

Rousseau behind Ruskin's Mask: A Critique of Ruskin's Views on Women and Their Education

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Abstract



John Ruskin's work *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) consists of his two lectures delivered in 1864 with the titles "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Garden". In these lectures, he defines manhood and womanhood simultaneously by using crafted words and flattering tone. Although he seems to stand with the women and calls them queens in men's kingdoms, yet he trickily draws lines between men and women and offers two types of education for both sexes. He was successful in befooling the Victorian women and early feminists but later feminists hated and condemned his work because of its anti-feminist approach. This research evaluates Ruskin's views on women and their education by using the yardstick of Rousseau's concepts expressed in his famous work *Emile, or on Education* (1799). This analysis is interesting because Rousseau was clear and bold anti-feminist who advocated different education for the imaginary mistress of Emile, Sophie. According to him, Sophie, the wife of Emile, ought to be educated to be a good wife and good mother but different from men. This study finds that there was, in fact, Rousseau behind Ruskin's mask when he was talking of women and their education in a flattering and seductive tone. So, it unmasks Ruskin's patriarchal views regarding women. This analysis is significant because it alerts and warns women to be aware of people like Ruskin who try to damage their cause in disguise of a well-wisher. Moreover, this study may provoke further research in this field focusing on the comparison of different works of prose.

Keywords: Women Education, Gender Discrimination, Bias, Feminist, Patriarchal

Introduction

John Ruskin is one of the major and most influential English writers. His writings greatly influenced the policies regarding education and other walks of life. His famous work *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) consists of two lectures which were delivered in order to discuss education, place and position of women and the types of education that would be suitable for both sexes. Ruskin's style is quite ambiguous and seductive that it pleased and flattered women, especially in Victorian era. During that time, this classic work was considered as a foundation for women education though he cleverly and cunningly intended to draw lines between men and women. He tried to present different levels of education for both genders. His style and tone were so flattering and deceptive that women of early feminist period were easily pleased and befooled though later feminists were sharp enough to catch his actual intention of showing men's superiority over women and his faith in gender discrimination. That's why they hated Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) on the account of its anti-feminist approach.

Rousseau is also another influential and important writer of his times. His famous work *Emile, or on Education* (1799) got great popularity though it was banned in some European countries because of some of its chapter that was an attack on Christianity. It has formed the basis of modern education system and still remains fundamental. But it is despised and condemned by feminists because of its gender bias which is expressed in the fictitious characters of Emile and his imaginary wife, Sophie. Unlike Ruskin's, Rousseau's tone and style is straightforward, simple and clear. He does not use sugar-coated words or concocted phrases in order to flatter or befool women. He directly and clearly draws lines between men and women and offers two different standards of education for both sexes. His work is purely patriarchal and anti-feminist.

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So, it is interesting to evaluate and explore Ruskin's anti-feminist views on women and their education. This study intends to unmask Rousseau behind Ruskin's mask by evaluating and analysing Ruskin's views regarding women and their education projected in his work *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) in the light of Rousseau's main concepts expressed in his famous classic *Emile* (1799). This evaluation of Ruskin's views in the light of Rousseau's concepts is largely of comparative nature. This is quite significant for the cause and mission of feminists who may be alert and active while considering male writers like Ruskin who try to damage their cause with flattering tones and crafted words. It may warn and alert modern women of showbiz industry who are exploited and used by males after being flattered and pleased by the status of a heroine or Ms. Universe etc. In fact, they may beware of Ruskins for whom they adorn themselves and dance to please them. Moreover, this study may provoke further research in this field that largely focuses on the comparison of different prose works whereas, in academic research now-a-days, fiction and poetic works are mainly taken as primary texts.

Literature Review

John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) and Rousseau's *Emile* (1799) have been criticized and analysed by numerous scholars and critics in different ways. The main purpose of the review of relevant literature related to these classic works is to find the research gap and validate the findings of the study.

In her 2019 article "John Ruskin and his Demarcation of Education Conditional to Gender Bias", Jesna Mariyam Johnson says, "*Sesame and Lilies* was interpreted by different audience in different ways. Victorian parents offered it to their daughters as a primer for virtuous behaviour" (p. 340). According to Jesna (2019), this work was appreciated by Victorians and early feminists but later feminists hated this work and found it contrary to their objectives and goals (p. 340). Helen Pike Bauer analyzed Ruskin's views on education of women in a 1985 article "Ruskin and the Education of Women". Though these ideas were later criticized, these found the foundation and gained great importance during the early periods of women's education. Gladys Jones discussed Ruskin's views in an article "Ruskin's Views on Women" (1906) and concluded that Ruskin was a dangerous writer who cunningly flattered women and was, in fact, against them. Jennifer M. Llyod criticized Ruskin in a 1995 article "Raising Lilies: Ruskin and Women" by arguing that Ruskin promoted "a fundamental Victorian paradigm, the ideology of pure womanhood" (n.p.). Kate Millet (1970) argues in an article "The Debate over Women: Ruskin versus Mills" that "the great Victorian debate on women did seem in its early fervour to be capable of challenging the most basic of civilization's socio-political institutions" (n.p.) and patriarchy itself was one of those institutions.

