

## Chapter I: A Writer Beyond Her Time

Presently Kate Chopin is widely accepted as one of America's well known authors. She broke new ground in American literature for her outspoken fiction. Revolting against tradition and authority, she undertook to give the unsparing truth about woman's submerged life. She is something of a pioneer in the amoral treatment of sexuality, of divorce, and of woman's urge for an existential authenticity. She is a modern writer, particularly in her awareness of the complexities of truth and the complications of freedom.

Chopin's uniqueness as a woman writer speaks out well beyond the French influence. It is a voice which is strikingly female. The French male form and style she adopts from Maupassant are adapted to suit her purpose. It is to explore a position unique to woman. She exerts literary individuality and originality and, ultimately, speaks in a truly feminist voice. Her novels were mostly forgotten after her death in 1904. But in the 1920s her short stories began to appear in anthologies and slowly people again came to read her. In the 1930s, a Chopin biography appeared which spoke well of her short fiction but dismissed *The Awakening* as unfortunate. However, by the 1950s scholars and others recognized that the novel is an insightful and moving work of fiction. This led to one of the more remarkable literary revivals in the United States.

Chopin is best known in the literary world of today as author of the novel *The Awakening*. Her final novel was published in 1899 at the height of her popularity. This work now regarded as a classic, essentially marked the end of her writing career. Many of Chopin's earlier works had been accepted despite their controversial subject matter because they appeared to contain narrative reporting rather than critical commentary. An underlying sense of support invaded the generally objective tone of

*The Awakening*. The reading public is shocked by such a sympathetic view toward the actions and emotions of the sexually aware and independent female protagonist.

Highly controversial in its time, the novel deals with the condition of the nineteenth century woman in marriage. It has been more recently rediscovered and recognized as an overtly feminist text for these same reasons. This novel represents only the climax of a literary career spent almost exclusively in the composition of short fiction.

When she published *The Awakening* in 1899, Chopin startled her public with a frank portrayal of a woman's social, sexual and spiritual awakening. It told the truth without judgment or censure. The disapproving public reception of it clouded the end of a career that brought to a wider public an area of the growing nation that was unfamiliar to many Americans. The nation in 1899 had seen vast changes in the American way of life and action. But the idea of a true autonomy for women was too much to imagine. Chopin's presentation of the awakening of her heroine, Edna Pontellier, and her unblinking recognition that respectable women did indeed have sexual feelings proved too strong for many who read her novel.

*The Awakening* is the story of Edna Pontellier, a married woman in the late 1800s. Through a friendship with a single male, Robert Lebrun, this slowly turns to sexual desire. She remains most of the time with her close friend Adele, who reminds her duties as a wife and a mother. At Grand Isle, Edna eventually forms a connection with Robert Lebrun, a charming and earnest young man who actively seeks Edna's attention and affection. They start to fall in love deeply. But Robert sensing the doomed nature of any relationship that would develop between them flees to Mexico under the guise of pursuing a nameless business venture. This shifts to Edna's complex and shifting emotions as she reconciles her filial duties with her desire to be with Robert and her desire for social freedom. Lack of husband's love and affection

leads to a question, Why Edna takes the role of an unconventional woman in adulterous affairs? In this regards, the women sufferings and pains depicts in those days which were subjugated. The traditional roles of women are subverted and the traditional thinking towards women is questioned. Then she begins to question her life as a married woman, how is she treated by her husband and the place of women in society in general? She feels that she is not only waking up her understanding of herself as an individual and as a woman who does not find herself happy in the domestic world of her peers, she is also awakening to herself as a sexual being.

The literature of a period is embedded in the social reality of the time. This research will be a great help in understanding to find out the inner pains and sufferings of the female characters that leads them to the rise of feminist consciousness and liberation for livelihood. An attempt has been made to investigate sexual satisfaction and freedom that the character Edna can no longer bear to keep hidden.

This research will draw on the theories related to Feminism and mostly of Simone De Beauvoir. In doing so, I will not cross the frontier of textual analysis. Regular literary consultation, findings and adopting materials from authentic resources has been utilized. *The Awakening* has been interpreted from different perspectives. Some have seen satire and irony in it. Other critics have studied and raised questions about the attitude of Edna towards her children and her husband. The present research will be limited to an analysis of the feminist consciousness and celebration of liberation of Edna.

This study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with an introductory aspect of the study. It incorporates the thesis title clarification, hypothesis elaboration, introduction to Chopin's background, works, themes,

techniques, etc. The second chapter delves into the theoretical modality that is to be effectively applied in the analysis of the novel. Therefore, it provides an introduction of the tool that is feminism. The third chapter of the thesis presents an analysis of the novel at considerable length on the theoretical modality defined and developed in the second chapter. The fourth chapter concludes the research work. With the analysis of the text done extensively in the third chapter, it tries to prove my hypothesis stated in the thesis proposal.

### **1.1. Literature Review**

*The Awakening* as a short novel has touched a nerve of many readers since it came back to public attention in the 1970s. It seems to speak to our time as much as it disturbed readers in 1899. Per Seyersted points out the role of patriarchy in the novel as:

Chopin has made Edna the subject of what is supposedly a male-centered world. She undermines patriarchy by endowing the other, the woman, with an individual identity and a sense of self. Chopin has exposed the workings of a world that kills individuality. Masculine possessiveness has been revealed as the pivotal problem with husband, wife, and marriage. But not only does she make this revelation, she exposes this world and additionally subverts and overturns it. (701)

That Chopin in some way bought into the French male literary tradition which presented itself to her in the form of Maupassant's short fiction is undeniable. Martha J. Cutter says that it is a fact alluded to repeatedly in the criticism surrounding her work, in that of recent years and also in the words of her contemporary reviewers as:

It was the mastering of the short story genre that allowed Chopin to complete her final masterpiece, to develop a style best suited to her

thematic concerns. This development did not of course occur in isolation. All writers have their predecessors and in Chopin's case it appears that one man in particular was highly influential, French short story writer Guy de Maupassant, who took the literary world by storm in 1880 with pieces marked by an impeccable concise prose, carefully chosen expressive details and solidly realistic characters. (21)

Chopin was against women being showcased as objects of erotic delight, intended for the pleasure and adornment of the male. The pleasure that the possession of a beautiful woman affords is entirely physical and Mary Donaldson-Evans writes that it is coupled by an absolute disdain for her being as:

Chopin's gendered originality is best seen in her treatment of male-female relationships. Her innovation lies not so much in the theme itself, because in these terms her work can indeed be seen as a response to European works in general, works which focused predominantly on gender and which shared her concerns with questions of sexuality, bourgeois marriage and woman's role. Her literary individuality and originality, lies rather in the daring with which she treats these relations and the female perspective she lends to them. (54)

Helen Taylor tells that Chopin writes against, shifting women from object to subject. She explores and articulates what she saw in life for women, and in doing so:

Perhaps it was her unique combination of honesty and objectivity that so incensed the readers of *The Awakening* that they condemned it so roundly she almost abandoned her writing. Had Chopin not retained her objective tone, had she lectured her readers on the fall of Edna Pontellier, condemned her with sermons and self righteous finger

pointing perhaps the response would have been different. Certainly she had explored many controversial ideas before and had questioned the married state in other ways. (76)

The reception *The Awakening* received indicates the climate of the time. Richard Fusco writes that its publication cast a shadow over Chopin and she only managed to publish three more short stories before her death. Contemporary critics were predominately hostile toward the subject matter, but praised the artistry of the writing.

