The Concept Of Liberty In John Stuart Mill's Works

For a great number of people, the concept of liberty is interpreted as independence or freedom from the norms or restrictions of the society. It can also be defined as the will to get away from the shackles of the society and be one's own person. One of the most famous and most read works of John Stuart Mill on this topic is "On Liberty". Through this book, Mill voices the idea of individual freedom in the light of his concepts of history and the evolution of the idea of freedom.

With the passage of time, the basic concept of freedom or liberty has evolved a lot. In ancient times, liberty was taken as the freedom from the tyranny of a corrupt or unjust ruler. But as democracy prevailed, the ruler became the servant of the nation and society became the one thing everyone needed liberty from. For example, the minorities in a society always get their voices suppressed from the majorities, either ethnically or ethically. For example, the oppression of black people because of their skin color. Similarly, in a broader setting of things, we can say that society is the tyrant which has imposed its wills and customs upon the individuals.

With the progress of time, every individual was given his/her basic rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), composed of several articles, has given the basic human rights to every human being on the face of earth. Article 19 of UDHR labeled as "Freedom of Expression" also tells us that every individual has a right to voice his opinions without the indulgence of the people around him and this right cannot be restricted in any situation. However, is this actually being practiced or not is a very striking question. Since the independence of USA, the domain of individualism has been discussed by a lot of people but it has never been implemented as such.

J.S Mill says that a limit must be implemented on the power or hold of society on an individual. This is the only way that an individual can gain civil liberty. Ralph Waldo Emerson, also an individualist, dictates in his essay "Self Reliance" that the individual perception is more important than the real world as it can make a huge difference. Every great person in history has been critiqued upon by the people of his time but later on, his name remained in the world as an irreplaceable person. When Galileo gave the concept of round earth and sun being the center of universe, he was banished and killed by the people of his time. Similarly Socrates was given hemlock due to his take on democracy but later on, the foundations of great classes of astronomy and politics were founded on their works. Moreover, Plato and Milton, the writers of the greatest fictions ever written wrote what their heart told them to, not what the society dictated and that's what made them different and well known in all times.

Liberty can be divided in three groups: liberty of thoughts and opinion, liberty of tastes and pursuits which is the freedom to plan one's own life and the liberty of joining other like-minded people without hurting anyone else. Each one of these types reject the 'do what you are told to do' policies of the society. One must be open to share his viewpoint about anything and should never feel ashamed to do so. It helps to preserve the truth and similarly, no one should suppress anyone else's viewpoint about anything as it is morally wrong to do so. The general popularity of an opinion does not necessarily make it right or vice versa.