

Aspects of the Influence of John Stuart Mill on Some Victorian Writers With a Specific reference to Tennyson, Arnold, James Thomson (B.V), Hardy, Dickens, Wilde, and Charlotte Brontë

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Abstract:

The ideas adopted by John Stuart Mill(1806-1873) have their influence on English literature in the Victorian Age. This is because these ideas are in harmony with the spirit of the age which is characterized by a strong sense of inquiry and curiosity concerning God, Nature, Religion and so many other serious matters. Moreover, these ideas are a sharp reflection of many aspects of the social, economic, political and intellectual life in the Victorian Age.

This paper is devoted to study some of the aspects of the influence of J.S.Mill on Some Victorian Writers. It traces this influence on the literary production of some distinguished Victorian poets and novelists such as Tennyson, Arnold, Dickens, Hardy and some other ones.

The characteristic feature which best differentiates the Victorian Age from other ages is that it is an age of transition. This fact is firmly stressed by J.S.Mill in his essay “The Spirit of the Age”. He says that “The first of the leading peculiarities of our present age is that it is an age of transition”.¹ In fact, the Victorian Age is pregnant with changes in every respect of life. The great scientific discoveries which have taken place in that period have led to a severe struggle between science and the traditional doctrines, especially Religion. These scientific discoveries cultivate a new spirit—the spirit of Inquiry. This new spirit characterizes most of man’s attitudes to God, Nature, and other serious matters.

In consequence of the spread of the spirit of Inquiry, Religion fails to heal the breach which exists between it and science. While science backs up its claims with tangible facts derived from real life, Religion offers nothing but symbolic stories and pieces of moral advice taken from the Bible, which, in its turn, can no longer cope with the changes of life and satisfy the intellectual hunger of Victorian people. It is worth mentioning that the spirit of Inquiry is strongly opposed by the Oxford Movement which tends to stand against “the liberalism of the day” and “to establish a real church.”²

On the same level, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution should be noticed as a turning-point in the intellectual history of mankind. Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859) is a highly influential book, for it sheds a doubtful light on so many old beliefs. Darwinism shatters the traditional belief that Man is the image of God on Earth and the belief in Nature as a symbol of God’s greatness :

The idea of evolution-which was current and influential long before the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species in 1859 dramatized and popularized it-did of course contribute to the doubt that man had his origins in, and his nature from, the special purpose of a divine creator ...³

These dramatic changes in the way of man’s thinking are paralleled by many social, political and economic changes. Politically, there is an utter rejection of the traditional system

of representation in the English parliament, which has been based on the standards of the landed gentry and the moneyed property-holders. There is an increasing need to reform this electoral system which should be replaced by a new democratic system that enables the public to be fairly represented in the parliament. Voices have been raised calling for the transference of the political power from the aristocracy to the people who are more inclined to have a representative government than to adhere to an aristocratic system.⁴

The Victorian Society witnesses the rise of so many upheavals mainly caused by the spread of industrialism and capitalism which have led to creating deplorable living conditions in England. There is also the replacement of the feudal and agrarian order of the past by a democratic and industrial society which is one of the important social changes that occurred at that time.⁵

The economic world has its own changes which have their great importance in shaping the character of nineteenth Century England. There is the emergence of England from the rigid economic system of the past into the dynamic world of capitalism. The Victorian Age is the age of many historic economic theories such as Adam Smith's principle of *laissez fair* and Mill's Utilitarianism which will be mentioned later on. This principle gives the green light to the individual property and also encourages industrial capitalism and commercial growth.⁶

Under the pressure of all these intellectual, social, political and economic conflicting values, the Victorians are left struggling, but in vain. Man is left with a disillusioned view of life, in a hostile universe with no one to provide him with ready-made rules of conduct. The outcome of this bleak situation is a severe state of psychological disharmony between the mind and the soul together with a state of spiritual decay. In the 1880's Nietzsche summarized this chaotic situation with his agonized cry "God is dead".

