

Millicent Garrett Fawcett: Writing in the Defence of Women's Emancipation

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At the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth century, the fight for a full feminine citizenship, represented by the right to vote, was, beyond doubt, one of the most controversial aspects of the political agenda in England. The prevailing legal system, and more precisely the liberal policy, denied women a political citizenship. In fact, the liberal ideology took as "natural" the sexual division of work. In like manner, the patriarchal character of the Victorian society, strengthened by the ideology of the separate spheres, was a strong obstacle between women and the public and political life of the country.

The right to vote was, thus, at the time, a symbol of citizenship, and that stressed even deeper the inferior status of women, and contributed to the maintenance of the exploitation and dependency situation which victimised the feminine population. In fact, in what concerned divorce and the rights of the mother over her children the law was still extremely unfair:

...if similar hardships had affected any represented class, they would long ago have been swept away. (Fawcett, *Women and Representative Government* 286)

Along with the law's injustice the Victorian society was living, at the time, under a double-faced moral standard, derived from the relation between the sexes, that allowed the most respectable men to molest, without punishment, young girls, and at the next moment to stand for parliament. It was, thus, against this whole situation of dependency and exploitation that the defenders of woman's emancipation fought, aiming to secure a full citizenship to the feminine population. This was, however, a long and hard task since one not only had to fight against a whole legal system, but it also implied the challenge of the Victorian mentality, so strongly patriarchal.

Among those who were deeply engaged in the feminine cause Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929) deserves to be detached as being an important contributor to the concession of the vote to the feminine population. Described by Brian Harrison (19) as possessing a moderate feminism, Millicent Fawcett has shown, since very young, her interest and concern in women's situation, being strongly influenced by John Stuart Mill, and by his ideals, after having heard him in a meeting, in 1865:

This meeting kindled tenfold my enthusiasm for women's suffrage. (Fawcett in Strachey 19)

The feminine cause meant, in this way, the fight of Fawcett's whole life, in which she assumed a political action characterised by dialogue and constitutional methods, rejecting, therefore, any form of violence. So, she engaged herself in public attack through the organisation of public meetings, the elaboration of petitions to parliament, as well as in the writing of essays and articles to newspapers and magazines. Her involvement in meetings and public speeches was, initially, in the sixties and seventies, a great shock, since the female participation in this kind of events was not considered a proper feminine behaviour:

This was regarded as a most terribly bold and dangerous thing in the 'sixties and seventies'. Women hardly ever spoke in public, and it was thought dreadfully "advanced" and likely to be "unsexing", besides, no one believed that a woman's voice could be heard. (Strachey 45)

But Millicent Fawcett managed not only to make herself heard but also to be a respected figure in the political arena of the time. According to her opinion, women's subjection derived both from the bad state of the law, of the public moral and also from the education given to the feminine population. However, the bad state of the law was, in its turn, influenced by women's situation:

The evil state of the law, the evil state of the general tone of public opinion in regard to morals, is an outcome of the subjection of women, of the notion that women are possessions or chattels, with whom men are freely justified in dealing as they please. (Fawcett, *Speech or Silence* 330)

The concession of the right to vote was, thus, the ultimate goal of Millicent Fawcett, and of all of those who fought for women's emancipation, since the demand of such right was not only "one of the vital questions before the country"¹ but it stood for the end of the dependency, exploitation and inequality experienced by women. The vote was, in this way, both a symbol of emancipation, of improvement of woman's legal and social status, and the only self-protection against certain injustices. It meant, in short, women's participation in the public sphere and the inevitable change of this area, based, till then, in masculine stereotypes.

The efforts made by Fawcett in the defence of a full citizenship for women were, notwithstanding, beyond her participation in public speeches or in her support to political figures. In fact, to operate the changing of mentality, which Fawcett considered vital to the edification of a fair and more humane society, the essays she wrote had a significant importance.

"Serene, self-contained and thoughtful" as Ray Strachey (20) once characterised her, Millicent Fawcett transferred these qualities to her writing:

...she had a natural distaste for elaboration. She used the plainest words and the homeliest illustration. (Strachey 54)

Fawcett's essays and articles reflected, thus, much of her character, and her writing was not much emotive or with many rhetorical ornaments. Nevertheless, it was her simple, objective and rational style that fascinated every one who listened or read what she wrote:

She was not eloquent, and made no appeal to the emotions, but she moved people none the less. ...there was no elaboration in her speeches, but no great simplification. Her argument was thoughtful, and sometimes difficult, but always fully worked out...(Strachey 131)

The essays written by Millicent Fawcett were the "most essayistic" form of an essay, since they presented themselves as an argument, an

¹ London Society for Women's Suffrage, *Circular Letter*, 1910.

explicit attempt to persuade², in which Fawcett addresses us directly. Being the persuasive essay the plainest literary form (Scholes and Klaus 8) it has as its main formal device the analogy, as well as other non literary strategies such as the author's testimony, or even the use of statistics.

