

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

Mohammed ALI TALHA *

University of Oran 2 (Algeria),
e-mail: mohammedalitalha@gmail.com

Submitted

28/09/2021

Accepted

27/02/2022

Published

01/06/2022

Abstract:

This article explores how Emerson's thought on women evolved throughout his career, shifting from a conservative standpoint to a modern-like version of empowerment. It also takes into account the ideas of fellow transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, whose approach to emancipating women from social bondage remained firm and unchanged. Emerson's position, however, kept changing in proportion to the historical context, and he became more and more in favour of making women's place in society comparatively similar to that of men. Starting out as a conservative who demanded women's obedience, he ultimately ended up as a prevalent defender of their rights, becoming the vice president of the New England Women's Suffrage Union.

Keywords: *Women's rights; Emerson; Conservatism; Empowerment; Transcendentalism; Social Reform*

1. INTRODUCTION

As an enthusiastic defender of individual rights, Emerson consistently spoke in favor of the underprivileged segments of society ever since he started his career. However, on the question of women, his early attitude was that of a conservative. Though he advocated individual liberties, he still held the stereotypical view that the women's nature would not allow them to have a role in society that is as complicated and as challenging as that of men. Nonetheless, owing to the big changes that America was undergoing at both the social and political levels, his new opinions on women's role in society almost contradicted his earlier ones. He gathered arguments from different sociological and philosophical sources to endorse his new commitment to the question of women's role in society.

Emerson refuted the misogynists extreme exaggeration and their inclination towards seeing women as intellectually inferior and of femininity as a disorder,

* Corresponding author

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

forestalling what later analysts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and English writer, Virginia Woolf, who stated in *A Room of One's Own*: "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only?" (Woolf, 2001, p104). When cynical opinions on women as constitutionally unacceptable turned into a medical condition, Emerson understood, women experienced as much misery as slaves, since the institutions were both founded on a materialistic basis.

2. Women in Emerson's Circle

2.1 The Family Factor

The circumstances in which Emerson was raised played a major role in the shaping of his thought especially as far as women were concerned. The circumstances in which he grew up made of him a strong believer in women's capacities to be amongst the elite. From his mother that supported the family after the death of his father to his intellectually-curious aunt Mary Moody Emerson, who lived with them at times was voracious in her intellectual and religious inquiry and was young Emerson's most powerful influence.

As a young man, he idealized women on account of the ones by who he was surrounded. This admiration of the female nature grew even stronger after he encountered Ellen Louise Tucker, his first wife, who he lost to tuberculosis, and Lidian Jackson Emerson, mother of his four children, who remained his wife till his death in 1882. However, his ultimate standpoint of empowering women did not come as a result of that. It took him years to develop an outlook similar to that of fellow transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller.

Emerson grew up in a family made up mainly of independent-thinking women that instilled in him the love of learning and spiritual quest. His aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who regularly visited them, was an immersed investigator in the realm of spirituality and intellectual development and had a remarkable impact on the shaping of her nephew's character. The Emerson family was also a host of other progressive female characters such as Hannah Adams, writer of the first *American Dictionary of Religion* and the first written piece on Judaism by an American, and polyglot "Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley who learned Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and German and tutored Harvard students" (Harvard Squares). Emerson's youth was that of brilliant and dedicated women surrounding him, and the reminiscence of which would make him campaign to find them a place amongst the leaders.

Having such brilliant figures in his direct circle helped extend his network of high profile women. They were intellectuals, literary figures, and participants in public life such as Elizabeth Hoar, Louisa May Alcott, and Margaret Fuller.

Similar to the latter, Emerson started from the point of admitting the innate differences between the two genders at all levels, and used this fact as an argument in favor of giving women more responsibilities in public affairs rather than a prejudicial excuse to undermine the efforts of determined and ambitious women.

2.2 Margaret Fuller

With the aim of figuring out Emerson's changing point of view about the woman rights movement, it is essential to know how the movement came into being, developed, and transformed and the challenges around which the early debates were focused. Even prior to the first phases of the woman's rights movement in America, Emerson had been familiar with the ideas that enlightened it, notably through the revolutionary work of his friend Margaret Fuller, writer of *Women in the Nineteenth Century* 1945. It was the first book in America to argue for women's rights. Its core ideas first appeared in the Transcendentalist literary journal, *The Dial*, two years earlier. Fuller's thought, passed on to Emerson via their direct discussions and correspondence, happened to put Emerson's views on women within a specific framework.

