MILL VERSUS SEWELL AND GENDER ROLES

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Although feminism seems like a contemporary idea, women's rights activists have been promoting the equality of the sexes throughout modern history. In the 1800's, John Stuart Mill argued for equal rights during a time in which women could not even vote or own property. In his book, The Subjection of Women, he challenges his contemporaries such as Elizabeth Sewell, who share the common belief that females are naturally subservient to males.

In her writings Sewell discusses the role of education in the lives of children. She claims that in preparation for the future, boys get ready to govern and rule the world whereas girls should only be expected to remain quiet and submissive in their homes. She does admit that girls perform equal to or even better than boys in school at an early age, but she states that boys tend to exceed girls by the time early adulthood is reached. In her opinion, the young women should remove themselves from all types of academic situations, for "any attempt to bring [them] into competition with men can scarcely escape failure." Sewell believes that the frail health of women causes this inferiority. She states that girls should be protected from fatiguing hardships and almost any responsibility. Boys, on the other hand, acquire a sense of power, both mentally and physically, from constant activity. For this reason boys may take risks whereas girls must not, since their "health would break down under the effort." Therefore, according to Sewell, any education of girls must be taken lightly after puberty in order not to strain their intellects.

In contrast to Sewell's beliefs, Mill declares it impossible that women could be naturally subservient to men. He believes that the true nature of women and men cannot be known because they are viewed in comparison to each other only as they exist in the present. He states simply that "everything which is usual appears natural." This suggests that women have been viewed as inferior only because it has been that way in the past. Something that is customary does not necessarily justify it as being correct. According to Mill, custom should not produce any prejudice against a person, or place anyone in political or social subjection. He thinks it foolish "to ordain that to be born a girl instead of a boy . . . shall decide the person's position through life."

In order to explain the way in which women were raised in the nineteenth century Mill uses a metaphor comparing women to trees. In this metaphor only one half of the tree is allowed to grow and flourish in a greenhouse while the rest of it is left to wither and die outside in the cold. The same is true of a woman who is encouraged to act passive, nurturing, happy, and dependent, while qualities such as competitiveness are repressed. According to Mill, in the nineteenth century, All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal character is the very opposite to that of men; not self will and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women and . . . that it is their nature to live for others.
Mill believes that the present condition of women is not natural but has been forced upon them by society.

Mill cites examples which illustrate that different cultures and environments are responsible for creating the "nature" of women. Mill logically reasons that Orientals view women as naturally voluptuous, Englishmen see women as naturally cold, and the French think they are by nature fickle. Therefore, it is obvious that women's nature did not create these characteristics but instead were formed by society. Another issue that Mill addresses is the idea that women are by nature nervous and twitchy. He explains, however, that women are brought up this way by being guarded from any hardships in life. In order to prove this point he states that women of lower classes who had to work for a living, and girls who were able to run free during childhood, did not demonstrate these nervous qualities.

Throughout his book, Mill refers to the idea of women's nature. He constantly reminds the reader that it is impossible to know the true nature of either men or women. He believes that different cultures, societies, and environments play an important role in forming ideas of how a man or a woman should act. He uses logical reasoning in order to promote equality among men and women. He speaks as a modern voice trying to enlighten the old-fashioned thinkers of his time.