The feminist movement, just beginning to emerge in other parts of America, was almost entirely absent in the conservative state of Louisiana. In fact, under Louisiana law, a woman was still considered the property of her husband. Chopin's novel was scorned and ostracized for its open discussion of the emotional and sexual needs of women. Surprised and deeply hurt by the negative reaction to *The Awakening*, Chopin published only three more short stories before she died of a brain hemorrhage in 1904. (139)

During the succeeding decades, critical debate surrounding *The Awakening* has focused on Chopin's view of women's roles in society, the significance of the main character's awakening and her subsequent suicide, and the possibility of parallels between the lives of Chopin and her protagonist and Peggy Skaggs adds that:

*The Awakening* created a scandal because of its portrayal of a strong, unconventional woman involved in an adulterous affair. While Chopin never flouted convention as strongly as did her fictitious heroine, she did exhibit an individuality and strength remarkable for upper-middle-class women of the time. But, the new generations are more accepting

of the notions of female sexuality and equality, praise the novel's candid and realistic views and have found it to be informative about early American feminism. (222)

Presently readers and critics have noted the book's rich detail and imagery and find that its ironic narrative voice is a rich source for analysis. *The Awakening* has now earned a place in the literary canon for the way it uses these formal and structural techniques to explore themes of patriarchy, marriage and motherhood, woman's independence, desire, and sexuality both honestly and artistically.

## **Chapter II: Giving Marginalized Women a Voice**

The patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological difference between men and women. It makes certain that men always had the dominant or masculine role and women has the subordinate. This ideology became the tool for the men to oppress women. Men with the superior concept of masculine gender oppress women through institution such as academy, the church and the family. Each justified and reinforced women's subordination to men with the result that most women internalized a sense of inferiority to men.

Feminist epistemology inquires and explores the different ways of patriarchal domination. For instance with different criteria of justification and different emphasis on logic and imagination, characterize male and female attempts to understand the world. Such concerns include awareness of the masculine self-image. It is itself a socially variable and potentially distorting picture of what thought and action should be. Janet Todd tries to define feminism that, "It is typically associated with particular historical moments when a coalition of women succeeds in bringing issues of gender equality, sexual oppression, and sex discrimination into the public arena" (13).

Feminism is political in nature. It concerns itself with the marginalization of all women. Feminists disagree with the inferior role inflected upon them by the patriarchal culture. They talk about how to unmask the culture and challenge it through literary texts. Feminist criticism includes a great variety of practices. English feminist criticism is oriented to textual interpretation. Nevertheless, nearly all feminist start from one fundamental perception that is, recognition of the patriarchal structure of society.

Feminism can be credited with effecting profound changes in the ideological construction of womanhood globally. The issue of women's autonomy in relation to



reproduction and to work, and the issue of women's health more generally, have found themselves on the global political stage. Feminism continues in its struggle to establish itself as the ground for women's political, economic, and cultural ascendancy in the face of its own internal debates about the significance of differences among women.

The words "feminists" and "feminism" are political. These two terms indicate to support the women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s. Defining feminist criticism Toril Moi writes; "it is a specific kind of political discourse; a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature" (204). Patriarchal attitudes and male interpretation in literary feminism is concerned both with representation of women in literature and with changing women's position in society by freeing them from oppressive restraints. Unjustified is the condition under which most women live. Women strive to be able to do anything and everything men do, because, after all, they are just the same as men.

The feminist movement very much disagreed, and argued that women's writing expressed a distinctive female consciousness, which was more discursive and conjunctive than its male counterpart. Such consciousness was radically different, and had been adversely treated. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* documented the ways, "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth (32)." Women had been made to feel that they were inferior by nature and, though men paid lip-service to equality, they would resist its implementation. Beauvoir adds that, some men might be sympathetic to women's issues, but only women themselves knew what they felt and wanted because:

Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave. The two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man's, and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores. (58)

Women traditionally had been regarded as inferior to men physically and intellectually. Both law and theology had ordered their subjection. Women could not possess property in their own names, engage in business, or control the disposal of their children or even of their own persons. Although learned women had pleaded earlier for larger opportunities for women, the early feminist document was Mary Wollstonecraft's book entitled *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).

Later, Simone de Beauvoir argued in favor of women in her book *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir said that woman was not regarded as an autonomous being. Humanity was male and male defined women. Every institution from culture through ideology to literature is all male. So, feminist writers attacked this notion of patriarchy to awaken women about the discrimination imposed upon them. So, feminists are ultimately in pursuit of a more radical change for enlightening women of a patriarchal society that exploited women from a long history in the name of sex differences. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar tend to define feminist literary criticism as the process of:

Revising the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. It is an act of survival to actively seek a female precursor. Far from representing a threatening

force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. (124)

Consciousness raising is a collective activity of mutual support and critique that encouraged individual women to see the ways in which their habits of thought conformed to a particular set of ideological presuppositions about women's nature and their roles. Though this characterization of consciousness raising might appear a parody of the concerns of middle-class married women, the fact that such women were drawn into the movement in large numbers was crucial to the widespread recognition that women were no longer content to sit on the sidelines of political and public life.

Despite serious differences among feminists as to whether the goal was equality with men or freedom from them, a broad agenda for change could be articulated. More generally, women demanded ready access to the political arena, to economic self-sufficiency, to childcare, to freedom from male violence, to divorce, and to workplaces free from sexual harassment. While feminism must be seen as an activist demand for political and economic reform, it has always been informed by serious reflection on the nature of sexual difference and the mechanisms by means of which sexual difference is enmeshed in relations of power and oppression. Julia Kristeva points out:

The specificity of feminism derives from the intellectual as well as the political climate in which it has developed. Most particularly, in the late 20th century, the dominance of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Post-Structuralism in intellectual discourse has shaped contemporary feminist theory as it is generally understood. The aspects of feminism

are its political struggles, its work in sociology, political science, and history. (82)

So therein lies a fundamental problem with the modern feminist goal, the total equality between the genders. There is no way to completely eliminate gender in society because that is something embedded into us. Nonetheless, feminists had advanced to a much more confrontational attack on male hegemony, advocating a complete overthrow of the biased male canon of literature. Feminists argued that women should write with a greater consciousness of their bodies, which would create a more honest and appropriate style of openness, fragmentation and non-linearity. Critics, being generally male, have not generally concerned themselves with gender issues.

