



Edna Pontellier's destiny and the process of "awakening" in "solitude" in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract- Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is a novel that talks about its protagonist Edna Pontellier's journey towards freedom and self-identity which culminates in her "awakening". However, what this paper tries to throw light at is not simply her awakening, but the very process of her awakening. What makes this awakening significant is the fact that this entire process takes place not in solidarity and togetherness, but in Edna's solitude. This paper tries to probe why is Edna Pontellier destined to undergo the process of "awakening" in "solitude" and what light does her predicament throw upon the possibilities and limitations of walking away from all social bonds.

Keywords- Awakening, solitude, solidarity, loneliness, death, patriarchy, freedom.

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is destined to undergo the process of "awakening" in "solitude" because the character of Edna has been conceptualised in loneliness and lacks any kind of solidarity. She is most of the times alone. In most of the crucial scenes in the novel, we find her alone. When she is weeping on the porch in chapter two, she is alone, she is alone in her swim, in the hammock that evening-she is alone, she is alone once Leonce has left for New York, she is alone in the region house, and even in her death she is alone. The title of the text too celebrates "solitude."

Edna undergoes the process of "awakening" in "solitude" also because she has the privilege, if at all a privilege, of loneliness. She is distant from her husband, children, female and male friends. Moreover, all those people with whom she has had the possibilities of forming a bond leave her repeatedly. In the end of the first chapter Mr. Pontellier leaves her for his club, in the third chapter he leaves her for his business, then in the morning again and finally, he leaves her and goes to New York. Robert too leaves her repeatedly; he leaves

her after the evening of moonlight swim, then on the Cheniere Caminada, and then he leaves her and goes to Mexico. Even her children are away from her most of the times.

Edna has at her disposal all the material perks, and yet she is unhappy and dissatisfied. This is the yearning of the most privileged. She is white and upper class, a mother, a wife, a friend, but what is lacking in her is the sense of human being. And the recognition of this lack is the beginning of her awareness. “She awakens to the injustices of her society and to her own sexuality, who rebels against patriarchal restrictions, and who attempts to realize her inner being through sensuality, love, and art.”¹

Her awakening is a quest for her essential self. And Chopin seems to be suggesting that authenticity of a woman cannot be defined through her relationship with the society, be it a husband, a lover, or her own children. Edna can give up everything, even her life, but not “herself”. For her all bonding seems to be a bondage. And this belief is justified by the cruel fact that no matter what, women are always expected to live up to those relations. But a woman who wants to awaken must rip off all such bonding because all bonding is imposed by patriarchy. However, once she has rid herself off all the bonds, she is all alone. And when a person tries to live in the society without any relation, the only inevitable solution that seems to be available is death.

What Edna’s solitary awakening then suggests is that if a woman awakens and awakens before anybody else has awaked from the deep sleep of patriarchy, can’t but be lonely. And in such a situation, the woman is fated to die. And in this, Kate Chopin brings out, Jules Chametzky suggests, “the pressures working against woman’s true awakening to her condition, and what that condition is.”²

What Edna lacks in this “awakening” is solidarity. And this is the limitation of her walking away from all social bonds. Walking away limits her to her own vulnerability. Had she been able to have a companion, a female bonding of likeminded woman, she wouldn’t have succumbed to the “abyss of solitude.” What this moving away does to her is that it takes her even farther from the prospects of any female bonding or sisterhood. She fails to form any sisterhood with other women in the novel, her potential fellow travellers, because in the world of this novel, women are divided from each other in terms of their social location. And social location is, undoubtedly, derived from patriarchal setting. Edna’s femininity is implicated in her race

¹ Genovese, “Progression and Regression in Edna Pontellier” in *The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition, Ed-Margo Cully, Pg-262

² Chametzky, “Edna and the “Woman Question” in *The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition, Ed-Margo Cully, pg-221

and class, that is why she is fated to be lonely. She chooses not to have companions. And that is why she is destined to go through the process of awakening in solitude.

Her moving away from all social bonds brings in a certain kind of despondency in her and makes her newly awakened self fragile. Her solitude “brings a confrontation with the ultimate aloneness-death-and thus the threat of extinction of the fragile, new-born self.”³ As George Arms rightly suggests, “we look upon Edna’s awakening as archetypal in marking her passage from death to rebirth, but we may also look upon her awakening as another kind of death that is self-sought.”⁴

In her solitude, in her death, Edna succeeds in preserving her authenticity, but probably her bold and daring transgression seems to be moving towards a defeat. However, one must not see it in terms of bravery and value judgement, but reality.

Her solitude “overpowers her with the sense of the unattainable.” She realises that “There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when even he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone.”

The freedom that Edna attains is subjective. It’s a very private freedom. She fails to find a sustaining freedom. It is this freedom that makes her a person of solitude. And freedom cannot be enjoyed in solitude. Had she been able to identify with other women in the text, she would have found an alternative to her solitude. However, Edna does all that is bold and daring, but in every way, she finds herself let down. What choices then has she got but to kill herself? What can she do if the world isn’t ready for her? Her suicide then is not a defeat but a protest against this world. This world that fails to provide an answer to the question “how to be free in one’s self and for one’s self but still meaningfully remain connected to others.”⁵

³ Culley, Edna Pontellier: “A Solitary Soul” in *The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition, Ed-Margo Cully, Pg-247

⁴ Arms, “Contrasting Forces in the Novel” in *The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition, Ed-Margo Cully, Pg- 198

⁵ Chametzky, “Edna and the “Woman Question” in *The Awakening*, Norton Critical Edition, Ed-Margo Cully, Pg-222

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