

## I. The Awakening as a Womanist Novel

Published in 1899, Chopin's *The Awakening* created a huge scandal because of its portrayal of a strong, unconventional woman involved in an adulterous affair, and for the same reason, the purport of the story was hardly considered fit for publication even at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Chopin's stories often deal with marriage and present an unconventional perspective on the theme. Her characters face choices between what society expects of them and what they really desire, and they usually decide to follow their own path, not society's. In her fiction, Chopin explores the special problems and dilemmas that women face and is unafraid to suggest that sometimes women want sex, or even independence. All of these themes appear in Kate Chopin's second and final novel, *The Awakening*. Unlike other women of her time, she, as a challenge to the conventional literary tradition, thought of a character, who, in the quest of her true self, condemns the idea of being the ideal motherly figure of the age and any roles society places her individuality into, who frankly expresses her sensuality regardless of Victorian notion of fidelity and moral conservatism and who strongly slams the age-old suppressive patriarchal door.

The creations of Chopin's rebellious characters, who are ready even to die to achieve the true self, should be understood in view with her own personal background. Born on February 8, 1850 in St. Louis, Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin was the daughter of an immigrant Irish father and a French Creole mother. The O'Flahertys were members of the Creole social elite and were fairly well off. When Kate was very young, her father Thomas O'Flaherty died in a work-related accident. For the next two years she lived at home with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, all of them widows. Kate was very close to her maternal great-

grandmother, Madame Charleville, who first introduced her to the world of storytelling. Her great-grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville oversaw her education and taught her French, music, and the gossip on St. Louis women of the past. Kate O'Flaherty grew up surrounded by smart, independent, single women. They were also savvy and came from a long line of ground breaking women. Victoria's own mother had been the first woman in St. Louis to obtain legal separation from her husband. While attending a Catholic high school, Kate attended numerous social events and became very popular in St. Louis high society. She also became interested in the movement for women's suffrage. When she was a young girl, she earned a reputation as the "Littlest Rebel" when she tore down a Union flag that had been tied to her front porch by Yankee soldiers during the civil war. When she was nineteen, she married Oscar Chopin, a twenty-five-year-old French-Creole businessman. A gentle man, Oscar tolerated Kate's "unconventional" ways, even though relatives warned him not to. He treated Kate as an intellectual equal. He didn't seem to mind that she smoked, drank, and behaved as her own person.

When her husband died of swamp fever in 1883, she moved back to St. Louis, only to have her mother die the following year. During this period of her life, she had one close friend named Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer. Dr. Kolbenheyer was initially Kate's obstetrician and her mother's neighbor, but he soon came to play a very important role in her life. Because of his influence, Kate began to study science, decided to abandon her Catholicism, and started to begin a literary career. Her first novel, *At Fault*, was published in 1890, followed by two collections of her short stories, *Bayou Folk* in 1894 and *A Night in Acadia* in 1897. *The Awakening* was published in 1899, and by then she was well known as both a local colorist and

a woman writer, and had published over one hundred stories, essays, and sketches in literary magazines.

The content and message of *The Awakening* caused huge uproar, and Chopin was denied admission into the St. Louis Fine Art Club based on its publication. She was terribly hurt by the reaction to the book and in the remaining five years of her life she wrote only a few short stories, and only a small number of those were published between 1900 and 1904. Like Edna, she paid the price for defying societal rules. Very shortly, her life came to an end when she died of a cerebral hemorrhage on August 22 1904 while visiting the St. Louis World's Fair.