The patriarchal society thought that women were naturally inferior to men. Women internalized their subordinate position and accepted their role to be meek and passive. They had to be useful to men and they had to win their love. These were women's duties in ages and that were taught to women from childhood. Women followed their duties set by patriarchal society without any question and they never tried to challenge it. The feminist critic Virginia Woolf questions, "Whether part of the housework was her task" (34). The male structured society compelled women to think that was their destiny and women did not think necessary to revolt against this thinking.

It became easy for men to convince women that their role in life was to be wives and mothers and to serve the family. Generally women were taught 'drawing room' piano playing and dancing in the place of real education like boys got. Juliet Mitchell writes that, "patriarchal society thinks women are ideally suited only for certain occupations – teaching, nursing, and clerking - are largely incapable of other

tasks” (28). Feminist content was the basis for the censorship of publications. Women needs and interests were ignored and neglected. In a patriarchal society, the law, constitution and the executive body were bias against women. These institutions were male oriented and from these institutions females were oppressed and suppressed. Beauvoir further adds that male defined women as other because:

When man makes of woman the other, he may, then, expect her to manifest deep-seated tendencies towards complicity. Thus, woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the other. (74)

Feminism awakened women with the new idea to struggle against the male dominated society. This is done by enlightening the female, feminist advocated for emancipation and equality. Because of the patriarchal structure of society women have been involved in an age long pathos of identity crisis. Women’s identity crisis has been the issue of several women writers all over the world. The bias society oppressed and suppressed women bitterly and obliged women to internalize their inferiority. But feminism as a political movement awakened them to dismantle all the disciplines of patriarchal society to address the absence of women in various academic areas by uncovering women’s achievement. Female awareness tried to dismantle the conventional patterns to establish nonsexist ones.

Feminism is a relatively recent term for the politics of equal rights for women. It came into use in English only in the 1890s, and many languages do not have this noun at all. It is also a system of critique and has as its central focus the concept of patriarchy, which can be described as a system of male authority, which oppresses

women through its social, political, and economic institutions. Feminism is therefore a critique of patriarchy, on the one hand, and an ideology committed to women's emancipation on the other. At the heart of feminist social and political analysis is the challenging of the public and private divide in politics, which has historically denied women access to the public political space and therefore representation of their interests.

In the nineteenth century, the ideological ascendancy of science and medicine joined the spread of industrialization to promote the sexual division of labor. Women's fixed role as caregivers was ideologically determined by their biological capacity to bear children. Associated with that biological capacity was a host of psychological attributes passivity, dependence and moodiness which further reinforced a growing emphasis on the gendered separation of the domestic and the public spheres.

While the resistance to this view of sexual difference varies historically and culturally, it is against this backdrop that modern and contemporary feminism must be understood. Gradually, women's demands for higher education, entrance into trades and professions, married women's rights to property, and the right to vote was conceded. In the United States after woman suffrage was won in 1920, women were divided on the question of equal standing with men versus some protective legislation. Various forms of protective legislation had been enacted in the 19th century. Not surprisingly, feminism often consolidates into a political movement as a result of women's participation in other radical, reformist, or revolutionary activities.

The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the backdrop to contemporary feminism, is characterized by two intersecting trajectories. On the one hand, in spite of the liberalization of non-marital sex, women remained men's sexual

subordinates. Feminists challenged 'sexist' images of women in popular culture and in the pornography industry in relation to a growing understanding of women's political subordination under patriarchy. Women's bodies, then, became the ground on which the struggle for liberation was waged. On the other hand, a connection was made between women's consciousness and their sexual subordination. Judith Butler sheds some light saying that:

For the most part, feminist theory has taken the category of women to be foundational to any further political claims without realizing that the category effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of a feminist discourse. When the category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character and, hence, exclusionary in principle. (218)

Feminism as a movement is committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. The growing feminist movement sought not only to change society's prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak passive, docile and dependent individual but also to eliminate the subordination, oppression, inequalities and injustices women suffer because of their sex.

Feminists are proud of their femaleness and have made a vital tool to femininity to perceive their existence. Viewing the discrimination upon women by patriarchal culture and society Toril Moi writes, "feminist criticism, then, is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism not simply concern for gender in literature" (204). In patriarchal society men defined women as other and men as universal because of sex difference. The radical feminist insisted that the root of women's oppression were buried deep in patriarchy was sex gender system. Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics*

(1970) argued that sex is political primarily because the male- female relationship is determined by it. Because of gender difference men controlled the public and private world.

The concept of male hegemony is not new in a patriarchal society. Women in the society consciously or unconsciously consent to their subordination before male. They are encouraged “Freely” to choose their inferior status and accept male exploitation as natural. History is only male centered and women are completely absent. The concept of history for women is inappropriate. They hit hard the male centered biased attitude. The feminist’s movement made aware to the women that they themselves were not the reason to be unfit, but it was male’s desire, not to give the women any respect. Making women enlightened the feminist movement, challenged the male hegemony to create a favorable situation for women to develop their personality. Simone De Beauvoir seems to vent her anger against males for their double speaks as:

All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the female species; today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger; we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. (62)

Feminism as a political movement, awakened women to bring a change in a society for women’s right of liberty, equality, property, education and so on. Feminists are alert of their existence. They desire that women should also be part of history, and emphasize upon equality of legal reform for women’s rights. This female



awareness movement helped to change the condition of women. That awareness has not remained limited to voicing out of the women's rights and sexual equality in the public and to create a political propaganda that explores how a woman tries to redefine the traditionally accepted patriarchal norms advocating freedom.

Literature reflects the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period, and that includes attitudes towards women. It deals with their roles and their expectations. But a literature comprising of male-orientated views would be failing in its first requirement, to present a realistic or convincing picture of the world. Feminists have argued for positive discrimination as the only way to correct centuries of bias. Presently, the debate had moved on, from exclusively feminine concerns to the wider issues of gender in social and cultural contexts. Patriarchy and capitalism should be examined more closely and sophisticated models built to integrate the larger web of economics, education, division of labor, biological constraints and cultural assumptions.