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) is an outstanding philosopher in the Victorian Age. Much of his intellectual production is very influential and has a great impact on English literature. Indeed, his influence can be traced in every aspect of the Victorian life: socially, politically, economically and intellectually.

Mill's attitude to Religion is typically Victorian, for it echoes skepticism and atheism. This attitude is best expressed by his own words when he says: "I looked upon modern Religion exactly as I did upon the ancient Religion, as something which in no way concerned me"⁷. Further, his outlook to Religion is based on scientific ground: "We are looking at [this] Subject not from the point of view of reverence but from that of Science."⁸

As a Utilitarian philosopher, Mill charges himself more with considering the "Utility of Religion" than with its truth or morals, since the Victorian Age is characterized by shaken and weak beliefs"⁹ In his essay on "The Utility of Religion", Mill comes up with the conclusion that "Early religious teaching has owed its power over mankind rather to its being early than to its being religious"¹⁰. Here, he implicitly equates Religion with legends and superstitions in which primitive men believe. What Mill attempts to establish is the "Religion of Humanity" which is free from the main intellectual difficulty of orthodoxy"¹¹. " He holds that the church is an obstacle which hinders the intellectual progress of man by its imposed traditions which are no longer valid. This negative attitude to the church taken by Mill stems from his liberalism against which the Oxford Movement reacted. At the same time, he calls for Rationalism; reliance on reason to discover truth. This Rationalism represents a threat to religious faith or authority.

Mill's outlook on Religion is introduced in Victorian poetry. Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is a good representative example in which the poet speaks confidently and

reflects the spirit of his age—the spirit of skepticism and doubt-despite affirming strong belief in God:

**I Stretch lame hands of faith and grope.
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is lord of all
And faintly trust the larger hope.**

“In Memoriam”,(LV,17-20)¹²

He looks at faith as a matter of feeling; something spontaneous and can not be proved.

In his famous poem “Dover Beach”, Matthew Arnold echoes the same note of skepticism with a sense of bewilderment because of the loss of faith in an age of materialism and spiritual decay. Here, the poet uses the image of the “Sea of faith” which is retreating under the impact of all the conflicting values which shape the frame of the social political, and intellectual life in the Victorian Age:

**The Sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long withdrawing roar,
Retreating...**

(Dover Beach (21-26))

James Thomson (B-V) is another Victorian poet who expresses his attitude that there is no God to give meaning to life. The poet draws a picture of the world which sinks in after darkness with the full disappearance of God:

**And now at last authentic word I bring
Witnessed by every dead and living thing
Good tidings of great joy for you, for all
There is no God, no Fiend with names divine.
“The City of Dreadful Night” (722-725))**

In the light of these examples, one can see that Religion ceases to be that spiritual strength upon which man can rely in his confrontation of the new life.

The Victorian Age also witnesses the shattering of the Romantic Wordsworthian Passion for Nature. Instead of being a symbol of God’s goodness and a source of man’s delectation, Nature is looked upon as an illogical hostile enemy which is completely indifferent to the affairs of men. In his essay on “Nature”, Mill raises questions such as “What ‘nature’ is it that we are invited to follow?”¹³ In this essay Mill does not only discuss the external world but also the internal world of human nature. As for the external nature he holds that Nature can not be God’s work because of the “perfect and absolute recklessness of the natural forces”¹⁴. He sees that there is an incomprehensible discrepancy between Nature’s everyday severe performance and the traditional belief in Nature as a symbol of God’s goodness or the Rousseauist belief in the goodness of Nature. He comes up with the conclusion that “Either God wills misery or that he is not omnipotent”¹⁵.

Moreover Mill has his own point of view concerning human nature. He holds that “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it but a tree which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.”¹⁶ This is a new conception of human nature in the light of which it is regarded as an organic entity which denies the assumption of its being based on a pre-designed organization. In other words, Mill does not

agree with Rousseau's theory of the natural goodness of man since man has the potential capacity of everything in his own "inward forces". He thinks that "nearly every respectable attribute of humanity is the result, not of instinct, but of victory over instinct"¹⁷.