Similarly, Rousseau's work *Emile* (1799) has been discussed and analysed frequently. John Darling and Maaiké Van De Pijpekamp analysed Rousseau's views in a 1994 article "Rousseau on the Education, Domination and Violation of Women". They argue that "Rousseau's endorsement of male domination and his illiberal views of rape, punishment and the education of women have been seriously underestimated by twentieth century commentators who tend to produce expositions of his work" (n.p.). They further say, "Trends in British primary education can be understood as movements towards, or away from, Rousseau's philosophy of teaching" (n.p.). Dunning discussed *Emile* in a 1909 article "The Political Theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" and argued, "It was at times an amiable delusion of Rousseau's that his philosophy was fundamentally a series of inductions from the observation of ordinarily neglected facts" and he further said that "this was true of his ideas about education, as expressed in the *Emile*; it was wholly untrue of his theoretical politics, in the *Discourse on Inequality* and the *Social Contract*" (p. 381). John Johnson Lewis criticized Rousseau's views on women and their education in a 2021 article "Rousseau's Take on Women and Education" and stated, "Since the main purpose in life, to Rousseau, is for a woman to be a wife and mother, she does not need to be educated to the extent that men traditionally have" (n.p.). Marry Wollstonecraft severely criticized Rousseau's views on women and education in her famous work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and opposed Rousseau's views.

So, in the light review of existing literature relevant to the topic of this study, the research gap found is that no researcher has tried to evaluate and analyse Ruskin's views on women and their education utilizing Rousseau's ideas as theoretical yardstick. This study intends to fill in this gap and utilizes Rousseau's concepts in order explore Ruskin's actual views on women and their education exposing and unpacking Ruskin's flattering, seductive, crafted and concocted language.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

So far as theoretical framework of this study is concerned, Rousseau's ideas on women and their education have been utilized for the analysis and evaluation of Ruskin's views. Rousseau's classic work *Emile* (1779) has been consulted and used as a core book. In the light of main concepts of *Emile* (1779), John Ruskin's views on women and their education expressed in *Sesame and Lilies* (1864) have been criticized. These concepts are purely patriarchal and anti-feminist focusing on gender discrimination. This is a qualitative research and the research method used in this study is textual analysis which delimits itself to the evaluation and analysis of Ruskin's views on women and their education. Being qualitative, this research is interpretive and descriptive as well. Textual analysis largely consists of comparison between *Emile* (1779) and *Sesame and Lilies* (1864).

Emile, or On Education (1779) is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's most important and famous work. Although this book was banned because of its anti-Christianity concepts, yet it remains a fundamental work on the nature and purpose of education. While describing pure and proper manhood in the form of the character of Emile, Rousseau draws an imaginary character of his ideal mistress, Sophie. Sophie's education is for all women who are supposed to be taught to be real women. They are supposed to learn the art of being good wives, beloveds and mothers. They ought to be taught the arrangements and ordering of the house and household affairs. They ought to be taught to be delicate, shy and weak. They are not equal to men. He says, "When a woman complains on this score about unjust man-made inequality, she is wrong" (Rousseau, 1779, p. 361). He advises them to be faithful because this quality is more important for women. He says, "But the unfaithful woman does more; she discovers the family and breaks all the bonds of nature. In giving the man children which are not his, she betrays both" (Rousseau, 1779, p. 361). So, he focuses on the moral character of the women and focuses on the importance of their femininity. He also forwards the idea of separate education for men and women.

Brief Overviews of *Emile* and *Sesame and Lilies*

John Ruskin is an influential and one of the most important English writers. He affected an age and is still doing so in 21st century. His writings are often complex and philosophical. He is a capable teacher, famous art critic, true polymath, a renowned geologist, a genius watercolorist and a keen advocate of social and political change and revolution. He is a true wisher of the improvement of working classes, women education and conservation of natural landscapes. His views also played important role in shaping certain reforms in Britain including universal healthcare, free school meals and minimum wage system. Being a prolific writer, he wrote more than 50 books on various topics.

Ruskin's famous work *Sesame and Lilies* (1864) consists of his two lectures entitled as "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Gardens". These lectures were delivered in 1864. Although he focused on the relationship between nature, society and art as well as effective education, yet these lectures are best known for their emphasis on women and their education. He tries to define womanhood and manhood using very ambiguous and crafted language. In his first lecture, "Of Kings' Treasuries", Ruskin tries to define and evaluate Victorian manhood. He talks of the treasures that are present in the books and people need to dig in for the sake of getting best out of them but he feels sorry for the English people who do not do so and waste their time and money in other activities. He believes that a nation becomes a great nation if it gives prime importance to books instead of horses and other activities. He advises men to better themselves and gain their kingly position by strengthening their bond with books which are man's best friends. He also focuses on the effective education of boys and imparting of their male virtues.

