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Transcendentalism and Gender Roles

A very simple idea is defined through the American philosophy of Transcendentalism that men and women both have the same idea about the world around them and how they see themselves in this world. However, these ideas are mostly abstract, such as man’s relationship with nature and gender roles in society. The basis of these ideas is based on transgressing from the societal and religious reasoning that promoted fixed gender roles and slavery in society. Two notable transcendentalists, Emerson and Fuller discussed these norms in their works, “Self-Reliance” and The Great Lawsuit. However, Fuller’s essay, “The Great Lawsuit”makes a more effective argument against oppressive gender norms as compared to “Self-Reliance”. As it talks about the transcendentalist philosophy, feminism and fixed gender roles in the cultural and historical context in the 19th century.

Through Transcendentalism, a voice was raised to get equal women rights, revolt against the fixed gender roles, abolish slavery and stress the idea of “Self-Reliance” in American society as a drive for moving forward as a nation. Emerson in his famous essay, “Self-Reliance”, motivated the American nation to achieve glory, however, his essay only made men it's subject and it failed to capture women and their interests as individuals. for instance, in this line, Emerson is addressing men and the social norm of addressing them with honor “Every true man is a cause, a country and age; - and prosperity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients” (Emerson 99). Owing to the philosophy of Transcendentalism which revolts against the societal norms, Emerson uses the same anecdotes and refers to great philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Milton because they have left great legacies behind and possessed great morals and strengths of MEN. “Him all tongues greet, all honors crown, all eyes follow with desire” (Emerson 112), in this instance it can be argued that if he is invoking the individualism within a society, American men are mentioned here. Quite the contrary, Fuller in her essay, talks about equality and equal distribution of resources between the two genders as this line focuses on equality “The sexes should not only correspond to and appreciate one another, but prophesy to one another” (Fuller.64). Moreover, this idea is based on rationality, intellectualism, and reason but “Self-Reliance” discusses these points with relation to men only instead of mentioning both the genders separately.

Feminism was a movement initiated by women after the French revolution, this movement talked about equality and the right to vote in a male-dominated society. Likewise, the transcendentalist philosophy talked about gender equality in a 19th-century American society where the term feminism was not even listed in the dictionaries. At that time, women were preparing themselves for the first wave of feminism. The ideology of feminism was only used as a political agenda by men and their issues remained the same regarding patriarchy and suffrage. The "woman question" was a part of all the scholarly discussions that started with the early 19th century. In the cultural context, men were dominated in society and religion also placed them on a high pedestal, likewise, women and their strengths and capabilities are not discussed in this essay. Moreover, society associated with irrationality and domestic work with women and men were perceived as intellectual beings and their superiors. In Emerson’s essay, women's individualism is absent, however, women contribute a lot in the collective good of society. He places men at a higher pedestal and encourages them to achieve the lost status of a man. Moreover, according to him the individual voice of a man should be the universal voice, “Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense” (Emerson 113). Quite on the contrary, Fuller in her essay, The Great Lawsuit, explores the idea of Transcendentalism from the perspective of women's individuality. She also takes into consideration, the matter of “women question” in this essay. In an instance, she addresses the social perception regarding feminism as “the same want of development, which thus affects him morally in the intellect, prevents his discerning the destiny of woman” (Fuller 65). Transcendentalist philosophy later inspired feminist ideas in women but the social and cultural paradigms are still prevalent. Furthermore, “Self-Reliance” as compared to “The Great Lawsuit” glorifies men whereas, on the other hand, Fuller points to the reasons behind gender discrimination and attempts at creating harmony between both the genders.

Fixed gender roles stem from the social and religious norms because the role distribution between men and women can be justified through these norms. Transcendentalist philosophy has revolted against these norms and calls for a rational change. Emerson has employed specifically "man-making" ideas and anecdotes from history to establish their individuality (Leverenz 36). For instance, in a place, he decides the position of men in society as “Let a man then know his worth, and keep things under his feet” (Emerson 99). The recurrent use of "man" and "men" in history, politics, and individuality, violates the principles of Transcendentalism because it keeps following the same lines of patriarchy and gender discrimination. Moreover, he has advised "boys" to be manly or a man like because a boy lives in a playhouse and views the world from there “A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible” (Emerson 100). This line refers to two ideas, one idea serves the need to man up to be self-reliant whereas the second idea hint to toxic masculinity. Fuller describes the European ideals and their influence on the patriarchal practices in America. She states that in America it is a common perception that in matrimony, man is head of the house and woman is its heart. The law also perceives women as the sole protectors of children and domestic responsibilities because they are inferior in the social hierarchy. She then quotes an example from religion that in Christianity, both men and women were saints when it came to divine rules. She also critiques at women being the subject of romantic poetries and prose, she rejects these ideas and calls them a rational and intellectual being. For instance, "in Schiller's Dignity of Woman, beautiful as the poem is, there is no “grave and perfect man,” but only a great boy to be softened and restrained by the influence of girls” (Fuller 64). Moreover, she calls for a revolutionary change where men instead of noticing every woman’s move, invite them to work alongside them. The fundamental transformation of American society can only occur with the collective efforts of both the genders, men and women.

Transcendentalist philosophy was based on rational and intellectual grounds because it transcended from the cliched cultural, historical and social norms prevalent in 19th century America. It also invoked individualism as a practice to grow in society, however, Emerson in his essay, “Self-Reliance” has only talked about the individuality of men and on the other hand, Fuller has talked about the individuality of women in Transcendentalism. Likewise, she has also talked at length about feminism and fixed gender roles from cultural, social and religious perspectives. In “The Great Lawsuit”, she is emphasizing on the value of individual acceptance of both the genders. Therefore, in the light of above arguments, references and instances from both the essays, it is evident that "The Great Lawsuit", focuses on gender issues in a transcendentalist space more effectively as compared to Emerson's ideology in “Self-Reliance”.

# Works Cited

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