Parallel studies in the visual arts stressed a feminine sensibility of soft fluid colors, an emphasis on the personal and decorative, and on forms that evoked the female genitalia. Feminism has gradually become more far ranging and subtle in its attacks on male dominated society. Many injustices still need to be corrected, but equally necessary is a more down-to-earth, tolerant and compassionate view of fellow human beings. Lois Tyson in his book *Critical Theory Today* points out that:

Because feminist issues range so widely across cultural, social, political, and psychological categories, feminist literary criticism is wide ranging, too. Whatever kind of analysis is undertaken, however, the ultimate goal of feminist criticism is to increase our understanding

of women's experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women's value in the world. (101)

Feminism studies women as people who are either oppressed or suppressed or deprived or the freedom of personal expression. All women writers who struggle against patriarchy in favor of womanhood are generally considered feminists. Today feminists have stepped forward against male dominance in order to enhance women's rights and to secure women's emancipation.

Elaine Showalter was another feminist who divided women's literary development into three distinct phases. The 'feminine' phase (1840-1880), where they imitated the masculine role, the 'feminist' (1880-1920) where they advocated the rights of women and protested male norms and values and the 'female' (1920-present) was the phase of self discovery where women's experiences were their main purpose. Showalter entitled *Women's Writing and Women's Culture* in which she said that women have their own types of culture, women have their own types of body, the speaking style, the language, the capacity of thinking and behaving, all are their own sorts and male have their own . So they are naturally different.

Feminist critics like Mary Wollstonecraft, Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf and Susan Gilbert were the renowned critics to enlighten the women about the precarious existence of women in a male governed society. In a patriarchal society, sexual differences caused sexual discrimination and repression. Because of the biological differences women had been compelled to lead a poor life. The sexual difference caused women to remain within the four walls of a house.

The patriarchal society had its own norms, values and culture. By imposing these norms, values and culture upon women they dominated the women. But with the

development of time the movement named feminism came into existence to deny the male culture, male norms and values that undervalued women as complements parts of men the feminism as a movement aimed awakening women in all sides. Its overall goal was to develop all round personalities of women. Simone De Beauvoir looks at the sorry state of women because:

The reason for this is that women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat.

They have gained only what men have been willing to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received. (147)

Contemporary feminism has achieved more systematic interventions into the arenas that authorize representations of sexual difference, in large part because feminists have secured a greater presence in academia and in elite domains of business, politics, medicine, science, and the mass media. Feminist historians have unmasked the assumption that history is determined by great wars and great men, and have succeeded in drawing attention to the ways in which women's work has significantly affected historical developments. Feminist scholars have demonstrated the extent to which male bias has determined the normative assumptions of the social, natural, and behavioral sciences. In the arts, literary and artistic canons are no longer restricted to the work of men.

Though feminism's relation to other struggles for political liberation has always been an element of its self-understanding, this has become particularly salient in recent years as feminism is increasingly exposed as beholden to a pernicious set of assumptions about class, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. Feminism has been

challenged to re-think the centrality of a unified and singular woman's identity to its political aspirations. Adding class as a factor further complicates the feminist agenda, for upper-class white women have considerable economic and social power over lower-class men and women, irrespective of race or ethnicity.

Some have argued that the belated admission of Beauvoir into the ranks of philosophers is a matter of sexism on two counts. The first concerns the fact that Beauvoir is a woman. Her philosophical writings are read as echoes of Sartre rather than explored for their own contributions because it is only natural to think of a woman as a disciple of her male companion. The second concerns the fact that she wrote about women. *The Second Sex*, recognized as one of the seminal works of the twentieth century, would not be counted as philosophy because it dealt with sex, hardly a burning philosophical issue at that time as:

This has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons that have been offered in explanation have seemed adequate. To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist to him also; mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other. (163)

Beauvoir's analysis of sexism is her account for how women occupy the position of the other. She argues that, in order to define their identity as superior, men declare themselves master of Nature, which includes women. By doing this, men put women in a Hegelian slave position. No wonder that the feminist view of the world is based upon a refusal to obey the will of the Supreme Being. The Women's Liberation Movement is the social struggle which aims to eliminate forms of oppression based

on gender and to gain for women equal economic and social status and rights to determine their own lives as are enjoyed by men.

Beauvoir's challenge to the philosophical status quo is part of an evolving movement. Her challenge to the patriarchal status quo is more dramatic. The publication of *The Second Sex* is regarded more as an affront to sexual decency than a political indictment of patriarchy or a phenomenological account of the meaning of "woman." The women who came to be known as second wave feminists understood what Beauvoir's first readers missed. It was not sexual decency that was being attacked but patriarchal indecency that was on trial. *The Second Sex* expresses their sense of injustice, focuses their demands for social, political, and personal change and alerts them to the connections between private practices and public policies. *The Second Sex* remains a contentious book. No longer considered sexually scandalous, its analysis of patriarchy and its proposed antidotes to women's domination is still debated.

Beauvoir's self criticism suggests that her later works mark a break with her earlier writings. Rather than thinking in terms of breaks it is more fruitful to see *The Second Sex* in terms of a more radical commitment to the phenomenological insight that it is as embodied beings that we engage the world. As *The Second Sex* became a catalyst for challenging women's situation, Beauvoir's political and intellectual place is also reset. With regard to the feminism, she herself is responsible for the change. Several concepts are crucial to the argument of *The Second Sex*. The concept of the Other is introduced early in the text and drives the entire analysis. It has also become a critical concept in many theories that analyze the situation of marginalized people. Beauvoir adds that:

If her functioning as a female is not enough to define woman, if we decline also to explain her through the eternal feminine, and if nevertheless we admit, provisionally, that women do exist, then we must face the question: what is a woman? Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority. (82)

Before *The Second Sex*, the sexed/gendered body was not an object of phenomenological investigation. Beauvoir changed that. Her argument for sexual equality takes two directions. First, it exposes the ways in which masculine ideology exploits the sexual difference to create systems of inequality. Second, it exposes the ways that arguments for equality erase the sexual difference in order to establish the masculine subject as the absolute human type. Her argument for equality insists that women and men treat each other as equals and that such treatment requires that their sexual differences be validated.

*The Second Sex* argues for women's equality, while insisting on the reality of the sexual difference. Beauvoir finds it unjust and immoral to use sexual difference to exploit women. She finds it un-phenomenological to ignore it. As a phenomenologist she is obliged to examine the ways in which women experience their bodies and to determine how these experiences are co-determined. As a feminist phenomenologist assessing the meanings of the lived female body and exploring the ways these meanings affect our place in the world, she brackets these assumptions to investigate the ways in which they corrupt our experiences. Beauvoir further says that:

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth. Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a

female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male. The most sympathetic of men never fully comprehend woman's concentered situation.