Hardy's The Return of the Native is a good example in which almost all these new perspectives concerning Nature and human nature are clearly reflected. First of all, Hardy, in this novel, presents an image of Nature as a principal character that is mainly characterized by hostility, indifference to the affairs of men, timelessness and ugliness. Egdon Heath, which is fully described by the writer, reflects nothing of the beautiful Wordsworthian natural landscape. Rather, it is "the home of strange phantoms; and it was found to be the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity..."¹⁸ As for the new concept of human nature, Hardy does not follow the traditional view of man as a pre-designed tool that performs its defined role. A close reading of this novel will show how Clym, the hero, does not behave according to what his mother and the other villagers expect him to do (to go back to Paris instead of staying on Egdon Heath). Although shocking, Clym's behavior reflects the new type of character that has the ability to grow in a completely different way, according to the inward potentials of man, not his own society.

The same Victorian attitude to Nature is maintained by Tennyson in his "In Memoriam". Tennyson holds that if Nature is the creation of God, then God is disease, murder and Natural disasters. Or if not, then either there is no God and no immortality, but only Nature, indifferent to all moral values, or else God and Nature are locked in an incredible and inexplicable strife:

Are God and Nature then at Strife

That Nature lends such evil dreams?

So careful of the type she seems,

So careless of the single life.

"In Memoriam"(LV,5-8)

The Victorian Age is also the age of the widespread of utilitarianism which represents the corner-stone of Mill's life and thought. Basil Willey says that Mill's aim in his essay on "Utilitarianism" is to "show that Utilitarianism will yield a morality as lofty as any 'transcendental' or religious system"¹⁹. The essence of Utilitarianism lies in its call for the achievement of the happiness "Pleasure" of the greatest number, not of the noble few. It stresses that the happiness of the individual lies in that of others. This means that Utilitarianism is a Secular philosophical system in which the individual should give superiority to the love of others. Hence, the Utilitarian spirit is a great assault upon Christianity for several reasons. Firstly, it contradicts Christianity which holds that we can not love our fellows much unless we love God more. Secondly, in giving such a bias to "Pleasure", Mill contradicts the spirit of Religion which sees that life has a "nobler" end than pleasure. Thirdly, it is a reaction against the values of the Church as well as a call for what is called by Mill the "Religion of Humanity"²⁰.

To illustrate Mill's Utilitarianism, we can select two suggestive examples. The first one is Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray in which the novelist shows how the domination of the idea of pleasure leads Dorian to commit suicide since he can not recover the beauty which the lifeless image of himself has despite his readiness to give even his soul for that.²¹

The second example is Charles Dickens's Hard Times in which we can find a good example of the negative literal application of Utilitarianism to everyday life in the Victorian Society. Gradgrind's Utilitarianism creates a bleak world of ugliness and selfishness in which his own family lives: "At the end of the story the parent utilitarian[Gradgrind] and his family look back in sorrow on avoidable unhappiness and lost opportunities"²². The concept of

“Utility” is shown to be a failure as Bounderby makes no real benefit of applying this concept to his own life throughout the story. He is shown to be as fragile as glass. He can not stand the blow of Louisa who has left him at the end of the novel.

Feminism is another field in which Mill’s ideas have greatly flourished. Mill’s essay on “The Subjection of Women” can be read as a reaction against the complete obliteration of the role of woman in society and the deprivation of her natural rights as a human being. He attacks the Victorian conception of women as a submissive wife whose duties are limited within the boundaries of her husband’s house. He strongly believes that:

the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes-the legal subordination of one sex to the other-is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances of human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.²³

This new perspective of woman establishes its presence in the literary production of many Victorian Writers. Tennyson, Ruskin, George Eliot, and Charlotte Brontëe are among the leading exponents of this view of woman.²⁴ Tennyson’s "The Princess" is a representative poem in which the princess Ida “represents the most advanced thought. She is the new ‘woman’ in revolt against her legal and social bondage.”²⁵ Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyne is an illustrative example in which Brontë successfully diagnoses the diseased situation of women through the heroine of the novel as a mouthpiece:

**Millions [of women] are condemned to a stiller doom than mine,
and millions are in silent revolt against their lot...
Women..need exercise of their faculties...they suffer from too rigid
a restraint, too absolute a Stagnation.**²⁶

These words clearly echo Mill’s liberal views of women which break the shackles of the past and the Medieval concept of woman which reduces her to a tool that satisfies the whimsical needs of man. Accordingly, woman is looked upon as a source of moral inspiration. In an age of spiritual decay and religions despair, the role of woman is distinct. She must play an extremely important role in elevating her husband’s intellectual, moral, and spiritual nature. In this respect, Charles Kingsley’s Yeast presents an image of woman as an emblem of self-sacrifice.²⁷

In conclusion, Mill’s new intellectual ideas and philosophical product both stem from and shape the spirit of the Victorian Age. They have their effect in igniting the Victorian mind with the required zeal and enthusiasm to break the shackles of the obsolete ways and modes of thinking and to mark the entrance of England into the modern world . Mill’s ideas have also given English literature a new flavour, a colour of realism and a down-to-earth treatment .

Notes :

¹ John Stuart Mill, Mill’s Essays on Literature and Society (London: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p.30.

² Basil Willey, Nineteenth-Century Studies (New York: Columbia University, 1977), p.85.

³ Frank Kermode and John Hollander, eds., The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), Vol.II, p.795.

⁴ H.L.Peacock, A History of Modern Britian (1815-1875)(London: The Macmillan Company, 1976), p.38.

- ⁵ Walter E.Houghton, The Victorian Fram of Mind (1830-1870)(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957),p.4.
- ⁶ David Roberts, Victorian Origins of the British Welfare State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p.4.
- ⁷ Willey,p.144.
- ⁸ Ibid, p.184.
- ⁹ Ibid, p.181.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p.182.
- ¹¹ Ibid, pp.182-83.
- ¹² All of Victorian Poetry quoted in this paper is from Frank Kermode and John Hollander (eds.), The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), Vol.II.
- ¹³ Willey, p.177.
- ¹⁴ Ibid,pp.177-78.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p.179.
- ¹⁶ John Stuart Mill, Three Essays on Liberty, Representative Government, and the Subjection of women (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.189.
- ¹⁷ Willey, p.179.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native, J.C.S. Temblett-Wood, ed., (London,Macmillan, 1985), pp.32-33.
- ¹⁹ Willey, pp.170-71.
- ²⁰ Ibid, pp.171-75.
- ²¹ Frances Winner, Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1941), pp.164-72.
- ²² Charles Dickens, Hard Times, N.L.Clay, ed., (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), p.278.
- ²³ Mill, Three Essays on Liberty..., P.427
- ²⁴ Houghton,p.351.
- ²⁵ Ibid,p.348.
- ²⁶ Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp.132-33.
- ²⁷ Houghton, p.350.

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الخلاصة :

**"جوانب من تأثير جون ستيورت مل على بعض الكتاب الفكتوريين
مع اشارة خاصة الى تنسن و آرنولد و جيمس تومسن (ب.ف)
وهاردي وديكنز ووايلد وشارلوت برونتي"**

ان للافكار التي تبناها الفيلسوف الانكليزي جون ستيورت مل (١٨٠٦-١٨٧٣) اثر كبير على الادب الانكليزي في العصر الفيكتوري، اذ كانت افكاره منسجمة مع روح العصر التي تتسم بالتساؤل و الفضول الفكري فيما يخص الخالق و الطبيعة و الدين و غير ذلك. كما ان افكار هذا الفيلسوف هي انعكاس واضح للكثير من جوانب الحياة الاجتماعية و الاقتصادية و السياسية و الفكرية في ذلك العصر. يتناول هذا البحث دراسة بعض جوانب تأثير جون ستيورت مل على ابرز النتاجات الادبية لبعض الكتاب الفكتوريين أمثال تنسن و آرنولد و ديكنز و هاردي و غيرهم .