

Inevitable Annihilation of Existence in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Jayasree K.,

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vellalar College of Engineering & Technology, Thindal, Erode, India

Abstract: Literature is a medium that incites changes of the women and women writers in the years to come and as well as in the past. Literature reinforced society's limitations for girls or empowered girls to live a more self-fulfilling life within society's standards. The women writers in the past had talked so much about the women independence and equality. One among them is Kate Chopin, whose heroine in *The Awakening* experienced a shift in her attitude towards the role of a mother and a wife in a stereotypical Victorian marriage by rejecting the prescribed roles and freely expressing her sexuality. By taking a closer look at the public reception of the female authors in the nineteenth-century, as well as the common themes that Chopin and Brontë used to expose the narrow-mindedness of the patriarchal society and the lack of basic human rights to freedom in this period, the novels raise awareness to the oppression of women and help in the establishment of a path towards the long-awaited female independence and gender equality. In both North America and Europe in the 19th century, women and men were expected to fill separate spheres of society. Beginning in the 19th century, women's acceptance of these traditional roles began to dissipate. The ideology of Separate Spheres rested on a definition of the 'natural' characteristics of women and men. This paper aims to look back the women in the nineteenth century; perhaps we call it as Victorian era.

Keywords: *The Awakening, Gender Equality, Independence*

I. INEVITABLE ANNIHILATION OF EXISTENCE IN KATE CHOPIN'S *THE AWAKENING*

As per the words of Goethe 'The right man is the one who seizes the moment. The moment in the *Awakening*, which seizes Edna Pontellier experiences is her first successful attempt to swim by herself. The *Awakening* was written at the end of the 19th century which depicts the French Creole society in Louisiana. The French-Creole community had strict social and moral rules and little more was expected of women save to marry, worship their husbands and care for their children. "The common Creole [women] [...] was expected to subordinate their needs to their husbands [...]. The novel presents us with different types of women and how they deal with the social restraints of their society. Chopin's characters depict the characters of women who were socially accepted even if they are rebelled against social code.

The role of a woman in Creole society was mainly that of a mother and a wife. A woman could busy herself with music, art and books but her priority had to be her family. She had to live by the rules given to her through guide lines and etiquette books which played a large part in the antebellum southern society. In other words, women during the 19th century lived in a patriarchal environment. As this is the case, Edna was born and brought up in such a Creolian society, she finds herself within and tries to overcome these societal conventions. Still Edna being the one side of a coin, there is the other side named Adele Ratignolle, a contrastive character to the protagonist. Both have a different perception of their roles as women and in the course of the story their attitude towards society's ideals and their lifestyle seem to diverge into different directions. This is important as it outlines the ideal woman, accepted by society shown through Adele and the rebellious woman, like Edna, becoming an outcast in this society. While Edna develops her own personality, disregarding all social conventions, Adele Ratignolle shows no change throughout the novel and maintains her understanding of what life is supposed to be for a woman.

At the beginning of the novel Edna, too, appears to be accepting the fact that her life revolves solely around her husband and children. Similar to Adele Ratignolle she believes that this is her principal duty. It is mainly Edna's husband, Mr. Pontellier, who tries to impose this image of having to be a perfect wife and mother on her. He perceives his wife as an object he owns and that needs to be conditioned to look presentable in society. Mr. Pontellier does not exactly show that he is worried about his wife's welfare but rather that he is concerned of her appearance being harmed. For Mr. Pontellier his wife is only a "valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage." (13) For Creole men their wives represented them in society. Therefore, the way they looked, their manner and behavior reflected their husband's reputation and honor. When the Pontelliers return home from their holiday on Grand Isle, Edna begins to pursue her own will and refuses to entertain guests on Tuesdays as she used to do, which displeases Mr. Pontellier.

Mr. Pontellier only values his prestige in matters of business and his wife must subordinate to this. Edna is also criticized for "her habitual neglect of the children." (16) Mr. Pontellier accuses Edna for not living up to her role as a mother. He notices that she is not like the other women who seem to be caring and loving to their children. Edna shows no real interest in her children and her husband doesn't see a typical "mother-woman" in her. She even admits herself that she is "fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way" and that she "would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart and sometimes forget them." (8) When her children are sent away to stay with their grandmother Edna feels "a sort of relief." By introducing Edna through her husband's gaze Chopin underlines the fact that 19th century marriages saw women as the "object of others rather than the free subject of their own fates."

In the first scene of the novel the locked up parrot may symbolize Edna. "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi!" as the parrot utters, he is described as a bird with "a language nobody understood." (21) The parrot mirrors Edna who is also locked up and misunderstood, parroting whatever she is told to do or say by society. Like the parrot who is admired for its beauty and kept in a cage, Edna is similarly only appreciated by society for her manner and physical appearance. Social conventions are in some ways important to her although she cannot fully understand the Creole society, as women around her openly speak of intimacies but at the same time they are conservative. Most of all, the women value chastity which Edna believes to be a natural trait a Creole woman is

born with. (22) She is surprised at how tolerant this society is to allow everyone, even women to talk openly about private things such as a pregnancy. Edna finds herself somewhat alienated but simultaneously she begins to understand that the People's free speech is only based on forbidden actions. Freedom is only shown on the surface, while beneath society's strict code still dominates.