From a feminist perspective what is perhaps the most famous line of *The Second Sex*, “One is not born but becomes a woman” (267), introduces what has come to be called the sex-gender distinction. Whether or not Beauvoir understood herself to be inaugurating this distinction, whether or not she followed this distinction to its logical/radical conclusions, or whether or not radical conclusions are justified are currently matters of feminist debate. What is not a matter of dispute is that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* gives us the vocabulary for analyzing the social constructions of femininity and the structure for critiquing these constructions.

Beauvoir exerts an enduring influence upon modern day feminism. Some may not deem her a major philosopher, but to humanists, socialists and Marxists, she is an original thinker. She put forward a series of empirical claims about women as the Other, that is, about what the role gender played in her society. Our nature is universal, the difference between the genders is frequently denied. She also puts forward a philosophical argument for why sexism is wrong. She forces the reader to face the absurdity of the human condition and then proceeds to develop dialectic of ambiguity which will enable him not to master the chaos, but to create with it.

### **Chapter III: Feminist Consciousness**

Women during the Victorian era were seen and treated as the property of their husbands. They had assigned duties that were considered insulting to neglect, and were expected to submit to the will of their husbands. While most women were satisfied with this status, others were more courageous, daring to see themselves as individuals. Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, tells the story of a bold and defiant woman. In the story, Edna Pontellier, the wife of a rich businessman and member of high society, experiences a transformation. She realizes she desires more from life than society usually allows a woman. As she begins to discover herself as an individual, she acts out in ways that ignore societal expectations of her. The novel exposes the repression inherent to the role of women in high society and the consequences of a woman's rebellion against it.

*The Awakening* is written at the end of the nineteenth century. The industrialization, urbanization and changing social norms of the turn of the century all contributed to the fact that life is changing. Change is everywhere and the population is struggling to come to terms with those developments. In many ways *The Awakening* encapsulates this struggle and speaks to the painful process that is in store for the country and its women. Like all epic turns in time, the citizens of the nineteenth century had mixed feelings about the progressions the twentieth century would hold.

#### **3.1. The Carefree Edna**

Many of Chopin's other stories feature passionate, unconventional female protagonists. But none presents a heroine as openly rebellious as Edna. The details and specifics of Edna's character is crucial to understand the novel and its impact on generations of readers. When Edna, the heroine of *The Awakening* announces,



“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” (7), she is addressing the crucial issue for many of Chopin's women, the winning of a self and the keeping of it. Because Edna is a respectable woman of the late 1800s who not only acknowledges her sexual desires, but also has the strength and courage to act on them. Breaking through the role appointed to her by society, she discovers her own identity independent of her husband and children.

Edna is unlike any of the other characters because she is continually developing and growing, evolving and progressing. She is attracted to what is forbidden and begins her quest for personal satisfaction regardless of any consequences that she may face. She is different from the rest of the women, which makes her feel alienated. Her fantasies ride upon the shoulders of sexual and physical gratification, and not on pleasing her husband or being a good mother. She is virtually powerless to any kind of seduction. Temptation of things forbidden is always on her mind. Therefore her story is a woman's transformation from an obedient, traditional wife and mother into a self-realized, sexually liberated and independent woman.

Chopin describes her protagonist as:

Mrs. Pontellier's eyes were quick and bright; they were a yellowish brown, about the color of her hair. She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought. Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair. They were thick and almost horizontal, emphasizing the depth of her eyes. She was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features. Her manner was engaging. (3)

At the beginning of the novel, Edna exists in a sort of semi-conscious state. She is comfortable in her marriage to Léonce and unaware of her own feelings and ambitions. She has always been a romantic, enamored with a cavalry officer at a very young age. She is in love with a man visiting a neighboring plantation in her teens and infatuated with a tragedian as a young woman. But she saw her marriage to Léonce as the end to her life of passion and the beginning of a life of responsibility. She expects her dreams of romance to disappear along with her youth. Her fantasies and yearnings only remain latent, re-emerging on Grand Isle in the form of her passion for Robert Lebrun.

The people Edna meets and the experiences she has on Grand Isle awaken desires and urge for music, sexual satisfaction, art, and freedom that she can no longer bear to keep hidden. Like a child, she begins to see the world around her with a fresh perspective. She forgets the behavior expected of her and ignoring the effects of her unconventional actions. Yet she is often childish and harbors unrealistic dreams about the possibilities of a wild adulterous romance without consequences. She fails to consider the needs and desires of anyone but herself. Her flagrant disregard of reality is revealed when she mocks Robert's apprehensions about adultery. She leaves her children in the care of their grandmother without a second thought. Her independence frequently amounts to selfishness as:

Mrs. Pontellier was not a woman given to confidences, a characteristic hitherto contrary to her nature. 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. (16)

Yet although the text never presents her escape from tradition as heroic, it also never declares her actions shameful. The narrative sometimes portrays Edna as selfish in the ways she acts out her defiance of convention. It never portrays her defiance itself as intrinsically wrong. Perhaps, the novel portrays her rebellion as intrinsically right. Edna's decision to commit suicide at the end of the novel can be read either as an act of cowardice. It is her submission to thoughts of her sons reputations and to a sense that life has become too difficult. It is also seen as an act of final rebellion, of refusal to sacrifice her integrity by putting her life in the hands of controlling powers.

### **3.2. Edna's Domestic Life**

In the novel, Edna is expected to submit to the will of her husband Leonce, revealing the sentiment of men's ownership of their wives during the time period. In the beginning of the novel, Leonce's attitude toward Edna as a possession is apparent when he looks at his wife's sun burnt skin, "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4). Leonce does not look at his wife's skin with concern for her health as an individual person, but rather her appearance as his wife and one of his belongings.

For her husband, Edna is a possession, something that belongs to him and something that should fulfill the narrow but confining roles it has been assigned. The oppressive feeling is related to her husband and the dull life she feels is before her. He scorns her lack of attention to the children and scolds her for her "habitual neglect" (37) of the children. Furthermore, at the beginning of the story, Edna has grown sunburned and, "looked at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property that has suffered some damage" (35). When she goes out on the porch and feels the oppression and the vague sense of despair. It can be reasonably assumed that it is these pressures which are pushing her over the edge.

The community views Leonce as the epitome of the ideal husband, for Leonce greatly adores and provides for wife and children. He is quite consistently concerned about the welfare and happiness of his household. Yet Edna does not look at Leonce as her choice of husband. She says their marriage is accidental, that as she was growing up there are particular men that came around her that she would have wished to take her hand. Leonce is disciplined, insistent and low-toned. He is often dissatisfied about her attention to the children and other household issues, because he is often away on business. Leonce sometimes causes her to walk off and cry because:

It would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define to his own satisfaction or any one else's wherein his wife failed in her duty toward their children. It was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement. She was blindly following whatever impulse moved her, as if she had placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility. (72)

His sense of authority over Edna is even more apparent later. In an incident that occurs as the latter rests on a hammock outside of their vacation house. Upon seeing that his wife intends to stay outside, Leonce asks her to come in because it is late. After she refuses, Leonce takes an authoritative tone and says, "I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly" (31). Edna refuses this demand, and wonders if she had ever submitted to such an order from him before, lamenting, and "She remembered that she had" (31). It is obvious from Leonce's tone that he expected to be obeyed.

