



An Idea Never Dies in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

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Abstract

Success is coveted by every one but failure too is necessary. This paper will discuss how the failure of Edna, the heroine of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, not only in life but also in losing life is a capstone to liberate the idea of human existence of women with the abilities to think, to be aware, to deliberate and reflect like their male counterpart. Women served men since men since ages and automatically assumed servile or commodity status. Edna rejects the idea of becoming servile to the dictates of a man in exchange of luxury and leisure.

Chopin is vehement about idea of respect and regard. She favours matrimonial bliss and discipline in family with one person chairing the events but hierarchy of positions in family should be followed with due reverence and renovation. Mother who is in important role of upbringing children should be entrusted with a set of responsibility and never be silenced into submission.

Throughout the novel, Edna is robbed of her expression as authority and coercion of conventional men — father and husband in her life never allows her to register her opinion, she gains confidence in company of her friend, Robert and sensuous admiration by Alcee Arobin, but both deserted her making her stranded in conventional framework helpless to support herself or survive the savage sarcasm of society.

Keywords : Sarcasm, antagonism, framework, Patriarchal suppression.

Introduction

Patricia's Yaeger suggests that *The Awakening* describes "a frightening antagonism between a feminine subject and the objectifying world of discourse she inhabits" (211).

This antagonistic and unusual relationship depicts a woman's inability to express her experience, it also exhibits how patriarchal forces expel or exclude women from discourse. Chopin renders how women most effectively resist patriarchal suppression. Chopin depicts two kinds of women: one— who are dumb and driven by patriarchal dictates and lack the courage to register their voice; the other— who overtly and overly attempt to enunciate and elaborate their cravings and are labelled either insane or redundant in main stream of society.

Chopin in her most popular novel, *The Awakening* talks about the idea of expression, the heroine, Edna fails to register her voice through out the novel she has no reason, no regret and no remedy for herself.

She dies an ignominious death by drowning in the sea. She is hated as adulterous and conventional readers find amusement and attention in her untimely and fearful demise. Edna dies but leaves behind the idea of woman's emancipation, autonomy and individual status; Patriarchy from centuries, has put women behind bars, caged like animals, dependent on men for every kind of facility. Human are also governed by evil. The good of them perceives the importance of women in household and in upbringing of children but the evil of man doesn't allow any respect to a woman despite her immense sacrifice and patience in relations.

This evil of man forced a woman to try her luck in male bastion. Edna is one such woman who tries to discover the purpose of her life in autonomous pursuits i.e. carving out a career other than matrimony and making money by personal efforts. The efforts of Edna are not fructified because the tremendous task of individual status, she has undertaken is beyond her ability and prowess.

The Chopin focuses on the achievement of Edna not as a successful artist or broker but as a women who has unleashed the idea of individual, autonomous status to women on their own steam and sail.

Edna loses her battle to patriarchy but wins her war against the tradition which basks in the glory of sanctioned supremacy of male over female.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin in very blunt, blatant and brazenly manner showcases the romantic impulse of Edna who craves for a life lived by her male counterparts. Chopin is neither in defence or in opposition of Edna, her only concern is to show Edna as a rebel who leaves behind the idea : long live the revolution! Even in her failure, she successfully registers the affliction and ailment if a woman's heart.

Edna commits suicide as she fails to countercheck the ignoble circumstances where in she has placed herself. Edna's suicide on one hand, shows her defeat and exit from social habitation and on other hand, shows her liberal spirit and autonomy – self acquired and acclaimed undaunted and uncut from conventional constraints.

Edna's suicide is a descent into madness, a triumph the best possible achievement of independence and agency under the circumstances.

Her final action a defeat – the fatal, inescapable result for any woman who tries to assert autonomy in the face of such debilitating, insurmountable patriarchy. (Ramos 145)

The Awakening showcases how patriarchal pressure of Chopin's times posed serious and severe obstacles for elite and privileged women. Chopin raises the doubts about the smugness of patriarchy over status of women in domestic set-up. She argues how women who are thinking entities and aware humans, need something more than luxury and leisure. In fact, they have immense reservoir of energy to be employed in various fruitful and educative tasks of life. They cannot be hushed-up, commanded and controlled like animals with leash of house-hold duties and blinkers of child-care. They are not spineless, they have genepool of man and do possess a highly developed brain to assess, analyse and associate with the imposition unduly imposed on them.

Women cannot be tamed with bare minimum for their survival and security from savages, their cognitive faculties curiously investigate the cautions caustically curl up their creativity into conditioned behaviour to serve the conventional framework. Chopin projects Edna as a woman who fights fiercely but silently for her right to choose for herself. She takes a course full of struggles, intimidation, rejection and dangers but she is headstrong and stubborn to follow her way, her choice if not in life, may be in a chosen death.

