

A Study of Literary Feminist Themes in *The Awakening* By Kate Chopin

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Abstract

The Awakening, novel is written at the end of the 19th century in America. In the 19th century in America and Europe, men and women were expected to fill the distinct domain of the society, where men were expected to live a public life that is the common life of the people and women were supposed to do the household duties such as the housebound, cooking, taking care of children and husband. Their identity was limited as a wife and as a mother only. The ideology of keeping women in the four walls of the house, taking care of children, obedient were and are at the centre of disparity at that time and now. The core objective of this paper is to explore the hindrances in the development of women after marriage and also shows how marriage become an obstruction in the progress of women. The novelist, Kate Chopin depicts main protagonist, Edna unsatisfied with her position in life.

Introduction

Kate Chopin was a controversial writer of the 19th century in America. Her second novel *The Awakening* received lots of criticism. Initially, it was not appreciated but later it become classic after the death of Kate Chopin. *The Awakening* written in the late 19th century and it gained popularity in the 20th century. Her literary career was limited, her first short story appeared in 1889. Apart from short stories, she also published a few novels such as *At Fault*, *The Awakening*, and *The Story of an Hour*. These are the best publication of her life. Her work shows her life experience.

The novel *The Awakening* deals with struggle of a woman against patriarchal society. The main character breathes with inequality have options available to her. In the novel the main protagonist is a controversial character of nineteenth century expected for women and their roles are being depicted by her. The protagonist denial from her responsibility as a mother and a wife. Her struggle social structure of the

society which forced her to reveal by her identity as a wife and as another by killing her own identity. Beside main protagonist, Edna the novelist is also emphasized on other two main characters of the novel. These two characters are Adele Rstignolle and Mademoiselle. In accordance with these two characters Edna's life path is shown.

Domestic Labour

In the novel protagonist, Edna Pontellier is suffered from the domestic labour. She was dominated by her husband, Leonce Pontellier, who always imposed authority upon her. He considered her as a piece of personal property who constantly take-care his children and obeyed his command without question. He wanted Edna with only a wife and mothers nothing else. Domestic labour is one the important theme of the novel.

Mr. Pontellier considered his wife not more than mother and wife, her role to nourish their children and pleasing her husband. She used to be a housewife and she has no right to see the world apart from her family. We can see the incidence, when Mr. Pontellier Klien's hotel, he investigates that

“The result of his investigation was far from satisfactory. He turned and shifted the youngster about in bed. One of them begins to kick and talk about a basket full of crabs. Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high

fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it.” (Page 5)

In the above quote Chopin shows that the care of the family was only associated with the female only, male had nothing to do it and it is clear from the above lines. The taking care of the children was only associated with mother at that time and it is an element of domestic labour. In reality Raoul had no fever; it has been just the imposition of duty to her (Edna).

There is another character in contrast of Edna namely, Adele, she is the epitome of motherhood and femininity. She adjusts herself in the patriarchal society. Adele Ratignolle happy to her traditional life she continuously devote her family. But the Edna is totally opposite to her she is not ready to surrender her life as a mother-woman only.

Patriarchy

A form of social organization in a male is the family head that control his family according to his own way. It is an unjust social system that is repressive to women. In the patriarchal society male are supposed to be superior to a female and everything is to be done according to his own rule and order in the family. He runs up to the whole family, according to his own willing. Women have no right to raise their voice against their (male) rule and order. In such kind of society women are in a subordinate position and they have no

right to claim on actions and norms which have been set by male in the society or in the family. And if anyone goes against these norms, it is considered being an offensive. So we can see such kind of societies, women are also not get much importance as the men.

Feminist critics like Virginia Woolf, Simone De Beauvoir has very well depicted the plight of women in the traditional patriarchal set-up. Resonating their views, it can be said that Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a reflection of such a patriarchal society where women are mostly obliterated.

Mr. Pontellier treat his wife as a possession, as something else that he can acquire when she re-joins him a little sunburned, he looks at his as damage personal property. He does not think of his wife as an equal and cannot participate in her world.

"You are burnt beyond recognition," he added, looking at his wife at one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage." (Page no. 1)

Patriarchy subjugates women, restricting them to household affairs as depicted by the character of Adele. Who is a devoted wife and mother, epitome of 19th century womanhood? She devotes her time to taking care of her children, performing her domestic duties with full strength and confirming cheerfulness of her husband. Her happiness lies in her family and her identity in her

husband. Her family is her world. She is comfortable with her simple existence, she unintentionally kindles Adele's movement away from such a lifestyle because she and her fellow Creole women are so clearly chased and highly moral, society allows them to feel only in such matters as pregnancy, underclothes and romantic chats.

Edna disapproves the traditional and patriarchal system of family. She was neither a traditional wife, nor a traditional mother.

"She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother, Pontellier in Iberville feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (Page no. 18)

Search for the identity

In the patriarchal system women are always confined to only a simple wife and mother whose business is to nourish the family. Women considered themselves that their job is only to serve the family nothing more it. Due to this, they are not able to express themselves in other fields and their life is wasted, their identity

only a wife and mother nothing more. Many feminist project this as a theme in their novel to show the quest for identity of women. In the patriarchal society, women are always in the search for identity.

Search for the identity is the major theme of the novel. Throughout, the protagonist searches for her own identity where she falls in the society? Where her real identity?

“Looking at them remind her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving the beach. She silently reached out of him and she understands, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm.” (Page no. 01)

In the beginning of the novel, Edna shows as a model of a wife who submits admits the control, it is signified by her marriage ring, but Edna not happy to be a wife. This incident should be watched in marked contrast to the act in which she (Edna) tries to halt her bridal ring. Initially, Edna presented to be a wife, but she has not confined herself to be a wife only she want to be more than a wife.