In his second lecture "Of Queens' Gardens", John Ruskin discusses the condition of the women and their suitable education. In fact, he advises women to get suitable education to educate their young ones in order to change the wilderness into a beautiful garden. He advises them to be educated in order to rule their male partners and win their hearts. He pleases and flatters women by calling them wise counsellors, good judges and effective advisors. He takes witnesses from works of literature, especially from the plays of Shakespeare and works of Walter Scott. He is of the view that women in Shakespeare's plays are better counsellors, good advisors and balanced characters. Whenever there is a downfall or catastrophe that is caused by the folly or weakness of male character. He also gives examples of women characters from the works of Chaucer, Dante and Scott. All of these women are better in wisdom, decision making and sagacity. Although Ruskin focuses on women's education and defines femininity, yet his lecture "Of Queens' Gardens' is described as a

honey-tongued defence of the subjection of women" (Johnson, 2019, p. 340). He trickily forwards the idea of two separate levels of education for men and women.

A Critique of Ruskin's Views on Women and Their Education

Although Ruskin's famous work *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) was hailed and greeted by Victorians and early feminists, yet it was called an anti-feminist document by later feminists and activists who really despised it and severely criticized. Anyway, it was considered a foundation for women education. For years, it had been befooling and deceiving women by fascinating them on the score of its alluring and deceptive tone. Whereas Rousseau's work *Emile, or on Education* (1799) was condemned and rejected by the feminists of all times. It is purely patriarchal and draws clear lines between men and women and proposes different levels of education for both sexes.

It is interesting to explore and highlight Ruskin's views on women and their education by going deeper into them and comparing them with those of Rousseau's expressed in *Emile* (1799). Rousseau's tone is straightforward and clear. Unlike Ruskin's, Rousseau's tone contains simplicity and clarity. Ruskin's tone is ambiguous and mysterious. He uses crafted words and deceptive manner of expression. Ruskin draws a fictitious character of a woman and shows her as a wiser and a better counsellor. It is, in fact, man's clever and cunning trick to flatter women and befool them in order to assign them the house and household duties and use her as a pleasing toy. As in our current times, man puts crown on a woman's head as a Ms. Universe, Ms. America or Ms. India and, then, uses her as heroine in movies and as a feast for his eyes in advertisements. She gets baffled, adorns herself, dances and pleases him in return.

Ruskin's book *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) consists of two lectures and the second lecture entitled as "Lilies of Queen's Gardens" is about women and their education. John Ruskin apparently seems to be on women's side but deeper analysis of his views shows that there was Rousseau hiding behind his mask or he was holding Rousseau's mind in his skull while thinking about women and their education. But Ruskin has used very flattering and seductive tone and concocted words. In a crafty way, he, in fact, tries to convey what was projected by Rousseau in a straightforward language. According to Ruskin (1913), if men are kings, women are queens in their regimes. So, kings are nothing without queens. (p. 56). Although he pleases women by calling them queens in the kingdom of men, yet he stands with Rousseau who believes that "men and women are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way in either character or temperament" (Rousseau, 1799, p. 363). It is quite clear that kings and queens are not equal and they have different status and position.

Ruskin (1913) believes in the power of education and thinks that education can enable man to ensure his kingly authority (p. 57). At the same time, he also believes, "What special portion or kind of this royal authority, arising out of noble education may rightly be possessed by women; and how far they also are called to a true queenly power,--not in their households merely, but over all within their sphere" (p. 57). By flattering and pleasing women with such crafted words, Ruskin wants to forward the idea of different levels of education for men and women in the same way as Rousseau (1799) believes that men and women "ought not to have the same education" (p. 363). While commenting on women's rights and equality movements, Ruskin (1913) argues that women's right or "mission" seems apparently different from those of men "as if she and her lord were creatures of independent kind, and of irreconcilable claim. This, at least, is wrong" (p. 58). Here, he means to say that men and women are not independent creatures and they heavily and necessarily depend on each other. Although it is flattering, yet this claim does not ensure equality that was main goal or agenda of the feminists and activists of their movement. In an ambiguous way, he seems to reject and disagree with the idea that "woman is only the shadow and attendant image of her lord, owing him a thoughtless and servile obedience, and supported altogether in her weakness by the pre-eminence of his fortitude" (Ruskin, 1913, p. 58). Although he seems to be in favour of the women, yet he actually means their obedience to men.