Edna's suicide is her sweet will to reject what is against her set of preferences but her drowning in the sea is also magnified as her well-deserved punishment through conventional lens; her demise is sometimes taken for cosmic justice hurled on her for her moral deviation. Spangler also asserts that the final scene of *The Awakening* "undercuts the otherwise superb characterization of the protagonist and thus prevents a very good novel" (250).

Chopin makes Edna embrace the sea in death to accommodate conventional publishers and readers who cannot tolerate moral digression of Edna. Patriarchal pressure is mounted on Edna in such a way that she becomes inescapably deterministic in her resolve and finds a type of mythical rebirth through suicide.

Suicide is viable from of agency for women ... it depicts female protagonists who retreat from a world of insurmountable obstacles into madness ... retreat is highly ambiguous. (Ramos 146)

Edna deserves justifiable sympathy and consideration for her poignant plight. Her innocence is victimized and crushed mercilessly by absolute patriarchy and she enjoy her last laugh with her contentment by ducking out of travesty of life's unfair and impetratable obstacles.

Edna strives for undefined, unrestricted and impossible state. She search for freedom from identity but her quest deprives her not only of meaning in life but also of life itself. Identity is a social construct like gender. Edna forgets that her decision to take on her identity is relatable to her biological and physical being.

Chopin is very much realistic in her approach and accords no leverage to Edna; she creates Reisz and Adele who clearly and explicitly inhabit well- defined social identities and creatively, zealously transform them which Edna fails to exercise manage and sustain; both Reisz and Adele accept their respective social identities of artist and mother- woman respectively ungrudgingly whereas Edna opt for both identities and feels disenchanting with both. She fails to realize that every role has its pros and cons and nothing is given to adults without fixing any duty. Adele compromises on individuality and Reisz on supple embellishment. Chopin observes:

Reisz was a disagreeable little woman ... self assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others ... with no taste in dress ... genuine satisfaction fell upon everyone as they saw her enter ... (33-34)

Self-effacing, impolite spinster is universally respected for her musical talent. She also observes some patriarchal constraints and manages her social identity publically to navigate through conventional set-up.

Edna successfully creates some significant employment other than household and childcare. She earns money from race course, indulges in artistic endeavours but her identity is fictitious and fluid as she always remains Mrs. Pontellier only. Her fantasy identify as love-interest of Robert and Alcee, her nurturing of romantic ideals and escape from her matrimonial duties weaken her will and resolve to achieve a social identity like Reisz or a perfect home like Adele.

Edna, swept and swayed by romantic hustle – bustle earlier, finally realizes her failure in attaining individuality. She wants to relinquish no role, no state of her existence but finally leaves all in a chaotic state of mind. She abandon herself to her fate as she chooses to live outside of social constraints beyond any practical fiction and reaches a place beyond habitation and endurance; governed by whims and a chaotic state of mind Edna directs herself to oblivion and self-annihilation. Chopin describes her state:

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. (36)

Edna throws, here, herself into an intoxication, a sense of rejuvenation as she defies the authority of her husband in a separate home and romantic affairs. She indulges so much so with Robert that she is least mindful of her surroundings. Chopin here, expresses Edna's restlessness.

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; she even realized that the day would come when he too and thought to him would out of her existence (151).

Believing that freedom is only a state of negation, a freedom from restriction rather than a freedom to take up and act on one's choices – Edna makes the decision to resign herself to an existence so particular to itself that it leaves her no room in which to negotiate the very social restrictions she seeks to elude. (Ramos 150)

The social roles, Edna enjoys and also the social roles, she envies implicitly remind us about their flexibility as well as circumscription. Edna exercises her freedom to choose but freedom should be followed by execution and sustainability to create meaning beyond her impulse and whims. Edna fails to employ courage, strength and dedication required for her undertaking.

Edna's behaviour proves that she is not a kind of woman daunted by demands of patriarchy. *The Awakening* performs a subtle but also a compelling critique of naturalism and realism which reveals the limitation and possibilities in human life.

Edna lacks the will, persistence and consistency, her final surrender to the sea is inextricably tied to her diminishing will power to face obliterating and insurmountable reality. Edna's conscience and social relation offer her no succor as in her times selfhood was incompatible with motherhood.

Edna relieves herself of responsibilities of larder with cook and of children with their grandmother. She sits amid her guests, she feels the old and tedious ennui overtaking her. Chopin showcases the "hopelessness which came upon her like obsession ... overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable" (118).

Katherine Kearns opines :

The condition of sublimity is a pleasurable delirium in which the ineffable is simultaneously felt to be unattainable but it is a pleasure that derives itself from pain. (75)

Edna is clueless about herself, an unarticulated, vague yearning for something ineffable rises up and subsides in her; her oppression is not a curative condition. Edna's due identity requires tremendous hardwork; her actions arouse sympathy, speak for huge effort and endurance necessary for survival of a woman who is neither purely determined by patriarchy nor absolutely free from its constraints. Bartley notes that Edna is a "helpless performer of socially scripted roles ... in any inhabitable, practical way when she commits suicide" (720).