In the late 1830s, Emerson and Fuller started to realize that their contributions that came in the form of lectures and public conversations were more than a mere individual expression. They began to look forward towards the foundation of a movement that would infiltrate the larger scope of the contemporary culture. The pair became friends in 1836, and Fuller sensed that she was pushing towards a radical social change. Having more or less the same sources of inspiration as her fellow Transcendentalists, she and Emerson ultimately met at a crossing point on the question of women's rights. They both realized that the status quo of women was holding back the society as a whole from becoming a more refined structure.

The complex alliance of Emerson and Fuller is one of the central narratives in the rise of Transcendentalism. Their work as individuals had both originality and social urgency; in dialogue with each other they seemed to generate a mutual empowerment that enabled them to articulate an incisive yet aspirational critique of American cultural values. Although they both advocated a version of individualistic self-construction, their lectures and public conversations clarified the idea that self-culture and the reform of society were mutually dependent aspirations (Robinson).

Nonetheless, Emerson, who himself backed away from public milieu,

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

valued and cherished the highly spiritual thoughtfulness women had inevitably developed just as illustrated by how he described his wife, Lidian: "My gentle wife has an angel's heart"(Emerson, 1926, p181). In other instances when he spoke in general, he still pictured her as "an angel of system. Her love of order is a proverbial blessing. A house is her classification" (Emerson, 2005, p19), or as his friend, Fuller explained this complementary nature of a couple: "The man furnishes the house; the woman regulates it" (Fuller, 1843, p36). Of course, Emerson here lauded women as housewives or in the traditional sense of a good woman. Maybe, because he did not want this idealistic view of women to change that he was satisfied with the status quo and even reinforced the conventional public opinion. Therefore, unless read chronologically, Emerson, on such subjects as women's right, his ideas would sound contradictory and unbalanced.

Fuller passed away in 1850, more than a decade ahead of the outbreak of the Civil War, thus, her activism remained limited to the antebellum culture. Emerson, however, lived well beyond the abolition of slavery and had to deal with the issue of women's rights in many different historical contexts. He continued the path that Fuller had traced and her influence on him became manifest when he turned into a women's suffrage campaigner.

Fuller's thoroughly consistent approach would provide a source for the arguments that would later be embraced by the growing woman's rights movement. Therefore, Emerson shared foundational principles and lines of reasoning about issues on the subject of women with the local woman's rights movement since its embryonic stages, encouraging suffragists to acknowledge him as one of their advocates.

After Fuller's perceptive presentation on the question of woman's role in society, the woman's rights movement came out from "the crucible of the abolitionist movement, in much the same way that the contemporary women's movement would later spring from the furor of the civil rights movement." The World's Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London 1840, accelerated the process of the formation of the woman's rights movement;

After women organized and planned the first international convention, a massive undertaking, when they arrived at the site they were informed that they could not be seated at their own conference due to their sex; all women were to be excluded from the platform and convention seating, allowed only to stand voiceless and silent in the aisles gallery. Outraged, organizers Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton agreed to hold the first woman's rights convention upon their return to America (Myerson, 2000, p212).

By 1848, these American women had held their earliest momentous woman's rights conference in New York, yet, true recognition of the woman's rights came only after the Civil War. Conversations were going loud around women implicated in social reform and a second National Woman's Rights Convention was organized in Massachusetts, in 1850.¹ Emerson was called upon to the convention and he backed the move but could not attend due to his time in editing the *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli*. Because he was so strongly connected to Fuller and the woman's rights movement, he showed her the determining impact on his reasoning about women's issues since he first publically identified himself with the movement, or even before.

Emerson, despite his known suspicion of reform and reformers, took a contradictory decision to put his signature on a convention to show approval of the agreement on particular principles. It was a very uncharacteristic move from him as a writer to identify himself with a formal association that would make his statements public and official. His motivation to be publically involved as a backer of the convention not only showed his recognition of the ambitions of the woman's movement. In doing so earlier than most of the country became aware of its existence, showed the power of his approval of its principles.

3. From Reservation to Activism

3.1 Recognition of the Women's Problem

Despite his reserved nature, Emerson felt the urge to step up his efforts in challenging the prejudicial view on women. Though the hot topic of the time was slavery, he realized that the empowerment of women would contribute greatly to the emancipation of all the subjugated. Social reform associations became a trend in the fast changing American society; yet, his approach to achieving progress was different. He always remained committed to his transcendental principles of self-reliance and individualism.

