UNIT 8: J. S. MILL: EXTRACT FROM *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* CHAPTER 1 "ON CHILDHOOD AND EARLY EDUCATION"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the text the readers will be able to:

- provide an introductory note to J S Mill's Autobiography mainly to the chapter 1 entitled "Childhood and Early Education"
- discuss the life and works of J S Mill
- explain brief summary of the chapter "Childhood and Early Education"
- discuss the major themes of the text.
- gain a comprehensive idea of style and language of J S Mill's literary work
- appreciate the text in its totality

8.2 INTRODUCTION

John Stuart Mill is one of the great British philosophers of the Victorian world whose writings on social and political theories have been widely read by the

readers. He is known for several writings on scientific methodology and logic as well as a great volume of essays on socio-political life. His book *Autobiography* is a clear elucidation of his early formative years of his life and his fascinating details of his education that has prepared him as one of the great thinkers of 19th century Western world. The book contains several parts starting with his educational journey of learning Greek and other languages upto his realisation of the need of emotional education side by side the lack of which cause a kind of chaos into the human mind. This book will definitely help those readers who are familiar with Mill's philosophical ideas and theories to know how he has built the foundation of his life surrounded by a kind of intellectual atmosphere where many famous personalities had been residing during the time. It is said that a man is known by the company he or she keeps. J S Mill had the advantage to be around with wise people; no wise human being will have the fools and rogues around him.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Who is J. S. Mill?

Q2. What is the full name of J. S. Mill?

Q3. For which theory J. S. Mill is famous?

Q4. Write the name of the autobiography of J. S. Mill.

Q5. When did Mill start learning Greek?

8.3 J. S. MILL: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), born to James and Harriet Burrow Mill, was one of the leading political philosophers in the nineteenth-century intellectual life of London. He is rightly called as "the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century". He was a brilliant child from the early age of his life as he took interest in accumulating knowledge from diverse fields. In his autobiography he clearly has talked about his education and discussed his interest in Greek as well as in English literature.

He was well-acquainted with Lucian, Isocrates, Diogenes Laërtius and famous six dialogues of Plato. Along with Greek and English, he had also learned physics, arithmetic and astronomy.

J. S. Mill was a utilitarian, a naturalist as well as a liberal, whose writings reflect the outcome of a systematic empiricist attitude of an individual. The famous Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham has immensely influenced his views and philosophical ideas. Mill has massively contributed to the various fields of knowledge including ethics, economics and logic in the Victorian era. Though during his adult life he went through a kind of mental crisis eventually he had overcome the grave situation by opening himself up to the realm of poetry.

When sixteen years old, Mill started a debating society involving the Utilitarians to talk over and make popular the ideas acquired from his father James Mill, his friend Jeremy Bentham, and many others. He furthermore began to publish on various socio-political issues, writing almost fifty significant articles and reviews before he attained age of twenty. But in 1823, Mill cast off his focus on a political profession and accepted a respectable position at the East India Company where he continued to work for thirty-five years.At the age of twenty-five he has met another influential personality Harriet Taylor whose political philosophy had greatly shaped his thoughts. It seems that Mill's acquaintance with the issue of Utilitarianism was based on the writings of others, particularly John Herschel, William Whewell, Alexander Bain and August Comte. He was a member of the Liberal Party as well as the second member of Parliament (in 1832) to call for women's suffrage after Henry Hunt. He was a successful propant of Utilitarianism, the ethical theory developed by Jeremy Bentham. Mill was the first Member of Parliament to introduce a bill demanding for the woman to be given the vote.

Though he was beaten, he strongly safeguarded his position and it was an imperative milestone for the campaign demanding voting rights. Mill also called for the extension of the vote to all adult people as well as the introduction of the system proportional representation. Mill vehemently opposed the system of slavery and the atrocities of colonial rule in the West

Indies. Even though Mill was allied to the Liberal party, he seemed to be more radical than other liberal members of the parliament. He became eminent as a writer, producing numerous significant political and philosophical works. In 1834 , he founded the *London Review* and just after two years later brought the *Westminster Review* – assimilating the two into an leading *London Magazine.*

J S Mill's most significant literary works are:

1. *System of Logic* (1843)
2. *On Liberty* (1859)
3. *Utilitarianism* (1861) and
4. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865)

The main argument he puts forth inhis famous essay, "On Liberty" is that there are some higher pleasures and that an individual should be educated to these higher forms of dreams. "On Liberty" involves an ardent defense of free speech. Mill maintains that free discourse is a necessary condition for the intellectual and social development. His work "Utilitarianism" is heavily influenced by the ideas he obtained from Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. Here he discusses principles of happiness. It gives the idea that a person must always act so as to yield the greatest collective happiness among all conscious human beings, within reason. He wrote a good number of treatises on the issue of women, such as *The Subjection of Women* (1861) as he was strongly advocating the right to vote extending to the women folk. Mill articulately wrote down how the subjugation of women was based on a set of biased views and ideas which were severely hampering the growth of humanity.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6. Mention the name of J S Mill parents.

