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Ralph Waldo Emerson & Women's Rights

Dr. Ekta Sawhney, Assistant Professor, Deptt. of Language & Literature, Alliance University, Bangalore.

Article Received: 8/4/2022,

Article Accepted: 29/04/2022,

Published online: 30/04/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.4.37

Abstract:

Feminism as a concept is not a new term. It has been in use for more than two centuries. Time and again, there have been philosophers, motivators and mystics who have espoused the cause of women's rights and stood up against atrocities on women. One such person was the American mystic, essayist, philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essays and works Emerson gives us a clear picture of the rights of a woman. Being a liberal man of progressive ideas, he believes that women should be given their rightful place in the society because they are equal to or even superior to the male species. This paper elaborates on the views of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a male Feminist of his times.

Keywords: Feminism, women, liberal, Emerson, Rights

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American mystic, preacher & writer was born on 25th May 1803. This day fell under a certain arrangement of celestial bodies when all the Planets were aligned on one side of the Sun - A Syzygy. This event occurs rarely and only once in 179 years. Anybody born under this astronomical arrangement was destined for greatness (McAlear 11). He was fortunate enough to have both elder and younger siblings.

From his childhood, Emerson was surrounded by strong-willed, independent, free-thinking women. His mother supported the whole family by doing odd jobs, after his father's untimely death. She was the one who inculcated in the young Emerson a fondness for reading and learning. He was also indebted to her for giving him an insatiable appetite for lifelong learning and spiritual progress ("Ralph Waldo Emerson and Women's Rights").

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Another woman who had a lasting effect on Emerson was his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Unabashed and at times voracious, she was the most powerful influence on his nephew Ralph. His home was also visited by intellectual, powerful women of their times. The women of his youth were brilliant and strong headed.

The nineteenth century American women were certainly in need of certain radical and revolutionary changes in their position vis-a-vis that of men. During this time, men and women were expected to fill different spheres of society. Men were expected to live a public life - drinking, socializing, or working. On the other hand, women were expected to be home bound, taking care of the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Though exceptions to the rule did exist, but they were very rare (Sailus).

Emerson came to know of the Women's Rights movement later in his life through conversations and correspondence with his friend Margaret Fuller, who had done a lot of work around women's rights and emancipation through her thought-provoking books and write-ups. Initially hesitant to express his thoughts on the issue of the rights of women, later he agreed to and attended a women's right Convention in Boston in 1855. On September 20 that year, he delivered an address called "Woman" in which he espoused the cause of women's rights and their equality with men. He said,

Man is the will, and Woman the sentiment. In this step of humanity, Will is the rudder, and Sentiment the sail: when Woman affects to steer, the rudder is only a masked sail. And they give entirely to their affections; set their whole fortune on the die, lose themselves easily in the glory of their husband and children. Man stands astonished at a magnanimity he cannot pretend to. (Allen 559)

The problem with most of the male populace of Emerson's time was that they did not stand "astonished" by the "magnanimity" of women. They took her responsibilities at home for granted. Society did not recognize their individual existence apart from their male counterparts. But Emerson was sensitive enough to raise his voice and talk in his lecture about, "the right to education, to avenues of employment, to equal rights of property, to equal rights in marriage, to the exercise of the professions and of suffrage" (Allen 560).

Emerson argued that if women were not allowed to vote, they should also not be taxed. He also raised concern on their right to Franchise and said that,

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“if the women demand votes, offices and political equality with men . . . it must not be refused . . . [their] aspiration of this century will be the code of the next”
 (“Ralph Waldo Emerson & Women’s Rights”).

Emerson stressed on women to be independent, free-thinking individuals capable of taking their own decisions. About women having equal share in public affairs, he commented, “it is they and not we that are to determine it”. In his Journals, Emerson condemned those poets and philosophers who, “looked on every woman as an imposter”. He supported the women’s movement and declared it as “no whim, but an organic impulse, - a right and proper inquiry, - honouring to the age”; of the “good signs of the times”, he stated, “this is of the best”. The nineteenth century women were forbidden to use their intelligence vis-a-vis men. Whenever they did so, it was dismissed as “women’s intuition”, and not recognized as a mark of intellectuality. Emerson opposed this view and said that what appeared as women’s intuition was in fact a quicker thought process.

“They learn so fast and convey the result so fast, as to outrun the logic of their slow brother” (Myerson 216).

There was another fact too, that supported this view. All through his life Emerson stressed on the power of intuition in a man’s life and he did not think of intuition as being subservient to intellect. It was equal to it, or even possibly higher.

According to Emerson, women influenced the progress of society. He said,

“Any remarkable opinion or movement shared by women will be the first sign of revolution” (Myerson 216).

The woman who completely fitted in Emerson’s vision of womanhood was his dead wife, Ellen Tucker. He called her his mate by spiritual affinities and not by sex, in his Journals. She was “complete in her perfections”, wrote Emerson and continued to quote her sayings and give her examples throughout his work. Emerson had high regard for women as intellectuals, literary and public figures. His intimate circle of intellectuals included some of the most well-known women literary figures as Elizabeth Hoar, Louisa May Alcott, Sarah Ripley and off course Margaret Fuller, from whom he derived most of his progressive thoughts on women. Like Margaret and like most of the thinkers of his time, Emerson accepted the theory of the innate differences between the two sexes. But like Margaret Fuller, he believed that the best and the most interesting natures had both the elements. He said that a highly endowed man with good

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intellect and good conscience is a man woman. Emerson also quoted the Hindus, when he said in his Journals that “Man is man as far as he is triple, that is, a man-woman-child” (Myerson 218). Thus, he concluded that,

“the finest people marry the two sexes in their own person. Hermaphrodite is then, the symbol of the finished soul” (Myerson 218).

Emerson also observed that the feminine element was always to be found in men of genius. Emerson, in his address on Woman, said that women excelled in all areas of life. They were, as contemporary wisdom insisted, not an image of imperfect men, but self-sufficient beings, complete in themselves. He was especially vocal in his charge for women’s rights. He set out the agenda for the women’s rights convention of 1850 by demanding for women, “the right to [equality in] education” and “employment, to equal rights of property, to equal rights in marriage, to the exercise of the professions; of suffrage” (221).

Emerson was aware of the economic deprivation of women of the 19th century. Even though this issue was not touched upon by any of the Feminists’ Movements of the age, yet it was Emerson who seriously gave a thought to it. He did not see women, in any way less to their male counterparts and insisted that impoverished and working-class women should retain their dignity.

A study of Emerson’s thoughts and comments on women makes one realise that he was far ahead of his times in proposing measures and steps for the modern-day Feminist Movements. Much of what he said around two centuries back holds true even to this day.

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