Leonce does not consider Edna's desires, or inquire as to whether there is any particular reason she did not want to come inside. He makes a decision based

on his own wishes that she will abandon the hammock. And by Edna's own admission, Leonce had every reason to assume she would obey. The deep roots of such expected obedience is apparent when Edna's own father echoes the same sentiment. While visiting the Pontelliers, Edna's father tells Leonce that:

You are too lenient, too lenient by far Leonce. Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it. The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave. Mr. Pontellier had a vague suspicion of it which he thought it needless to mention at that late day. (68).

It is clear from these instructions given by Edna's father that a woman's obedience is a universal expectation, and not merely Leonce's. Chopin's depiction of Edna's submission to Leonce as a common expectation reveals the repression of women during the time and creates a circle of characters about her heroine. She is presented as a devoted wife. She is encircled by an embittered spinster musician, a dour and disapproving father, an understanding doctor and empty headed pleasure seekers. Edna veers between realistic appraisal of her place in the world and romantic longing for Robert. She enjoys the sensual pleasures with Alcée and practically removing herself from her husband's control. Alcée's seductive embraces answer Edna's realistic appetite for an animal satisfaction. Robert's evasions feed her longing for love in its most sentimental dress.

At the beginning of the novel there is considerable attention given to the concept of "mother-women." Edna is already significantly different from these types. For her, this is not a fulfilling role and although she does seem to love her children, she finds peace outside of the home and within her own thoughts. According to the

narrator in one of the important quotes in the novel, Chopin states that:

Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (27)

Society upholds Chopin's criticism that social expectations provide women with only marriage or death. Women were expected to devote themselves entirely to their husbands and children, but Edna does not do this. Her suicide is not the result of grief over losing Robert. It is grief over her loss of the hope that she could ever truly be herself. Shortly before her drowning, there is the statement that, "she understood now clearly what she had meant long ago when she said to Adele Ratignolle that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children" (131).

Realizing after extreme struggle and pressure that she could not beat patriarchy, Edna chose suicide. She felt like she would have to sacrifice herself in order to go on living in such a patriarchal world. She would never truly have control over what happened to her. Robert's treatment towards her firmly cemented that fact in her psyche. For her, no life and a death on her own terms was a hell of a lot better than a life out of her control.

### 3.3. The Awakening of Edna

Edna's process of self-discovery takes place in a series of three significant stages that eventually lead to her death at the conclusion. Before she begins to discover herself, she is caught between her desires to explore herself and her desires and the realities of Victorian womanhood and life. It is not until the first major event in her awakening. It is the combination of music and a baptismal swim in the ocean that she finally awakens to a much deeper form of self-awareness. At this point in the plot after this magical night she is reborn and begins to shed her identity as a typical "mother-woman" and begins to develop her interests and desires more fully.

She rashly gives up her home and husband. In a second major contribution to her awakening, moves into a home of her own and engages in an affair through which she can explore herself sexually as well as creatively. Her awakening occurs rapidly and she falls so deeply into the process that her third and final awakening is too much for her to handle. She cannot completely attain her desires without taking responsibilities and the demands of society into account. Edna feels like a free bird when she is alone because:

There were days when she was very happy without knowing why. She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be one with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day. She liked then to wander alone into strange and unfamiliar places. She discovered many a sunny, sleepy corner, fashioned to dream in. And she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested. (142)

Edna is twenty-eight and comfortable in a marriage to an older man involved with his business life in New Orleans. She has never settled into the selfless maternal

mold of the other women. She begins a journey of self discovery that leads to several awakenings. The first is her separateness as a solitary soul and to the pleasures of 'swimming far out' in the seductive sensuously appealing sea. Her moments of self-discovery are closely tied to the ocean.

At her great moment of awakening, she suddenly learns how to swim, after being frustrated in her efforts before. She and Robert also spend a lot of time in and near the ocean. One day they take a spontaneous day trip to another island in a boat. Edna undergoes a metaphorical rebirth when she falls asleep for hours on the island. She reveals her passion for music, to her own desire to create art and to a romantic attachment to a young man. She loved to living on her own and a gradual rise of sexual desire. Chopin further comments that:

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. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult! (83)

Edna's relationship with Adèle also enables her process of awakening and self-discovery. The process accelerates as she comes to know Robert Lebrun. He is the elder, single son of Madame Lebrun. Robert is known among the Grand Isle vacationers as a man who chooses one woman each year, often a married woman. This summer, he devotes himself to her, and the two spend their days together



lounging and talking by the shore. Adèle Ratignolle often accompanies them. This move leads Edna to self realization and to a final awareness that she has awakened to a world in which she has no place.

On one night of her stay at Grande Isle, her first major awakening occurs as a result of two events. First, when she hears the music of Reisz. Her imagination runs away from her and a series of images of freedom comes to her mind. She imagines a naked man being left by a wandering bird. It is a strikingly raw image for a Victorian woman to have. Chopin is alluding to the idea that her thoughts up until this moment of music have all been leading to a realization of her own freedom and where her happiness lies. This musical experience then emboldens her to finally swim for the first time. It is the second event that contributes to her powerful first awakening.

Therefore, for Edna:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck at the piano sent a keen tremor down her spinal column. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air.

(49)

After this event, she is no longer the old Edna who is still a victim of Victorian demands, but she is renewed and reborn. As she lay on outside after the night the narrator states, “Edna began to feel like one who awakens gradually out of a dream, a delicious, grotesque, impossible dream, to feel again the realities pressing into her

soul” (57). These realities are her love for Robert, her husband and children, and the numerous other demands of Victorian womanhood. Still, after this first awakening she is able to spend a glorious day away from the island. She is with Robert and takes up painting with renewed vigor. She is literally a new woman after this experience.

Although he remains away in Mexico for much of Edna’s awakening, Robert plays an invaluable role in its beginning and end. His flirtations, along with Adèle’s freedom of expression, inspire her to forget her reserve and to begin revealing herself to others. For several summers, Robert has devoted himself to women at Grand Isle, showering them with affections rooted in admiration but lacking serious intent.

