



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

The Pursuit of Selfhood and Institution of Marriage in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

Ruby

Ph.D Scholar, Baba Mastnath University, 22-BMU-7357, English Department

Email-07rubydhalwal@gmail.com

Abstract-*The Awakening* (1899) is considered as one of the most renowned novel in American Literature. Through the character of Edna Pontellier Chopin discusses about the conflict between the individual identity and restrictive nature of marriage in American society of 19th century. The Novel explores Edna's awakening to her desires, ambitions, emotional independence and self- discovery. However, her pursuit of selfhood often clashes with expectations of society regarding wifhood and motherhood. This paper examines how Chopin critiques conventional marriage as social institution that supresses female individuality and demonstrates how Edna's search for her liberation ultimately leads to her alienation and tragedy. This study also challenges traditional gender roles and social norms.

Keywords-Selfhood, marriage, female identity, patriarchy and gender roles

Kate Chopin (1850–1904), is an American author from Louisiana, brought a markedly different cultural context and boldness to her exploration of gender dynamics. Writing primarily in the 1890s, Chopin addressed a post–Civil War Southern society and an era of emerging modern ideas about women's independence and social identity. She is often regarded as a precursor to twentieth-century feminist writers because her stories candidly depict women's inner desires, emotional struggles and quests for autonomy. Chopin's fiction challenges the traditional nineteenth-century ideal of the submissive wife and mother by portraying women who begin to question the limitations imposed upon them by patriarchal society. Chopin also exposes the rigid ideals of femininity that defined nineteenth-century womanhood. In *The Awakening*, she contrasts Edna with the character of Adèle Ratignolle, who represents the socially accepted model of the devoted mother and wife. Edna Pontellier's struggle feels very personal, almost uneasy to read at times. It's not just about marriage or motherhood, it's about not feeling like yourself within those roles.

Chopin's writing combines concise prose with vivid symbolism and sensory imagery. Natural elements frequently mirror the emotional states of her characters. In *The Awakening* the sea symbolizes both freedom and danger, representing Edna's longing for independence as well as the risks associated with defying social norms. Chopin's use of imagery such as birds, water and open landscapes reinforces the theme that women, like creatures meant to soar freely, often find their wings constrained by society. Kate Chopin's perspective on gender is therefore characterized by psychological realism and empathy for women's inner struggles. Her female characters are complex individuals who grapple with conflicting desires, responsibilities and



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

societal expectations. Edna Pontellier's marriage to Léonce Pontellier is comfortable but emotionally constraining. Léonce is a conventional husband who fulfills his social duties and provides financial stability, yet he treats Edna more as a component of his domestic life than as an autonomous individual.

Edna Pontellier's marriage initially appears stable and respectable, yet it gradually becomes clear that the relationship suppresses her individuality. Chopin describes Edna's emerging self-awareness as a profound shift in consciousness: "In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her." Edna's awakening reveals the fundamental tension between personal identity and the expectations of marriage. Although Léonce Pontellier fulfills his social responsibilities as a husband, he cannot comprehend Edna's desire for autonomy. As she begins to pursue art, independence and emotional self-discovery, her marriage becomes increasingly incompatible with her sense of self. Chopin, approaches societal expectations with greater intensity and skepticism. Edna confronts not only the expectations of her acquaintances but also the cultural institutions of marriage, motherhood and religious morality that govern women's behaviour in late nineteenth-century America. These institutions possess legal and cultural authority that extends beyond the local community.