He admitted that the pressure of being exclusively responsible for raising a child was a heavy burden even for the blessed wife as expressed it in his poem "Holiday":

Year by year the rose-lipped maiden,
Play fellow of young and old,
Was frolic sunshine, dear to all men,

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson had been invited to speak at women's rights conventions in both 1850 and 1851, but he declined, finally agreeing to the request by Paulina Wright Davis to appear at the 1855 meeting. Other speakers at the event included representatives of abolitionism, such as Wendell Phillips and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and the prominent women's rights activists Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Transcendentalist feminist Caroline Dall ...after 1855, women's rights leaders claimed Emerson as friend of the cause (Tiffany, 2010, p285).

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

More dear to one than mines of gold.
Whither went the lovely hoyden?
Disappeared in bless wife,
Servant to a wooden cradle,
Living in a baby's life (Emerson, 2018, p101).

Emerson expressed sympathy for the several roles that were assigned to women especially as wives and that these responsibilities never ceased to accumulate. Men would never find a true place of comfort in the absence of women; "a man is sometimes offended at the superfluous *superogatory* order and nicety of a woman who is a good housewife. But he must bear with little extremities and flourishes of quality that makes comfort for all his senses throughout his house" (Emerson, 1926, p170).

Society has badly interfered as far as young women's education was concerned, "worst when this sensualism intrudes into the education of young women," (Emerson, 2010, p218), and makes the hope and friendliness of human nature fade, by instilling the belief that marriage means nothing but a housewife's carefulness, and that women's life culminate in this project. This was also a view that Emerson once held: "Our marriages are bad enough but that falls from the defects of the partners; but marriage as it exists in America, England, and Germany, is the best solution that has been offered of the woman's problem" (Emerson, 2005, p222). With no better alternatives to opt for, such was the model that every woman had to follow:

The fair girl whom I saw in town expressing so decided and proud a choice of influences, so careless of pleasing, so willful and so lofty a will, inspires the wish to come nearer to and speak to this nobleness: So shall we be ennobled also. I wish to say to her, Never strike sail to any. Come into port greatly, or sail with God the seas. (The) Not in vain you live, for the passing stranger is cheered, refined, and raised by the vision (Porte, 1982, p445).

Emerson's frequent reading of newspapers and periodicals broadened his vision about marriage and stimulated his interest in it. Marriage was an institution that put all its focus on women's status, especially during the nineteenth century:¹ (Myerson, 2000, p224). Nonetheless, many were of the opinion that marriage should be founded on mutual agreement, common goals, sincere respect, and

¹ He [Emerson] had begun his investigation of these ideas as early as 1817, at the age of fourteen, when he borrowed Hannah More's *Strictures on a System of Female Education*, which emphasized the need to develop women's intellect as well as her emotions, her logical as well as her affective nature, her sense as well as her sensibility.

sexual compatibility or as it is sometimes referred to “Marriage of the Minds.”

This appellation might have been an inspiration from Shakespeare’s first line in the sonnet 116, “Let me not to the marriage of minds admit impediments.” Influenced by Swedish philosopher and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, Emerson believed that marriage is a state of a spiritual union. This view would prompt him to regard women as soul rather than property and to claim their equal rights in marriage. In the essay “Love,” he clarifies that the absence of this spiritual dimension will lead the couple to finally “discover that all which at first drew them together, those once sacred features, that magical play of charms, was deciduous, had a prospective end, like the scaffolding by which the house was built,” then he continued to insist that “real marriage” is not a formality but requires “the purification of the intellect and the heart from year to year” (Emerson, 2010, p220). He also approached marriage from different perspectives as when he quoted Socrates: “Whether you take a wife or not you will regret it” (Myerson, 2000, p225).

He believed that since women did not have equal rights of property and right of voting, their destiny was going down the wrong path or opposite to that of social progress. According to him, this wrong evolved during savage times, when, for the reason that she could not defend herself, it was essential that she should be under the control of a man who recompensed for protecting her. Now that times have changed, it is commonplace that she claims her property, and, when she gets married, the husband can no longer take full legal possession of her possessions as soon as he is legally tied to her. Emerson then expressed his dissatisfaction with the status quo of women endorsing his opinion with firsthand real life situations and, at the same time suspected the efficiency of legislation in changing the woman’s conditions.

3.2 Empowering the Second Half of Society

Taking into consideration all the social roles, prospects, and laws that had an effect on women’s status, Emerson has been making quite a strong case for equal rights, as he states confidently: “They [women] have an unquestionable right to their property” (Emerson, 2005, 222), and they want vote, offices, and equal opportunities in the political arena, their demands should not be rejected.