Q7. Name the birth place of J S Mill.

Q8. Who was the great personality who had influenced Mill a lot?

Q9. What were the subjects Mill was expert in?

Q10. Whose writings have tremendously influenced Mill regarding his belief in Utilitarianism?

Q11. What are the most significant literary works of J S Mill?

8.4 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER I

J. S. Mill begins his *Autobiography* with the essay "Childhood and Early Education" by systematically considering whether his description of his biographical details help readers in their understandings. In this part he basically incorporates the issues related to his father who has immensely shaped the life of his son, his study of Greek and English language, logic, poetry, history and economics. Moreover, the chapter also deals with the issues related to the solitary childhood of the author as well as the education he received after being in touch with a circle of great personalities. This section of the book primarily concentrates on his early education in which his father being aware of his genius paved the path of his. Being a champion of utilitarianism Mill is concerned too much with practicality and usefulness of his description of his biographical details. Justifying the need of education that he had had in his childhood as "unusual and remarkable", the biographer says in the first chapter,

But I have thought that in an age in which education, and its improvement, are the subject of more, if not any profound a study than at any former period of English history, it may be useful that there should be some record of an education which was unusual and remarkable, and which, whatever else it may have done, has proved how much more than is commonly supposed may be taught, and well taught, in those early years which, in the common modes of what is called instruction, are little better than wasted.

He strongly urges his readers not to proceed far while reading his work if they do not find any interest in it. At the inception of the chapter "Childhood and Early Education", Mill has elaborately discussed how his father, in spite of having so many hurdles of life, has provided him the proper intellectual ambience that helped him being in touch with different subjects

from the very tender age of his life. He is the man who has tried "to give the highest order of intellectual education" to the author.

Mill began the study of Greek language at the age of three only and took up Latin between his seventh and eighth years. At that time, he started going through those Greek and Latin books including *Aesop's Fables,* Plato's *Dialogues,* Xenophon's *Anabasis* and *Cyropaedia* as well as Memorials of Socrates. His attentiveness and his close association with his father is best reflected when he started making notes on slips of paper while reading and telling the summary of it to his beloved father in the next day. His close link with books of different disciplines including history books is well marked when he talks about great literary works like Robertson's histories, Watson's *The Reign of Phillip II* and *The Reign of Phillip III,* Hooke's History of Rome, Rollin's *Ancient History*, Burnet's *History of My Own Time*, Miller's *Historical View of English Government*, Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History*, McCrie's *Life of John Knox*, and Sewel's and Rutty's *Histories of the Quakers.*

He was also familiar with numerous Latin and different Greek classical poets whose writings have tremendously influenced and provided him a great amount of knowledge. Some of the Latin works he has mentioned are Bucolics of Virgil and the first six books of the Aeneid; all of Horace apart from the Epodes; the Fables of Phaedrus; some plays of Terence; the first five books of Livy; all of Sallust; a substantial part of Ovid's *Metamorphoses;* several of Cicero's Orations and of his writingson oratory. He has also read *Iliad* and *Odyssey* thoroughly. Alongwith the study of Greek and Latin language, J S Mill also tried his hand in writing poetry but not in Greek and Latin as his father did not want him to do it because being a calculative man as well as,an utilitarian he thought that was not worth the time it required. Therefore, the verses he basically composed were written in English Language.

In the part "Self-conceit" J S Mill describes how his father has guarded him against boasting of his knowledge and taught him not to be 'self-conceited' because the having too much pride on knowledge or power destroys the person. Mill's father seems to be the torchbearer of his son's life who taught him to be humble and submissive at the need of time. He

always guarded him from the evils hidden within like pride, self-conceit, vanity etc. We are more easily attracted by evil and vice than by virtue and goodness. Mill has comprehended that we have to curb that tendency because one evil act or company will lead us away to more evils. An individual should never compare his or her pool of knowledge with that of other individuals; one should not say to the self that 'I am such and such' or 'I can do so and so'. Everybody may not be having similar favorable environments to develop or to acquire knowledge in life. Mill had the 'unusual advantage' of having a father who had constantly been a friend, philosopher and a guide for him.

One of the major books that has contributed largely to Mill's education is undoubtedly *History of India* written by his father. In the section "History of India" he discussed how the content of the book has made him aware of the contemporary society, administrative system, history as well as human civilization. In Mill's opinion of the book, it is "one of the most instructive histories ever written—if not the most—and one of the books from which most benefit can be derived by a mind engaged in making up its opinions". The book reveals the practical nature of his father who was appointed as one of the assistants of the Examiner of India Correspondence—officers under East India Company.