Edna makes a difficult choice, unavailable to her gender; she does not know how to fight for her conception and dedicate herself old and new roles together or selectively. She tries to live freely but lives chaotically, in a meaningless way eliminating the identities she used to represent once.

Santangelo observes :

Insanity is the final surrender to such discourses characterized by the disability to produce meaning – to produce representations recognizable as meaningful within society. (11)

This madness, childish impulses detected in Edna by her friend, Adele, she says : "In some ways you seem to me like a child ... you seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life" (Chopin 127).

Here Adele, Edna's friend guides her to be more responsible, analytical and reflective, to play a realistic role than a fictitious one. Edna's unripe self, immature adulthood and childish impractical curiosity make her blind to her duties and deafen to the serious concern of her friend. Chopin delves down into her psyche :

She was blinding following whatever impulse moved her as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility. (Chopin 42)

Adele, Edna's friend also extends her social boundaries even in her limitation. She manages to broaden her boundaries of household. Indisputably, she wields a social power to flirt with Robert and manipulate him to her service.

Chopin contest the boundaries of Adele's assigned gender roles. Is she a mother? a femme fatal? a saint? a wild woman? ... she reveals an identity that confuses and belies static stereotypes ... She reveals Adele's ownership and authority of mother- woman role beyond the male prescribed definitions ... (Streater 409)

Adele understands the fictitious facade of social boundaries, the contestable and fluid structures, she inhabits them in a practical way : she drops down her fork to listen to the command of her husband giving him the authority suitable to her master but she abuses the same person at the time of labour pain; she is under his command but shares his right in her flirtation with Robert.

Edna possesses many gifts not acquired by her own efforts but she must possess a courageous soul that can not only defy the unreasonable compulsion on women but also reason and remediate her affection of secondary role and dormant status. Edna "had resolved never again to belong to another than herself" (Chopin 106).

Edna stubbornly and selectively refrains from actively opting any duty and whole- heartedly devoting herself to any social role. She always embraces any role out of defiance; her marriage was her disobedience to her father and her affairs– an answer to romantic indulgence of her husband during his business trips. She does everything out of impulse without premeditation and reflection. She tells Robert :

I am going to pull myself together for a while and think – try to determine what character of a woman I am; for candidly I don't know ... I must think of it. (Chopin 109)

Edna in her quest of herself, liberates herself from conventional duties – house care and children but she invites upon herself a kind of vacuum and emptiness that her life becomes meaningless and hollow; she answers her husband with evasiveness but with no intentional gesture to mislead him; all sense of real existence is extinguished in her and she does not want to live in perpetual lie. Her truthfulness prompts her to leave than to eat a humble pie; she becomes indifferent to the consequences as she has never taken a thoughtful decision.

Edna's belief that she cannot escape her reality of her existence make her assume the stark reality, merciless fate, an existence without will and hope, unbearable due to unmediated status. Edna chooses her way, agrees only to her whim and fails to live by her choice due to its unusual way. Edna faces reality as Chaos, naked and unmediated, imprisoning her instead of liberating her. Social construction as practical and highly fulfilling agency offers her no problems in framing new identities but her new identities adumbrate an intricate pattern which logically ends in suicide to liberate her from any kind of pain, pains, purification, pulverization or proof of purity.

Conclusion :

Edna invites every new venture and artistic innovation in her life but she fails to notice the side effects of her actions. Her new identity is unbearably real and horrid as she has nothing at the end; she is also unable to muster courage and strength to accept, endure and sustain whatever she has chosen for her at the age of twenty-seven; she is unwilling to exercise her choice as her obsession has lead her to oblivion. Like Adele, she fails to maintain, mollify, modulate, monitor, modify or manipulate her social roles.

Edna occupies the contrary choice – swimming, painting – unusual for women such tasks require infinite inspiration and potential for continuation. While swimming, Edna looks at the vastness of the sea, space and solitude it offers. Vast expanse of blue water melting in moonlight excites her fancy and she “reach out for the unlimited in which to lose herself” (Chopin 36).

Edna dies physical but survives in her idea. Her success in material world with material entitlements is negligible but idea never dies. Edna even on her death liberates the idea of autonomy and individual existence for women. Edna continues to inspire women by her free spirit, by her idea of romantic ideals in a woman, by her efforts and endeavour to try forbidden fruits and unfurl the possibilities for future generations. Her death is divine, a sacrifice to pave way for reluctant and hesitant soul to give a try to their conception. Failure is the stepping stone to success and today's woman's success is an eruption from Edna's failure.

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