Although Fawcett often used the analogy in her essays, her persuasive power was grounded in her argumentative ability, which enabled her to refute the strongest objections from the anti-suffrage faction:

Her wit, detailed argument, youth and eloquence were compelling attractives to contemporary audiences. (Rubinstein 39)

The Future of Englishwomen: A Reply, written in 1878, is, perhaps, of all the essays produced by Fawcett the best example of a persuasive essay. In it, Millicent Fawcett rises against an article of Mrs. Sutherland Orr, named *The Future of Englishwomen*, and refutes one by one each objection to women's emancipation presented by Mrs. Orr. So, when Mrs. Orr feels certain that the women's movement will bring society's total degradation, Millicent Fawcett argues that, being that true, such decomposition has manifested itself benefic:

The women brought under its influence will have a wider intellectual horizon;...they will have more dignity and more happiness in their lives...in a word, we shall see "the utmost expansion of which the female nature is capable". (Fawcett, *The Future* 347)

Nevertheless, Mrs. Orr continues her quest against the feminine emancipation movement defending that it should stay as it is or the whole society will degrade itself. Against such prediction Fawcett argues that the process of decomposition can not be considered good only till a certain moment. According to her, it is a harmful process from the beginning to the end. Notwithstanding, Fawcett points out that the feminine movement doesn't identify itself with the degradation foreseen by Mrs. Orr, and makes use of the analogy to prove her viewpoint:

² For this purpose see Scholes and Klaus, *Elements of the Essay* 4.

The same process which in a fruit causes it to ripen, may if continued after a certain point, cause it to become rotten. So far, then, we may have the satisfaction of believing that from hour to hour “we ripe and ripe”, and that the fatal “rot and rot”, even if it comes at all, is still in the distant future. (Fawcett, *The Future* 348)

Mrs. Orr also charges the defenders of the feminine cause of considering marriage simply as a legal contract, where the emotional element has no place. This argument is, in fact, a very strong one if we bear in mind that the home and the family were the centre of the Victorian life, with still very strong patriarchal characteristics. Millicent Fawcett presents herself, thus, as evidence of the reverse, and stresses the importance she assigns to marriage, when contracted of one's free will:

I represent the vast majority of women who have worked in this movement when I say that I believe that the emotional element in the marriage contract is of overwhelming importance;...I feel that no one, man or woman, ought to be forced into marriage by fear of social or legal penalties. That is one main reason why I should like to see honourable and honoured careers, other than marriage, open to women. (Fawcett, *The Future* 349-350)

Millicent Fawcett expresses also her disagreement about the disconcerting statement of Mrs. Orr that single women are not only numerous and superfluous, but they also have a mutilated existence. At this point Fawcett recalls names such as Florence Nightingale, Paulina Irby and Octavia Hill who, being single women, dedicated all their lives to the feminine cause, and developed an important and useful work both to women in general and to society as well:

It seems to me that a woman is or is not “superfluous” in proportion as she finds and performs useful work which the world, or some little bit of the world, wants done. (Fawcett, *The Future* 350)

In what concerns the fact that single women are numerous, Fawcett presents an unquestionable fact – only in England there is half a million more women than men, so the number of single women has to be bigger.

But what Fawcett considers of the utmost importance is that only those women who think themselves apt to marry should choose to do so. Proper conditions should, on the other hand, be created so that the other women could take up a useful and noble career. Once again Fawcett makes use of the analogy in order to justify her point of view. In the same way that free-traders defend the removal of all restrictions to trade, so that each country may develop the type of industry for which is most apt, it is also urgent to eliminate the restrictions which debar women from getting a job, in the most different areas:

In like manner, we say, remove the artificial restrictions which debar women from higher education and from remunerative employments...; and the play of natural forces will drive them into those occupations for which they have some natural advantage as individuals, or at least into those for which their natural disadvantages are the least overwhelming. (Fawcett, *The Future* 352)

Another prevalent fear, at the time, among those who opposed women's emancipation, was that women might usurp men's jobs. However, what Millicent Fawcett and the defenders of women's rights aimed at were equal opportunities in the access to work or to a profession, and not any privileges or exceptions:

The one thing that has been asked, and the one thing that is in process of being granted, is a fair field and no favour. (Fawcett, *The Future* 352)

As regards the practice of medicine by women, Mrs. Orr considers this fact the "trigger" to social degradation, as soon as the female emancipation movement reaches its end. In Fawcett's viewpoint things are not as simple as that, but she believes that women's entry in medicine, as well as other victories already achieved, by emphasising the worth of the feminine action, will be a consistent basis to the demand of new rights and liberties:

We have to show what good results we believe would accrue not only to women of this new privilege [the municipal franchise]; and we can point to the experience gained of the results of their admission to the other franchises as showing that women can vote for town councillors, and can both vote

for, and sit on, school boards, without ceasing to love their children or throwing every vestige of feminine propriety to the winds. (Fawcett, *The Future* 354)

Millicent Fawcett considers, thus, that the main aim of the woman's emancipation movement is, not the degradation of society, but its strengthening and evolution. Therefore, Mrs. Orr's predictions are unreasonable, since that kind of prophecy has already proved erroneous:

Those who write and speak against the extension of liberty of action and conscience to men and women have always said that the change they deprecate will undermine or decompose the foundations of society. A few years pass by, the change is accomplished, and it turns out that society is not undermined or decomposed at all, but is all the healthier and more vigorous, through being possessed of a larger proportion of free citizens. (Fawcett, *The Future* 356)

During the following decades, and almost till the end of her life, Millicent Fawcett revealed herself untiring in the defence of women's full citizenship, whether through her writings or through her speeches in order both to collect more adherents to the feminine cause and to refute any objection presented to women's emancipation. In fact, her writing reflected not only the female rationality but destroyed as well any reference to woman's inability based on biological differences. The essayistic she produced was, thus, a powerful means of persuasion, so that woman's conception, and her role in society could be altered, and it also proved, following Dawn Oliver and Derek Heater (113), that although the law has a great importance in the formation and concession of citizenship, it is not enough to produce a true status of it.

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