submission, self-denial and abnegation. Women were seen as having no life besides that of their husband and their children, leaving their minds at an underdeveloped stage, since the only value they were taught to nourish was that of physical attractiveness. For Mill, the inherent "disability" of women and their exclusion from competition is mainly ascribed to the support of laws and institutions. There is one exceptional case provided by Mill, as an example, that of royalty, in which lineage and social status and not sex play a decisive role. Only in this case women were allowed to stand out as skilled performers in politics and government (ibid. 490). In all other instances, however, women in nineteenth-century England were paradoxically excluded from positions of power and subjected to numerous disabilities by both legislation and social institutions, which Mill considered to be a relic of an old world (ibid. 491). Mill placed his firm belief in social progress, similarly to other Victorians, living in an age of great social transformations and the Industrial Revolution, which was to provide the necessary conditions for female emancipation in the future.

Discussing the present subjection of women, however, Mill commented that it was made most explicit within the private domain of the family i.e. of marriage as an institution. Marriage in Victorian England was generally arranged with the forceful contribution of the father of the girl and the church. After getting married, a woman assumed the role of a mere servant and had no right to attain any property. What is seen by Mill as an outrageous injustice is the fact that legislature itself gave husbands the position of sovereign in marriage. In case a wife murdered her husband, it was not surprising that the crime was called "petty treason" compared to "high treason", the former of which provided for even more severe punishment. The legal position of women in Victorian England, Mill concludes, was worse than that of slaves (Mill in Gray 503). The reason for such a condition is seen in the fact that no slave could hold such attachment to his master to the extent to which a wife devoted every minute of her life to her husband. She had no right to escape from him, even if he turned out to be a brutal tyrant, nor had any legal rights over her children after the husband's death (ibid. 504). Mann and Spinner-Halev (12) comment on Mill's comparison of marriage to a form of bondage akin to contemporary radical feminists. Similarly, Keith Burgess-

Jackson (72 cited in Mann and Spinner-Halev 2) considers Mill's views on the social and legal status of women more in line with contemporary radical than liberal feminists. Mill's idea of marriage, in general, is quite modern, as he suggested that marriage should be made to resemble a business contract on a voluntary basis in which there would be a division of powers of both parties in their special "department" (Mill in Gray 512-513), similarly to the contemporary idea of the egalitarian family in sociology. Joint property and separate interest in financial matters are further advocated by him as a solution to economic dependence, together with the need for a complete legal reform in family legislation. Nevertheless, the liberation of women for him meant not only economic independence and legal equality, but also a reform in education, social customs, and in the entire nature of the relationship between the spouses, showing greater respect for individual needs, mutual understanding and friendship.

Mill's ideas on the wielding of patriarchal power and the need of social reform to guarantee gender equality were extremely radical for his time and provoked different responses with audiences and critics. A reviewer of The Subjection of Women, for example, accused him of imagining himself of playing a moralizing and enlightening role of extremely unpopular ideas (Robson xix). Another contemporary of Mill, however, John Morley, reflected on the grandeur of Mill's ideas and on the value of his "moral thoroughness" in the following way: "The value of this wise and virtuous mixture of boldness with tolerance, of courageous speech with courageous reserve has been enormous" (cited in Robson xix). For Mill's contemporaries, undertaking the defense of women's rights both in writing and in policy making was an extremely bold act, indeed, to the success of which only testifies the popularity of the ideas that his last book, The Subjection of Women, managed to create and challenge well-established dominant positions within the social structure of Victorian society.

Present Reception and Contemporary Points of Criticism

From a present point of view, however, contemporary critics find Mill's work deficient in a number of respects. The change of perspective, of the socio-historical setting, of the cultural codes and symbols for interpretation as well as of the entire feminist discourse from a position of dependence to a well-established social paradigm within societal discourses with a long tradition and multiple

voices on issues of identity and power, has provided for certain points of criticism that fail to account for the particular context that was in place almost a century and a half ago when the book was written. This presupposes the fact that contemporary critics can be seen as developing negotiated meanings of interpretation at times, while at others, completely oppositional.