Without a doubt, he was convinced that women would contribute fruitfully to the civilizing process and that was a genuine cause to give them the right to vote. This line of reasoning was focused on in the 1855 address to the Woman’s Rights Convention. Woman is the pillar of civilization; it is she who has fixed the brutal and careless ways of men. Hence, taking into consideration the election scam, extending the vote to women would make of it a more civilizing

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

act; "Here, at the right moment, when the land is full of committees examining election frauds and misdeeds, woman asks for her vote. It is the remedy at the moment of need. She is to civilize the voting..." (214) "It is said that when manners" are immoral and dissolute, change and reform are "always near: the virtue of woman being the main girth or bandage of society; because a man will not lay up an estate for children any longer than whilst he believes them to be his own" (Emerson, 1926, p373).

He used this argument to the greatest extent to respond to other familiar opposition to women's suffrage, that it would "contaminate" women and "unsex" them (Myerson, 2000, p231). "As for the unsexing and contamination, that only accuses our existing politics, shows how barbarous we are, that our policies are so crooked, made up of things not to be spoken" (Emerson, 2005, p224). Instead of denying the woman's right to vote for fear of involving her in filthy world of politics, Emerson proposed that the clever option would be to launch a crackdown on the political system. Banning women from being part of the system was only an avoidance of the problem. He saw a true man as the one who is enough self-assured, that he is in no need to put others in an inferior position in order to enhance his own status or at least keep it. Therefore, for him, a real man was one who consistently defended women's rights and demanded equality.

However, Emerson goes back to his chief objection to the women's movement and believes it is not the right moment to try and implement premature changes: "I do not think it yet appears that women wish this equal share in public affairs." Then, he insists that the truest women should determine the path of their destiny and not the members of the movement or all citizens in general; "it is they [women], and not we, that are to determine it." He also wanted the laws to be changed according a civilized society: "Let the laws be purged of every barbarous remainder, every barbarous impediment to women" (Emerson, 2005, p224).

He promotes access to education and property rights before women can decide for themselves if they truly wish to have a say in the lawmaking and insists on dealing with women "greatly: let them make their road by the upper road not by the way manufacturing public opinion, which lapses continually, and makes charlatans." Women should influence the lawmaking process instead of trying to be lawgivers. "The new movement is only a tide of shared concerns by the spirits of man and woman, and you may proceed in a faith, that, whatever the woman's heart is prompted to desire, the man's mind is simultaneously prompted to accomplish" (225). Thus, women should know how to use their influence on men to their advantage instead of being involved themselves in a complicated life style of a politician or a campaigner.

In "Woman," Emerson maintains that women exercise a positive influence

on men, society, and politics by means of their greater moral sensibility and sixth sense. This influence was more significant than taking part directly in public affairs, and he supposes that the “truest women” did not want the vote. He restates the sentiment was impelled by an insignificant number of women, who acted wisely and spontaneously, and the mainstream American women did not adhere to the plea, and accordingly the movement did not truly respond to the women’s demands. However, voices of other Transcendentalists did not necessarily echo Emerson’s views though mostly they were of the same line of reasoning. The involvement of his colleagues and his close friendship with Fuller, and his commitment in publishing her memoirs after she passed away in 1850 possibly gives an explanation of the supposition by women’s rights campaigners that Emerson could speak in support of their cause.²

Emerson always refused to associate himself to any group or cause, insisting, as is the case in most of his writings that actual reform comes from within, as matter of individual sense of right and wrong and development. While he was continuously driven to lend his voice to the antislavery cause, “Woman” was the sole public address, and sole to be published as a revised essay, on the subject of women’s rights. He did reveal privately in his journals, correspondence, and conversations on women’s roles with his closest acquaintances such as Margaret Fuller, his aunt Mary Moody Emerson and his spouse Lidian Jackson Emerson. Yet, when faced with models of female talent, he still considered woman’s essential role to be social; “But to women my paths are shut up and the fine women I think of who have had genius and cultivation who have not been wives but muses have something tragic in their lot and I shun to name them” (Emerson, 1925, p173).

In the second part of the essay “Woman,” if read between its lines by contemporaries, they will come across hints that Emerson was contributing to an agenda of women’s rights that was rather fanatic even for the latter part of the nineteenth century, much less for its norm. He had gone from one extreme to another, considering his early acknowledgment of the popular excuse that women were in no need of rights since they were supported by men. He held this view through the mid-1840s, but, “possibly seeing the plight of women, such as

²Between the 1830s and 1850s, other Transcendentalists were increasingly connected with the cause of women’s rights. In 1839, Margaret Fuller began her series of Conversations for women, promoting women’s education and self-development, and in 1843, Fuller published an article in the *Dial* magazine titled “The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Women versus Women.” The main argument of the “The Great Lawsuit” (as indicated by the subtitle) was that limited social roles for both men and women prevented the full development of individuals both male and female. The male Transcendentalists such as Amos Bronson Alcott, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Theodore Parker also publically supported both the abolitionist and the women’s movement by the 1850s (Tiffany, 2010, p287).