Ruskin gives examples from William Shakespeare's plays in order to prove women the wisest. In almost all of Shakespeare's plays, heroines enjoy the prime status and highest position in terms of wisdom, sagacity and counselling. They are better judges of their own wants. Ruskin (1913) says, "The catastrophe of every play is caused always by the folly or fault of a man; the redemption, if there be any, is by the wisdom and virtue of a woman, and, failing that, there is none" (p. 60). Here Ruskin deceives women by pleasing them and calling them the wisest, better judges and best counsellors. They are supposed to be harmonious and play balanced role on the stage. Ruskin seems

to suggest that women ought to be taught to be like Shakespeare's heroines. They ought to be trained to be the wisest and the best judges. But he never talks of their equality with men in the way the feminists have done. He also does not mean that men and women should be educated on equal levels. This is what Rousseau suggests in *Emile* (1979) and says, "Nature wants them to think, to judge, to love, to know, to cultivate their minds" (p. 364) and suggests women to be educated to become better wives and best companions. While drawing a fictitious character of Emile's wife, Sophie, Rousseau (1979) says that Sophie ought to be taught in order to "be a woman as Emile is a man" (p.357). He thinks that man "ought to be active and strong" and woman ought to be "passive and weak" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 357). So, Ruskin and Rousseau stand side by side in their opinions regarding women and their education. It is irony that a male writer proves and stamps women as "infallibly faithful and wise counsellors" and "strong always to sanctify even when they cannot save" (Ruskin, 1913, p. 62). Moreover, he takes witnesses from the writings of male writers like William Shakespeare in order to prove women's character and abilities. These are the witnesses which the later feminists don't believe in.

Ruskin also takes examples from the works of Scott and finds that women characters are well-balanced, wisest and best guides to men. Ruskin (1913) says, "So that, in all cases, with Scott as with Shakespeare, it is the woman who watches over, teaches, and guides the youth, it is never, by any chance, the youth who watches over, or educates, his mistress" (p. 64). Here, Ruskin tries to flatter and please women by giving them the status of best guides and mentors of the youth or men. But he, still, keeps that line clear between men and women and never mentions their right of equality including education. He intends to say that women ought to be taught to become best guides and mentors of their male partners. He assigns them this task of watching over men when they go in the wrong direction. It clearly means that there should be different types of education for men and women. In the similar way, Rousseau thinks that women ought to be taught to be the best wives and the wisest mothers. While drawing the character sketch of Emile's imaginary wife, Sophie, he says that "she ought to constrain him to find his strength and make use of it" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 358). Rousseau (1979) further says, "She needs patience and gentleness, zeal and an affection that nothing can rebuff in order to raise her children. She serves as the link between them and their fathers"(p. 361).

In his lecture, Ruskin (1913) further says, "We are foolish, and without excuse foolish in speaking of the "superiority" of one sex to the other" (p. 70). In these lines, Ruskin clearly intends to say that it is foolish to call man superior to women. Later he cunningly and cleverly shows and approves man's superiority over women. He says, "But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,-- and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" (Ruskin, 1913, p. 71). He clearly states that women are inferior to men so far as invention, creation or battles are concerned. They can neither create, nor can win or fight battles. So, after pleasing women in his first statement, he projects his idea that clearly relates to those of Rousseau's. Rousseau (1979) says, "The more women want to resemble them, the less women will govern them, and their men will truly be the masters" (p. 363). He further says, "Believe me, judicious mothers, do not make a decent man of your daughter" (p. 364). So, it can be said that there was Rousseau behind Ruskin's mask when Ruskin tried to please and flatter women with his crafted words and seductive tone. In fact, he stands side by side with Rousseau while thinking and reflecting women's position and education for a better society. He means that men are superior to women and he also believes in different levels of education. Instead of helping or supporting feminists' cause, Ruskin's work did more damage to it.

Conclusion

John Ruskin's work *Sesame and Lilies* (1913) largely focuses on the women and their education using ambiguous and flattering tone. These views are evaluated and analysed in the light of Rousseau's concepts on women and their education expressed in his book *Emile, or On Education* (1979). It is found that Ruskin stands with Rousseau so far as his stance on women and their education is concerned. Ruskin had been able to please and befool Victorian women and early feminists but later feminists hated and disliked him because of his anti-feminist approach. Although Ruskin pleases and flatters women by calling them queens and wiser than men, yet he trickily and cunningly proves men's superiority over them. He dismantles their narrative of equality and draws line between two sexes. He advises them to be taught to become better wives and good mothers. It is found that there was, in fact, Rousseau behind Ruskin's mask when he was thinking of women and their education.

This research is quite significant because it alerts and warns women to be aware of people like Ruskin who try to damage them by pleasing them with honey-tongued writings. Moreover, this study may provoke further research in this area that focuses on analysis and comparison of different prose works because current literary research largely concerns itself with fiction and poetry as primary texts.

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