Kate chopin's literature has been studied by several researchers and there is a lot of literature on the subject. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier experiences a profound transformation as she begins to recognize her individuality and desire for self-expression. Chopin describes the emergence of this self awareness in symbolic language. Edna's awakening leads her to challenge the expectations placed upon wives and mothers in Creole society. She begins to pursue painting, cultivate independence and ultimately move into her own residence. These actions represent attempts to reclaim her personal identity, yet they also alienate her from the social community that defines her role. Her awakening represents the emergence of an autonomous selfhood that had previously been suppressed by social expectations. Throughout the novel Edna gradually sheds the identities imposed upon her wife, mother and society woman in favour of a more authentic sense of self. Chopin describes the beginning of this transformation in language that emphasizes individual consciousness. As Edna's awareness grows, she begins making decisions based on her own desires rather than the expectations of others. She devotes herself seriously to painting because it brings her fulfilment. She engages in a physical relationship with Alcée Arobin as an expression of her own sensual autonomy; and she temporarily leaves the domestic sphere by moving into a smaller residence of her own. Each of these actions represents a deliberate assertion of independence in a society that expects women to subordinate their identities to their roles as wives and mothers. Chopin presents these choices without overt moral condemnation. Instead, they appear as a natural progression once Edna recognizes the possibility of freedom. Yet the consequences of such autonomy are profound. As Edna distances herself from social



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

conventions, she experiences increasing isolation from her husband, friends and community. Her pursuit of selfhood conflicts directly with the cultural ideal of the self-sacrificing mother.

The main objective of this research is to explore how women pursue their passion within their marriage and how they dealt with the challenges set up by society towards ambitious women. To study and investigate the ideals of domesticity, purity, piety and submissiveness expected of women. To explain how marriage was viewed as an economic and social arrangement where women were expected to be wives and mothers above all else. To explore the symbolic significance of the sea as a catalyst for freedom and self-discovery. To highlight the external judgements and pressure faced by Edna from the society. Chopin highlights the conflict during one of Edna's moments of intense self-reflection, when she realizes that her commitment to personal identity outweighs even the traditional expectations of motherhood. By distinguishing between sacrificing material things and sacrificing the self, she rejects the Victorian ideal that a mother's entire identity should dissolve into devotion to her children. In addition to the literature review, this study will discuss about female identity and selfhood. Furthermore, this research also discusses about how women were under constant pressure of patriarchal society. The study also discusses about how women chose to follow their passions regardless of the rules of patriarchal society.

Data collection for this research paper involves literature review and discussions to understand how Chopin uses small opportunities to imagine what women might do if granted even a modest degree of independence. Edna Pontellier transforms her spare time into artistic exploration and personal self-discovery. She is a twenty-eight-year-old wife and mother living within the Creole society of New Orleans who undergoes a profound personal transformation an awakening to her own desires, ambitions and identity beyond the roles assigned to her by society. At the beginning of the novel, Edna lives a materially comfortable life supported by her husband Léonce Pontellier, a successful businessman. Yet despite this comfort, she experiences an increasing sense of emotional and spiritual dissatisfaction. Chopin signals this tension early in the narrative by depicting Edna as a woman gradually becoming conscious of her individuality. The restrictive nature of Edna's social environment becomes particularly evident through the contrast between her and her friend Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle represents the idealized Victorian model of womanhood the devoted "mother-woman" whose entire identity revolves around family life. Chopin describes such women in language that emphasizes their self-sacrificing nature.

Data collected through the literature review is analysed thematically. Thematic analysis involve identifying patterns and themes related to the research questions. Data is organized into categories based on research questions and analysed to identify trends and relationships. Data collected through narrative analysis is analysed by using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative analysis involve identifying recurring themes regarding how women followed their passion despite living in a society which is governed by



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

patriarchal rules. Conclusions and recommendations are based on data analysis and synthesis of results. Limitations of data collection and analysis methods include the possibility of incomplete or biased data due to the subjectivity of the analysis. Additionally, data may be limited by the availability of relevant sources and the risk of interpretation errors.