More particularly, Mill has been attacked for his failure to discuss properly the division of labor within the family, sexual politics and for supporting the idea of "separate" domains for both sexes. It is true that Mill rejected biological determinism and the distinction between nature and culture, traditionally ascribed to gender division within society and the family. Nevertheless, some present authors have an oppositional reading of Mill's ideas and have accused him of revisionism for his insistence on the idea that when women obtained their full freedom, they would undeniably choose the domestic realm, or in other words, what nature dictated to them (Okin 230). In addition, his acceptance of the traditional division of labor within the family is interpreted as one of his shortcomings to perceive the participation in household duties and childrearing as contributing to the process of establishing friendship between the spouses (Shanley 175). Early liberalism has been criticized by feminists (Patman 190) on the grounds that it supported gender distinctions and the division between specific roles within public and private domains. The private domain was associated with the role of women as mothers, who were expected to bring up children and preserve particular moral and ethical values. Women, in this sense, were perceived as bearers of morality and had to be endowed with such high qualities as love, altruism and self-sacrifice. This distinction is very clear in Mill's essay and is generally typical of the frame of thinking even of other feminists of the period, as well as of later second-wave feminists, who would insist on sexual difference (Szapuova 186). Nevertheless, Mill was able to look deeper in the ideological purposes behind such a distinction. For him, there was deep irony in the fact that those who have been proclaimed to be "better," were made to serve and obey the "worse" (Mill in Gray 554). Similarly, Morales (2005) as well as Mann and Spinner-Halev (2010) have presented a negotiated reading of this part of Mill's gender theorization. As defenders of Mill's radicalism, they argue that the inequality of power is corrupting of both genders, and as Mill considers, it is the main source of oppression in society (Morales 100). The family, however, was elevated by Mill to the position of the most fundamental institution in sustaining equality and justice. By such means, women were

not simply confined to an unimportant private sphere, but assumed to play a central role in sustaining society, even bigger than that Mill provided for the state and legislature (Mann and Spinner-Halev 3). Therefore, we could conclude that the centrality of the family and the role of women as moral guardians in the overall Victorian system of values have often been undermined by contemporary feminists who fail to consider the historical context that determined the persistence of some ideas, which seem backward and unacceptable from a present point of view.

A further point of strong criticism is that for Mill women seem to need to improve their education and cultivate specific qualities in order to make better companions of their husbands. This might have been a tactical posture to make men in general support their wives' educational endeavors. Nevertheless, this question is a point of distinction between him and his wife in the earlier essays as well as in the Emancipation of Women. Contrary to his ideas, Harriet Taylor wrote that women should be educated with the purpose of gaining solid knowledge for themselves and for the world (Harriet Taylor in Rossi 42-43), which is actually the argument of many contemporary feminists.

Mill also did not openly support divorce in the Subjection of Women. In this respect Harriet chose a far more radical direction by rejecting any laws of marriage and by subscribing to the idea that a woman alone should provide for her children after the divorce. This, according to her (in "Early Essays on Marriage and Divorce") (Rossi 88), implies that women should be more careful in deciding how many children they should have. In contrast, Mill seemed to remain more conventionally Victorian and fought shy of dealing with issues of sexual policy and reproduction. Okin (203) interprets Mill's silence on such important matters as an attempt to preserve the reputations of both his wife and himself from public attacks. Nevertheless, it would be important to point out that if Mill had not adopted a revolutionary position in certain aspects of his written work, he did it in his political activities.

Despite some obvious lapses – especially when seen from a present point of view – concerning reproduction and the division of labor in The Subjection of Women, which are usually taken out of the original context of the book, the work is still considered an important contribution to feminist thought. It has been acknowledged as a founding source of liberal feminist ideas for its insistence on liberty and self-determination, and the provision of opportunities for the full development of women's potential.

Conclusion

For the full understanding of Mill's The Subjection of Women it is necessary to emphasize the importance of its socio-historical and intellectual context. The significance of Mill's work undeniably lies in the break with traditional patriarchal thought and the advancement of the liberal feminist ideas of freedom and equality. Studying the contextual grounds of the genesis of his ideas and the constraints he faced may surprisingly help recognize the persistence of the latter even within contemporary societies. In this sense, Mill's experience and his intellectual and tactical posture in promoting The Subjection of Women may point at finding more successful ways for dealing with such constraints. Therefore, it could be worth accounting for the different positions audiences apply in meaning-making processes as well as for the overall societal context. Moreover, we shouldn't underestimate the role of the book as both intellectual and cultural product, subject to particular market principles, which can throw further light on understanding its overall significance. Mill's book The Subjection of Women was a key source of inspiration and it held a radical transformative power in questioning patriarchal hegemony in the time of its writing. Nevertheless, despite certain contemporary controversies over the "encoded" meaning of his ideas, the fact that it still succeeds in challenging public vision and that it provokes heated discussions stands in relation to the relevance of the multiplicity of meanings it creates and which generations of audiences have been capable of deconstructing and negotiating on its literary terrain.

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