Although notoriously ruled by his passions and impulses, he nevertheless cannot forget the societal conventions that both allow and limit his actions. Unlike the Creole women who play along with his flirtations, Edna is swept away by Robert’s devotion.

The second major part of her awakening comes with her removal to her own house and her affair with Alcee. It is the most socially observable act of her defiance and freedom. Now she is able to explore her repressed sexuality in a setting that allows her to be free. This leads to her understanding of herself as a female and sexual being. She is no longer surrounded by her husband’s possessions but by a place she has carved out for herself. In such a place she is free to explore her sexuality and creativity. The problem with this is that she cannot ignore society completely, nor can Robert. In essence, it is a place where she can live out her fantasy of being an independent woman and:

The pigeon house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having

risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligations added to her strength and expansion as an individual. (76)

She sees in him a promise of the love and excitement that have been missing from her life since she married Léonce. Although he never consummates their relationship physically, Robert's tender treatment of Edna proves that his love for her. That extends beyond the superficial adoration he is used to showing his female companions. When Robert recognizes the intensity of his feelings for Edna, he decides to go to Mexico. He cannot bear to be near her and know that he may never act on his love. His courtship of Edna on Grand Isle perches precariously on the boundary between innocence and misconduct. It suggests that defiance and daring may lie beneath his reputation as a harmless flirt.

It is also worth noting that before her awakening she is beginning to notice her husband's treatment of her. Robert's sudden return from Mexico and his unrealistic plan to request that Léonce set Edna free so that he may make her his wife manifest a bolder side to his nature. When he returns to New Orleans, he accepts the impossibility of his intentions. He ignores Edna's claims of independence and self-ownership. Despite his sincere love and urgent lust, Robert cannot escape from or ignore the rules of society. The note he leaves when he flees her house sums up for Edna the unjust, unchangeable state of the world around her. Robert's ultimate fidelity to convention and society solidifies her disappointment with life and with the role she is expected to play. As for Edna's husband:

When Mr. Pontellier learned of his wife's intention to abandon her home and take up residence elsewhere, he immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance. She had given

reasons which he was unwilling to acknowledge as adequate. He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say. (112)

Instead of *The Awakening* turning into a stereotype story about a woman trapped in an unhappy marriage only to be saved by a better man. It is a story of self-realization and empowerment. It is frustrating to read that her affair with Robert is never truly consummated. In fact, they never share more than a few embraces and kisses. It does allow for a lot more personal growth on Edna's part. Later, she did not need Robert to discover her sensuality. She did not need him to make changes in her life. He does, however, turn out to be her downfall.

While Edna despairs over Robert's rejection of her, her suicide is not a response to her disappointment but rather to the final awakening that it affords her. When even Robert, whose love matches the sincerity and desperation of her. Edna acknowledges the profundity of her solitude. In the end, he foolishly and paternalistically rejects her "for her own good" (93). He effectively denies her agency, rejects her ability to make a competent choice and turns out to not be much better than her husband. After all, they both treat her as highly irrational and not knowing what's best for herself as:

Mr. Pontellier had been a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backward. (136)

Mademoiselle Reisz is an unconventional and unpopular older woman who serves as an inspiration to Edna throughout her gradual awakening. She is often called upon to entertain people at gatherings with her expert piano playing. She realizes that Edna is the only one of the guests who is truly touched and moved by the music. Reisz seeks out Edna shortly after Robert's departure to Mexico. Her exchange with Edna by the shore fosters a relationship that continues upon their return home to New Orleans. Edna is inexplicably drawn to the older woman, whose lifestyle she envies. In fact, neither Edna nor Reisz can claim to be particularly fond of the other. But the latter understands the former's passions and enjoys the company and the opportunity to share her thoughts on art and love. Through her relationship with the pianist, Edna increases her awareness of her as a woman capable of passionate art and passionate love.

In many senses, Edna's suicide is the result of her final awakening. That she has been unable to balance a sense of self and freedom with the demands of life. Her feet, despite her best efforts, straddle two worlds. One of the lone artist and seeker and the other the Victorian woman enamored with society and the home. Since she could not create a balance or allow herself to live one life over the other completely, her only choice was suicide. Her awakening happens almost too quickly and her actions as a result of it are too hasty and brash. The only way to cleanse her of both worlds is to enter the sea, the site of her baptism into awakening.

### **3.4. The Celebration of Edna's Sexual Liberation**

Upon its initial publication, this novel caused quite a stir. It presented a female protagonist who is so blatantly refusing the society she lives in and because she is so sexually aware. This combination in Edna's character makes her a literary icon for

feminist ideals. Edna chooses individuality over conformity, sexuality over repression and art over entertaining. She is acting as a feminist, even at a time when this is not a common concept. She is simply deciding to do what she wants, regardless of what her husband or society may think. She continues to think about Robert and on some days she is happy and on some days she is sad. Edna recollects that:

Her marriage to Leónce 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. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. (124)

Edna discovers that Robert has been writing letters to Mademoiselle Reisz about her. She starts to visit her frequently to read the letters and to listen to her friend play the piano. She enjoys her new-found freedom while eating solitary, peaceful dinners and doing quite a bit of painting. She also goes to the racetracks to bet on horses and begins spending a lot of time with Alcée. He is a charming young man who has the reputation of being a philanderer. She wins a great deal of money gambling, and her relationship with Arobin starts to border on the sexual.

While visiting Reisz one day, Edna decides that she is going to move out of the Pontellier house on Esplanade Street. With her gambling wins and the sale of her paintings, she has enough to support herself. She intends to move to a smaller “pigeon house” just around the corner. She wants to be independent and does not want her husband to have any sort of claim on her. That same day she hears that Robert is returning to New Orleans. She admits for the first time that she is in love with him as:

There was Robert's reproach making itself felt by a quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love, which had awakened within her toward him. Above all, there was understanding. She felt as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life, that monster made up of beauty and brutality. But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her, because it was not love which had held this cup of life to her lips. (109)

Therefore in *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is supposed to be one of the most fortunate women in the world. She has a hardworking and earning, capable, loving husband, along with her two male kids. She does not have to go outside of home to work. Yet, she is dissatisfied with her status quo. It is a rich homely situation that many women crave to be in. She brings forth into question, feminism in the context of individuality, sexuality, marriage, freedom and choice. She brings it out that each female is a unique individual, of personal talent. She need not be comfortable with how society categorizes women. But, she did not fit in the conventional mode of the beginning of the 20th Century American dream woman. She instead provides a window into what the woman, over the numerous decades to come, would perhaps evolve into as the individualist and the emancipated female.