“She [Edna Pontellier] thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (page 139).

At the beginning of the novel, Kate Chopin shows Edna as a wife and mother. But Edna was not happy to be simple wife and a mother. She has

own desires and dreams, actually she was not happy with her married life. She denied the institution of marriage, and said that marriage is the barrier in the development of the women.

“Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself. At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions.” (Page no. 07)

There are two images of Edna towards her life that is inner Edna and outer Edna one contradicting another. These two do not match. One image of Edna as the perspective of societal expectations and another image are interrogated herself. She is always in contradiction to each other. Throughout the novel inner image dominated by the outer image of Edna and converts much more entire. She has a child and a husband, but she wants to live their own. She wants to live separate from the family. This action of her associated with the inner image, but at the same time she has an outer image of Edna which bind herself to do this.

Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one. Then had followed a rather heated argument; the two women did not appear to understand each other or to be talking the same language. Edna tried to appease her friend, to explain...

“I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it clearer; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.”

Kate Chopin portrayed Edna as autonomous, self-centred and ambitious being who desires a life that is free from restriction, the limitations imposed on her by the family and the society. She strives to discover her identity as an independent being she tries to discover herself as a free human being. She wants a life of full liberty. The family duties and traditional beliefs are not as important as her personal life. It is not like that she does not devote herself to her family. But what she actually wants or desires is a kind of recognition as a free individual who can enjoy his liberty to full extent and expects that his liberty and rights should be recognized and confirmed by his family and society.

“Mrs. Pontellier (Edna) beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and recognize her relationship as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of the young woman of twenty-eight- perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any women.” (Page no. 13)

Society and social norms

Society is preoccupied with the idea that what women should do and what they should not to do. If any woman goes against the ideas and beliefs of the society, the society never allows her to do what she likes to do. In the pressure of society women are not able to expose themselves in a way in which they like to express. Different kinds of societies have different kind of ideology towards the women, in the traditional societies, people have the belief that women should stay in the household and their duty is only to look after the house and if any woman goes out of her house for earning money it is considered as an act which is against the society. And with the pressure of the society they are unable to enjoy their life in a proper and freeway.

Our social norms are such that the woman is regarded as child bearing machine and unpaid servant. Her happiness should lie in taking care of her family and children, as is best depicted by the character, Adele Ratignolle.

Edna lives in Creole society which is enemy for her. It is a barrier in her way of living and development. Due to this society, she suffered in her future life and finally commits society.

“Edna looked straight before her with a self-absorbed expression upon her face. She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing, there under her eyes, was all part and parcel of an alien world which had

suddenly become antagonistic.”
(Page no. 53)

Society implements certain norms which we all need to follow whether we desire or not. Sometimes breaking those norms is difficult because we think too much about what society will say. Mr. Pontellier is also more worried about the breaking of social norms rather than Edna leaving the house.

Marriage

Marriage is also the one of the literary themes of the feminist writers. They have exposed this in their writing that marriage is also one of the barriers in the development of the women as self being. Due to orthodoxy and traditionalism in many societies women have to be getting marriage at their early age, the age which is the age of flourishing their career, but their career becomes stagnant after marriage because they have to take responsibility of the in-laws household, their children, their husband despite of fulfilling their own desires and dreams. Their husbands treat them just like a piece of personal property which they used only for looking after the house and nothing else. They are forced to obey their husbands command because they are directly or indirectly dependent upon their husband. So it is a very pathetic kind of life which the women live after their marriage in traditional societies which has been depicted in *The Awakening*.

Mr. Pontellier is under no obligations to answer to his wife. He does as he likes...

"Coming back to dinner?" his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. He felt in his vest pocket; there was a ten-dollar bill there. He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not. It all depended upon the company which he found over at Klein's and the size of "the game." He did not say this, but she understood it, and laughed, nodding good-by to him. (Page no. 03)

"Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired." (Page no. 23-24)

Mr. Pontellier treats his wife as an unpaid servant and wants her to be at his disposal. He is irritated when his wife is not available to attend him at odd hours. Sometimes he expects unreasonable attentions from her even while she is sleeping.

"It was eleven o'clock that night when Mr. Pontellier returned from Klein's hotel. He was in an excellent humor, in high spirits, and very talkative. His entrance awoke his wife, who was in bed and fast asleep when he came in.

He talked to her while he undressed, telling her anecdotes and bits of news and gossip that he had gathered during the day. From his trousers pockets, he took a fistful of crumpled bank notes and a good deal of silver coin, which he piled on the bureau indiscriminately with keys, knife, handkerchief, and whatever else happened to be in his pockets. She was overcome with sleep, and answered him with utterance.

He thought it very discouraging that his wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation.” (Page no. 05)

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“You are burnt beyond recognition,” he added, looking at his wife at one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.” (Page no. 01)

Conclusion

Edna disapproves the traditional and patriarchal system of family. She was neither a traditional wife, nor a traditional mother. “She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The

year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother Pontellier in Libreville, feeling secure regarding their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her.” (Page no. 18)

The central root of the problem is the system of patriarchy which league to all kinds of discrimination against and devaluation of women. The concept of gender is the real villain and has to be demolished.

The central, radical, or ‘essential’ focus of all kinds of feminism is the unjust discrimination between men and women, when they are both human beings. Feminists insist that while ‘sex’ is real and biological ‘gender’ is nothing real but only a social construction. A woman is not born, but made-by the patriarchal society with its concept of all the do's and Don'ts for women who ensure subordinate status for them. This is the central issue and all kinds of feminism take their roots from it.

“The voice of the sea, speak to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous. Enfolding, the body in its soul, close embrace.” (Page no. 13)

She asserts that her life is hers to have or to destroy. She refuses to sacrifice it for the society. **She feels resurrection in self-destruction.**

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