Apart from Chopin's personal background, the historical and cultural background of the text also cast shadows on how significant this work of art is to understand the conflict between Edna's outward existence and inward life. The *Awakening* was written at the end of the nineteenth century. That was a time of tension between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern. The industrialization, urbanization and changing social norms of the turn of the century all contributed to the fact that life was changing. It, along with Darwin's theories of evolution taking hold of the public mind, the Higher Criticism of the Bible (that the Bible was made up of different manuscripts and not the divine word of God), and the continuing movements in women's suffrage, all contributed to a time when fundamental assumptions were being questioned and cast aside. Kate Chopin lived in Louisiana which was a state created out of three different cultures. It is American in many ways, but it is also southern, and Creole. The combination of these three cultural forces was very strong. The Creole culture was very different from the others. It was Catholic in a Protestant country. The Creole women were very conservative; perhaps the most conservative group in the nation. They were

committed as a group to their husbands and children and had a deep personal and religious commitment to fidelity. Adele is a fine example of this type of woman. But with the spread of industrialization women could earn wages as a factory worker. This was the beginning of their independence, even though the conditions were hazardous, the pay low, and their income was legally controlled by their husbands or fathers. Middle and upper-class women were still expected to stay at home as idle, decorative symbols of their husbands' wealth. They were, as Virginia Woolf termed it, expected to be angels in the house. They were pregnant frequently due to the restrictions on birth control, they cared for their homes, husbands, and children, played music, sang, or drew to enhance the charm of their homes and to reflect well on their husbands. Wives were possessions, cared for and displayed, who often brought a dowry or inherited wealth to a marriage. They were expected to subordinate their needs to their husband's wishes. Marriage was the goal of every woman's life, service to her husband and her children her duties, passionlessness and submission her assumed virtues, selflessness her daily practice, self sacrifice her pleasure. In short, they were expected to be Adele. Thus, love and passion, marriage and independence, freedom and restraint — these became recurrent themes of her work.

Kate Chopin had also noticed some other female characters in the period, who would not stand for Adele's role. They were Lucretia Coffin Mott, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, chief among them. They held the first women's right convention in July of 1848 (two years before Chopin was born) in Seneca Falls New York. They adopted a Declaration of Sentiments patterned after the Declaration of Independence and focused on getting the vote. Suffragists were branded the 'shrieking sisterhood', labeled unfeminine, and accused of immorality.

And thus Kate Chopin thought of a character, Edna Pontellier, a character, who embarks on a path of emotional, intellectual, and sexual awakening, who bravely goes against moral conservatism and Victorian notion of motherhood or womanhood and who flouts convention by moving out of her husband's house, having an adulterous affair, and becoming an artist in trying to gain a sense of herself as a complete, autonomous human being.

That is why the contemporary critics were predominately hostile toward the subject matter (but praised the artistry of the writing). Still, despite Willa Cather, a friend of Chopin, being a strong voice of support, newspapers and magazines of the day were filled with such comments as "it is not a healthy book," "sex fiction," "the purport of the story can hardly be described in language fit for publication," "we are well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death," "an essentially vulgar story," and "unhealthy introspective and morbid" (Culley146-52). Chopin was hurt by such a response, both personally, and as a writer. But new generations, sensitive to women's needs, accepting of woman's sexuality, have welcomed the book; critics have made it one of the most widely discussed. Now, almost forty years after its revival, it has entered the canon, regularly appears on college reading lists, and has inspired movies. Almost a century after, America has fully awakened to Kate Chopin's novel and paid the respect due to a woman who had been so far ahead of her time.

Various critics have studied the novel from multiple perspectives. Cynthia G. Wolff disagrees with the chief interest and power of woman's question. She claims that "Edna [...] interests us not because she is a 'woman' [...] because she is human because she fails in ways which beckon seductively to all of us" (204). Some other critics state Edna's actions as a 'fantastic longing for unattainable goals' (Franklin

520) that lead her to suicide as a result of her defeated mentality. Wendy Martin remarks; “about the emerging individuality of a woman who refuses to be defined by the prevailing stereotypes of passive femininity”, (qtd. in Anastasopoulon 1) Feministic perspective, alone does not suffice to interpret why Chopin’s Edna suffers to death in her search for autonomous self.