The findings of the study shows that Edna's awakening happened when she begins to perceive herself not merely as a wife or mother but as an autonomous individual with her own emotional and intellectual needs. As Edna's awareness grows, she begins to assert independence in several ways. She devotes herself seriously to painting, abandons the obligatory social routine of receiving visitors on her designated "at-home" day and eventually leaves her husband's house to live in a smaller residence she calls the "pigeon house." Each action represents a step toward reclaiming her identity from the social roles imposed upon her. Chopin also explores Edna's sexual autonomy, particularly in her affair with Alcée Arobin. Unlike the romantic idealizations common in nineteenth-century literature, the relationship is portrayed as a purely physical experience, emphasizing Edna's claim to control her own desires. One of the most significant moment occurs when Edna learns to swim. For the first time she experiences the exhilarating sensation of controlling her own body within the vastness of the ocean, an experience that symbolizes personal liberation. Edna distinguishes between loving her children and surrendering her identity to them, asserting that a woman's sense of self should remain inviolate even within motherhood. The reactions of those around Edna reveal how profoundly her awakening disrupts societal expectations.

Conclusion- Throughout this research work, we have observed how Chopin does not portray Edna as a flawless heroine. She is often impulsive, self-centered and unaware of the potential consequences of her actions. Yet Chopin's narrative clearly sympathizes with Edna's struggle for identity. By depicting a woman who acknowledges sexual desire, questions maternal self-sacrifice and demands personal freedom, Chopin challenged the cultural assumptions of her time. The novel's final scene, in which Edna swims alone into the Gulf of Mexico, remains one of the most debated moments in American literary history. As she enters the water, she recalls the voices and expectations that have shaped her life, yet ultimately listens only to the rhythmic call of the sea. The scene is filled with ambiguity, Edna's death may represent defeat, liberation or both simultaneously. On one hand, her inability to reconcile personal freedom with societal obligations suggests the tragic limitations imposed on women in her era and on the other hand, the act can be interpreted as the final assertion of autonomy a refusal to return to a life defined entirely by external expectations. Through Edna Pontellier's journey, Chopin exposes the emotional and psychological cost of a society that denies women the right to define themselves. Ultimately, *The Awakening* stands as a profound exploration of the relationship between freedom and constraint. Edna's awakening reveals both the beauty of individual self-discovery and the devastating consequences that can arise when society refuses to accommodate that



Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 7.2

ISSN No: 3049-4176

freedom. In doing so, Chopin offers one of the earliest and most compelling literary examinations of women's autonomy in modern literature.

Léonce does not see himself as an oppressive husband; rather, he believes he is fulfilling the proper role expected of a man within society. Yet his perception of his wife reveals the underlying assumption that a husband possesses authority over a woman's life and body. Early in the novel, when Edna returns from bathing in the sea, Léonce examines her appearance with a critical eye and Chopin writes that he looked at her "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage". Léonce's expectations become even clearer when he criticizes Edna for failing to attend properly to their children. Chopin exposes the rigid gender division that defines the domestic sphere. Women are expected to sacrifice personal desires in order to fulfill their roles as mothers and caretakers, while men remain largely detached from these responsibilities. She reveals how patriarchal authority often operates through social expectations rather than overt force. Léonce does not forbid Edna's independence directly instead, he manipulates public perception so that her actions appear harmless and conventional. Through Edna's awakening, Chopin articulates the idea that women possess an inner self that cannot be defined solely by domestic duties and Edna's struggle reflects broader feminist arguments emerging during the late nineteenth century, which emphasized women's right to personal autonomy, intellectual freedom and emotional fulfilment.

Reference

1. Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Penguin Classics, 1993.
2. Bonner, Thomas, Jr. *The Kate Chopin Companion: With Chopin's Translations from French Fiction*. Greenwood Press, 1988.
3. Bonner, Thomas, Jr., editor. *The Kate Chopin Companion: With Chopin's Translations from French Fiction*. Greenwood Press, 1988.
4. Culley, Margo, editor. *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text, Biographical and Historical Contexts, Criticism*. 3rd ed., W. W. Norton, 2018.
5. Dyer, Joyce. *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*. Twayne, 1993.
6. Fetterley, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Indiana UP, 1978.
7. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. Small, Maynard, 1900.
8. Seyersted, Per. *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. Louisiana State UP, 1969.
9. Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin*. William Morrow, 1990.
10. Rosowski, Susan J. *The Voyage Out: Sinclair Lewis, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and The Awakening of Feminist Consciousness*. U of Nebraska P, 1987.