### **3.5. Emergence of Feminist Consciousness**

Chopin's depiction of the role of women during the nineteenth century in *The Awakening* exposes the oppression of women at the time. It is the repercussions faced by one who dared not to submit to it. The novel reveals that women in society during this time period are expected to submit to their duties as wives and keepers of the

household. Not the least of which being subservience to their husbands, thereby taking away their individuality and free expression. Edna experiences an awakening as she attempts to pursue her own desires. She defines her own sense of fulfillment outside what has been prescribed for her by society.

In doing so she learns that this is a lonely path to take, as society will make her an outcast. Edna's plight reveals that women at the time had a choice between obedience and submission or isolation and solitude. She learns to think of herself as an autonomous human being. She rebels against social norms by leaving her husband Leonce and having an affair. The first half of the novel takes place in Grand Isle, an island off the coast of Louisiana. Over the summer it is inhabited by upper-class Creole families from New Orleans who go there to escape from the heat and to relax by the ocean. During the week, the women and children stay on the island, while the men return to the city to work.

The confinement of women is a major theme in *The Awakening*. Edna first abandons her reception days. It is a day on which wives must be home to receive visitors or be thought of as rude. She then proceeded to make, "no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household en bonne menagere, going and coming as it suited her fancy" (54). The gravity of this is understood when Edna's behavior, "bewildered Leonce. It shocked him and her complete disregard for her duties angered him" (55). Edna's feeling of confinement is not merely physical, but also mental. The physical aspect is apparent from the emphasis put on Edna's frequent absences from her home as a drastic step in her awakening as:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her



soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken.

The feminism of the book is clear early on. There are descriptions of her husband looking at her as a piece of property. Though Edna loves her children, she does not feel an all-consuming devotion towards them that was expected at the time. Her first instance of rebellion occurs when she first realizes that she can swim and, "she grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (62).

At first Edna settles into her usual routine. She receives callers on Tuesday afternoons and accompanies her husband to plays and musical events on other nights. Soon, however, she stops taking callers, much to her husband's displeasure. She begins to take up painting and starts behaving in what her husband consider an uncharacteristic manner. A little bit confused, Leónce goes to Doctor Mandelet, an old family friend to ask for advice. The doctor advises him to leave his wife alone, and even though he suspects that Edna may be in love with another man because:

Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her. A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her,—the light which, showing the way, forbids it. At that early period it served but to bewilder her. It moved her to dreams, to thoughtfulness, to the shadowy anguish which had overcome her the midnight when she had abandoned herself to tears. (71)

Up until this time, Edna's odd behavior had bothered Leonce. Never before had he been outraged after Edna began abandoning her reception days and coming and going as she pleased. This indicates that an immense portion of what is expected of women involved in some way staying within the physical confines of their domicile. The more significant confinement is of Edna's mental state as it pertains to her outlook on life. Once again the extent of this confinement becomes more apparent after Edna has broken free of it. At the end of the novel, Edna remarks that:

The years that are gone seem like dreams - if one might go on sleeping and dreaming - but to wake up and find - oh! Well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than remain a dupe to illusions all one's life. I have said it before, but I don't think I ever came so near meaning it. (105)

Edna says that waking up from her dream may involve suffering. She insinuates that prior to this awakening she may have been happy, or at least content. This means that her prior concepts and expectations of happiness, fulfillment, and her own place in the world were illusions to which as a woman she was confined. Edna and indeed all women at the time were repressed to the point that what with objective reflection is appalling seemed to them an acceptable state of things. While shattering illusions and breaking free of submission may be empowering, such an awakening is of great consequence to a woman of Edna's era. Chopin's depiction of Edna's eventual loneliness indicates that a woman could expect to be an outcast if she disregards the cultural dictums for women.

## Chapter IV: Realization of Female Self

Once considered a minor author of local-color fiction, Chopin is today recognized for her examination of sexuality, individual freedom, and the consequences of one's actions. Her minute examinations of female protagonists have made *The Awakening* and several of Chopin's stories seminal works in the development of feminist literature. Her writings provide a broad examination of societies that stifle self-expression. In many ways, Edna's awakening is not a gradual or even natural process since it takes place so quickly. Like a child, she gives into her desires to live according to the new thoughts spurred by her awakening but is too hasty in her decisions. In the end, Edna is left with the feeling that she could never attain what she has imagined herself to be.

*The Awakening* depicts the life of a woman, Edna. She revolts against the social status quo and leads the life of an independent female regardless of all the risks. It is a story that unfolds the two parts of her life only to see them fall apart. We see the unreasonable conflict between her exterior worlds of the role of a wife and a mother that society has imposed on her. Her interior reality of emotions and sexuality initially are asleep and awaken through the course of the novel. For the arousal of each aspect, two men are responsible. Robert and Arobin correspond to the two sides of her existence. She seems to have lost touch with the chain of humanity and the society in which she lives. As a result, she cannot make a true commitment to life.

*The Awakening* advocates the notion that women are entitled to true love, happiness and independence. Edna's rebellion against the social conventions is regarded as a very strong characteristic of feminism. It highlights her intense emotional capacity. It is her desperate loneliness that leads to her death. It shows the conflicts and struggles a woman goes through while challenging the social norms. Edna at first behaves and considers herself a reserved and inhibited person not accustomed to intimacy. After she

develops a relationship with Robert and Arobin, it is her passion for Robert and the sensual stimulation by Arobin that bring her sensual joy and awaken her.

The awakening in the book is both a sexual awakening, and an awakening to the restrictiveness of her place in society. This moment of freedom, empowerment, and self-realization is a catalyst for Edna's growing assertiveness and independence. In fact, it is after this moment that, for the first time, she openly refuses to obey her husband's wishes. In other words, she began to recognize that she had automatically assumed a role of inferiority towards her husband, when she did not necessarily have to. It leads to bigger and better things like perusing her talent as an artist. It is also giving up social expectations and domestic responsibilities. It is also about moving out of her husband's home and finding the courage to finally express her love for Robert.

During the summer, Edna meets a young gallant named Robert Lebrun, whose mother rents out the cottages on the island. The two spend almost all their time together. Edna greatly enjoys his company, especially since her husband is generally preoccupied with business. Due to Robert's constant presence, Edna starts to experience a change within her. She begins to develop a sense of herself as a whole person, with unique wants, interests, and desires. She realizes that she is not content to be simply a wife and a mother. She begins to assert herself to her husband.

We see Edna as a woman who awakens to her sensuality that brings her physical joy. Later on, she awakens once again to realize that she is all alone in the world and can never overcome this state of being. To dispel this intolerable sense of solitude, she chooses to end her life. She first awakens from sensual pleasure followed by the realization of an unbeatable sense of solitude. Edna is not seen as a new woman who has a great desire to pursue true love, happiness, and freedom. She is someone who sensually awakens to find herself suffering increasingly from an unbeatable sense of solitude.

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