However, Edna reveals her true self while talking to Adèle Ratignolle about her youth. As a young girl Edna believed in romance and she fantasized over different men she came across while growing up. Her passion stayed unfulfilled and when she married Mr. Pontellier, who "fell in love with her, as men are in the habit of doing". (23) She decided that her dream of romance and the passion she yearned for must be submitted to the past and that marrying for true love was not something she was bound to do. Instead she devoted herself to her husband like every other woman did.

Suppressing this desire of passion is what leads Edna to feel unsatisfied. When she discovers her infatuation for Robert Lebrun her suppressed feelings return. "Edna again becomes conscious of her own duality: her youthful romantic infatuations are transmuted into an adult combination of romance and sexuality." (24) Her entire experience on Grand Isle and the people she is surrounded by allow Edna to question her purpose as a woman and to gather the courage to go against society's expectations and become her own person. Her first step to relying on her newfound confidence is taken when, on Grand Isle, Edna returns from her first successful attempt to swim by herself, telling her husband in a sort of melodramatic way that she had been close to death but had still made it without relying on anybody's help.

She expects some kind of praise from her husband, but all he says is "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you." She reacts to his comment later in a way she would have not dared to do before. While Edna is sitting on the porch outside the house in the middle of the night Mr. Pontellier urges Edna to come inside the house, but she refuses. (25) Edna's resistance shows that she has begun to realize that she is not inferior to her husband because she is able to achieve something without depending on anyone. Her transition begins by her excluding Mr. Pontellier, the man she always succumbed to in the past, out of her life.

Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly [...] with a writhing motion she settled herself more securely in the hammock. She perceived that her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant. She could not at that moment have done other than denied and resisted. She wondered if her husband had ever spoken to her like that before, and if she had submitted to his command. (26)

With her awakening Edna also begins to feel a desire to quench her thirst for expressing herself in every manner. This desire is particularly provoked by Mademoiselle Reisz's

piano playing. Edna slowly begins to explore her feelings when Mademoiselle Reisz plays the piano. She even drifts into a fantasy world which is somewhat sexual.

Edna realizes that she is leading a double life "that outward existence that conforms, the inward life which questions." (30) From the outside Edna must abide by the social rules, but from the inside her imaginations and fantasies allow her to gain a sense of freedom. She recognizes on Grand Isle that her role as a woman is more than fulfilling domestic duties, so when she returns home she is a changed woman and has a different perspective on life. She begins to pursue the life she has inwardly always fantasized about. Ignoring all social conventions Edna sets off her journey of independence by refraining from her duties and doing whatever satisfies her. She tries to develop her own individual role in society by moving out of her husband's home and into "the pigeon house" (31) because she feels like her husband's home "never felt like hers, anyway" and because "the house, the money that provides for it, are not [hers]" This shows that she has become confident and believes that she will "never again [...] belong to another than herself." (32) She is beginning to break free from her obligations towards her husband and by throwing a dinner party all by herself to celebrate her house moving she wants to set an example of a free woman who can support herself. Her husband to her is now merely "like a person she had married without love as an excuse." (33)

The concept of the "mother-woman" in *The Awakening* underlines the theory of patriarchy which is a social concept in which a man always functions as the head of his family having authority over everyone else. According to this ideology women possess an inborn inferiority to men which is explained with the term "biological essentialism." These distinctions are "based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our changing essence as men and women." (50) In other words, women are biologically programmed to submit to domestic work while men are in charge of the entire system making women powerless. But not only are these gender roles biologically programmed, it is also society that imposes this image upon people. The Creole society in the novel for instance inflicts the idea that a woman can only find true happiness in marriage, such as Adele Ratignolle does. Lois Tyson endorses this way of thinking by exemplifying the fairytale of Cinderella through which young girls are exposed to the image of a submissive man from the very beginning.

In the course of the novel Edna develops her strength to go against all social conventions. By moving into "the pigeon house" it seems as though she has finally gained enough confidence to be an independent woman. But in the end she realizes that emotionally she is not strong enough to withstand the pressure. She is left with an inner conflict and sees suicide as the only escape. The reader is left to judge whether her suicide was her true liberation or if it was her weakness that made her choose the path of death.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, and inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. (55)

The sea is personified and is the inner voice Edna succumbs to. It opens up the path to Edna's self-discovery in the beginning and in the end awakens Edna one last time. She realizes that the sea is the only place where she can attain freedom. By taking off her clothes she frees herself from all ties she has with society and she feels "strange and awful [...] to stand naked under the sky!

[...] She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known.”(56) She leaves her entire identity behind and enters the sea as a “new-born creature.” Edna no longer exists and by that she obtains her female empowerment in death, staying true to her individuality.

Edna’s suicide is therefore not entirely a sign of weakness but rather a last victory for herself as it is her own choice to take her life. Death is an absolution from society. Chopin lets her protagonist commit suicide to show that for a woman to try to escape strict social conventions and to be empowered was impossible but at the same time she shows that there is a possibility for women to break free. Therefore Edna’s main problem is her inner conflict and the influence of society which she cannot truly escape. Realizing that society only allows a woman to find happiness in marriage and that she can only survive by depending on a man, Edna recognizes that society’s codes and guidelines for women are far too internalized in the people’s minds, and so her family and friends, the people she loves, cannot accept the person Edna wants to become.

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