From Conservatism to Empowerment: Emerson's Changing Attitude towards Women's Role in Society

Concord neighbor Ellery Channing's wife Ellen, whose husbands manifestly did not care and provide for them, had dispossessed Emerson of this chivalric illusion" (Myerson, 2000, p220).

Emerson outspokenly urged women to claim their "half of the world," implying here, equality in all walks of life, from education, marriage, property, suffrage, to employment. Fundamentally, Emerson was forging the whole agenda of the 1850 Women's Rights Convention, on which he had accepted to put his signature, confirming that he was completely responsible and conscious about his actions, and truthfully of all these then-radical and unwanted reforms (221).

Although his opinion on the subject of women's roles is a traditionalist one, and that their influence is mainly seen at level of the home and family, it sounded "hoarsely the attempt to describe didactically to woman her duties. Man can never tell woman what her duties are: he will certainly end describing a man in female attire" (304).

4. CONCLUSION

Typical Emerson would often return to his ways of perceiving things through applying his scopes of spontaneity and naturalness. As for women, he had well and truly wanted them to be strong, independent, and involved in public affairs as long as they would remain in touch with their very nature and not envying men for their masculinity and their natural characteristics. The more natural women are, the more irresistible they become "all that is spontaneous is irresistible: and forever it is individual force that interests. I need not repeat you, your own solitude will suggest it, that a masculine woman is not strong, but a lady is" (225). The more a woman is ladylike, the stronger she is and that principle should draw a red line between why women want to feel empowered and the real things that make them so. These thoughts were already stated by Fuller but with a different tone, arguing that if women were free and "wise fully to develop the strength and beauty of woman; they would never wish to be men, or men-like" (Fuller, 1843, p31). These lines were clearly stated in defense of the opponents of woman's rights who held on to the argument of femininity to obstruct the individual development of ambitious women.

Considering the time line, it follows that the development of Emerson's ideas on women, and, in particular, their right to be equally involved in politics as men during the formation of the American suffrage movement in the 1850s, Emerson was by now persuaded by and insisted on its inevitability. Though his arguments were embedded in the essentialist nineteenth-century terms of sanctified womanhood, courtesy, and instinctive superiority, his political request in support of women's rights were audacious.

He is then consistent with Fuller's view that both sexes have a balance of qualities that societies name as masculine or feminine, though justifiably, "given that they were already in advance of the awareness of their times, neither he nor Fuller was able to apply this insight further to reach today's hypothesis that social conditioning may create all gender traits." Correspondingly, possibly some modern readers have hoped that Emerson had a step further to know about the impact of societal conditioning specifically for the reason that, regardless of Emerson's compatibility with ideas of his time, the address and the essay "Woman" comprised a prophetic statement of opinions that would not become up to date until very recently. As Emerson started to examine the popular reactions to the woman's movement, his voice sounded noticeably similar to that of women who would only start to write in the twentieth century (Myerson, 2000, p219).

5. Bibliography List:

- Harvard Squares Library "Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Women's Rights: Legacy of Emerson Series" <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/biographies/emerson-and-womens-rights/> accessed on 01 Sep 2020.
- Robinson D.M. (2014) *The Movements Medium: Fuller, Emerson, and the Dial "Revue française d'études américaines"* 2014/3 n° 140 -ISSN 0397-7870.
- Emerson. R. W (1925) *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, (1926) Ed. Perry Bliss.. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Emerson R. W. (2005) *The Selected Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Edited by Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson), The University of Georgia Press.
- Fuller M. (1999) *Woman in the Nineteenth Century 1843*, Dover Thrift Editions New York.
- Emerson R. W. (2018) *Poems* Frankfurt am Main, Germany Reproduction of the original.
- Emerson R.W. (2010) *Emerson's Essays* New York Wildside Press LLC.
- Porte J. (1982) *Emerson in His Journals*, selected from the Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks Harvard University Press.
- Myerson J. (2000) *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson* Oxford University Press.
- Woolf V. (2001) *A Room of One's Own* Broadview Press, Canada.
- Tiffany. W K. (2010) *Critical Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson: A literary reference to his life and work* Tiffany K. Wayne New York 2010.
- More H. (1799). *Strictures on the modern system of female education: ...* London: printed for T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies. <http://name.umd.umich.edu/004902140.0001.001>