In the last section "Solitary Childhood" Mill discusses how he could not get the chance to have enough interactions with other boys of his age because his father was apprehensive of 'the contagion of vulgar modes of thought and feeling' that could have been exercised upon him by other boys. He admits the fact that being too much absorbed in education he had not been able to give emphasis on physical education at that time. His amusements were generally of quiet kind as he did not have boy companion for any physical activities. Unlike him, his father was very much energetic "but the children of energetic parents frequently grow up unenergetic, because they lean on their parents, and the parents are energetic for them."



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12. What are the main topics as discussed in the first chapter of *Autobiography* by Mill?

Q 13. What are the major history books Mill has gone through in his early part of life?

Q 14. What are the major Latin works Mill seems to be well-acquainted with?

Q 15. Who has played a major role in the life of J. S. Mill?

8.5 MAJOR THEMES

Utilitarianism: J. S. Mill is a firm believer in Utilitarianism, a set of principles based on the conviction that an action is morally right if it benefits the majority of people. In his *Autobiography* he discusses the formation of utilitarian society composed of youngmen agreeing in the vital principles—acknowledging utility as their standard in both ethics and politics.The standard of utility holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to encourage happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the opposite of happiness. Utilitarianism seems to be the major theme in most of his writings.

Unpretentiousness: One of the important motifs discussed in the Autobiography of J S Mill is undoubtedly his genuine approach to life. Mill nowhere in the work seems to be boasting of his voracious knowledge. He himself declares that “My state of mind was not humility, but neither was it arrogance”. He is a man of discipline who comprehends well that pride and arrogance based on human knowledge can make a person vulnerable to ruin or destruction. His unpretentiousness shown throughout the work reflects his personality and his attitude towards life. He confesses that “I did not estimate myself at all.”

Childhood: One of the major themes that play a significant role in his work *Autobiography* is undoubtedly the formative time period of Mill’s life, i.e. Childhood. It was the time when his mental faculties were shaped by the

famous personalities with whom he had close connection all through his life. But it cannot be considered that his life was totally molded by the shadows of those renowned personalities. In spite of being in touch with the most highly cultured and well-educated people in the society, especially with a political class of London, he shone in his life with his own efforts. Even though Mill was brought up in the Utilitarian school of Jeremy Bentham, he wished to provide a refined form to the philosophical idea of Utilitarianism. Mill sought to differentiate the higher and lower forms of happiness which was not done by that school. He mentions in his work “Utilitarianism”, “It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.”



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 16. Name two important themes in J S Mill.

Q 17. What is Utilitarianism?

Q 18. “It is better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” Who said this?

8.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

John Stuart Mill’s prose style seems to be of very high quality that displays his vast array of knowledge. His narratives are the food for the intellectual minds only; he seems to appeal to a particular section of the readers who are inquisitive of knowledge and ideas. Politics appear to be one of the important topics of discussion in his writings. He is a strong supporter of the theory of Utilitarianism. He believes in the principle of utility. None of his major writings seem to be independent of his political, moral or social agenda.

Mill’s language is not so difficult to be understood though it has a kind of magnitude. For most of his literary works he has chosen serious subjects which can impart knowledge to the readers. They are full of wit and intelligence which can be noticed in the writings of Victorian masters.

His political bent of mind is due to his position as a member of Parliament. His style of writings is enriched with precision and lucidity owing to his awareness of vast range of knowledge gathered from various sources including Greek and Latin. He does not use language ambiguously; he appears to have a clear cut vision what he actually wants to deliver to the readers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 19. Write the name of the subject Mill has dealt mostly with in his writings.

Q 20. Is he a strong supporter of the theory of Utilitarianism?

Q 21. What is the nature of the language used by J S Mill?



8.7 LET US SUM UP

J. S.Mill is one of the firm believers of Utilitarianism and he started adopting utilitarian principles from the very early age of his life owing to his brilliant education and the constant support he got from various personalities of the Victorian period. His vast extent of knowledge was fortified by the books of different languages including Greek, Latin and English which had been referred by his father James Mill. Though initially he believed in the free market idea of Scottish economist Adam Smith, he was later influenced by utilitarian socialist principle and started supporting more the ideas of Socialism including eliminating the wage system and substituting with a co-operative wage structure.

Like a psychologist of the nineteenth century, he firmly believes that the performance and the character of a child are the result of the experiences he or she gathers as a child on earth. This fact is well-reflected if readers consider Mill's life, childhood and his journey of education. His display of proficiency as a writer as shown in the first part of his *Autobiography* is definitely the consequences of the lives of famous personalities he was encircled with and the experiences he collected from various situations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 22. What does the performance and character of a child depend on?

Q 23. What were the languages in which Mill was an expert?

Q 24. Who is Adam Smith?



8.8 FURTHER READING

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