There are various romantic elements in *The Awakening*, especially with the main character, as she struggles between society's obligations and her own desires. Chopin writes about a woman who continues to reject the society around her, a notion too radical for Chopin's peers. Edna Pontellier has the traditional role of both wife and mother, but deep down she wants something more, difficult to do in the restricted Victorian society. She was a wife and a mother, but not the typical Victorian wife and mother. With regards to her children, "Their absence was sort of relief...It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (Chopin 221). Already she is revealing ideas uncommon in the Victorian era. Victorian society was not ready for a novel whose main character disregards the norm for her own happiness.

The rejection Chopin received was mainly due to Edna's rejection of the traditions and the adultery aspect of the novel. Edna, caught up in a loveless marriage, resorts to adultery to keep herself satisfied. Edna follows her heart rather than reason when she pursues Robert Lebrun, breaking rules and norms of the society.

As the story progresses, Edna focuses on her desires rather than what her husband wants. She refuses to participate in the traditional role given to her as a woman. The romantic notion of individualism comes out as Edna decides to go out on a Tuesday afternoon rather than receive visitors. As the novel continues, Edna

continues to feel trapped in the restricted environment and ultimately commits suicide to leave the world that will not let her leave her traditional role. Romanticism is evident as the novel ends and Edna completely rejects the Victorian ways. With Chopin's ending, she creates an idea that her society can not accept. Edna tried to maintain her role as long as she could, but it became too much for her, and she needed to do the best thing. In her mind, that meant killing herself in the water which had no boundaries and restrictions.

Perhaps the most obvious and elemental romantic theme in the novel are the exotic locale, use of color, heavy emphasis on nature and Edna's search for individuality and freedom: freedom to decide what to be, how to think, and how to live. In this search process, two classic motifs of the Romantic Movement occur: rebellion against society and death. "Edna lies between two extremes in life and is completely alone in the universe" (Ringe 204-05): a condition that is a hallmark of Romanticism. As are the other prototypical romantic elements of the text: frequent inner thoughts, memories of childhood, the personified sea and its sensuous call, the fantastic talking birds, the mysterious woman in black, the romantic music playing almost constantly in the background, the dinner party, the gulf spirit, and the desire to express herself through art.

The conflict of Edna's outward existence and inward life and the way this conflict cost her life should be viewed from the perspective of Naturalism, too. Naturalists believed that man's instinctual, basic drives dominated their actions and could not be evaded. Life was viewed as relentless, without a caring presence to intervene. The aspect of naturalism most evident in *The Awakening* is the portrayal of Edna as hostage to her biology. She is female, has children, and is a wife in a society that dictates behavioral norms based on those conditions. These factors drive

the novel and drive Edna. She makes "no attempt to suppress her amatory impulses" (Seyersted and Culley 180); she bases her decisions on the welfare of her children; and she is in her difficult situation because of the men in her life: father, husband, lover, and would-be-lover. The novel is also true to the real life aspects of Realism and Naturalism in its forthright dealing with sexual matters: Arobin's seduction, the hot kisses she gives to Robert, Leonce's allusion that they no longer sleep together, the naked man on the rock.

Another naturalistic element in the novel is the portrayal of Edna as a victim of fate, chance, of an uncaring world, pulled into a consuming, but indifferent sea. In the end, despite her developments into selfhood, the only escape from her biological destiny as a woman in society, possessed, sexual, and ruled, is death.

All of these criticisms of *The Awakening* seem to be focused more on why Edna ends up taking her own life but not on how the conflict between the inward life and the outward existence of Edna creates a rift in her awakening consciousness, which ultimately cost her life. The thesis will deal primarily with this issue while taking into account many possible others.



## II. Feminism: Debate on Gender Equity

The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the ‘women’s movement’ of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. The representation of women in literature was felt to be one of the most important form of ‘socialization’, since it provided the role model which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’, a set of culturally defined characteristics.

In the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanism of patriarchy, that is, the cultural ‘mind-set’ in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality. Critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed.

In the 1980s, in feminism as in other critical approaches, the mood changed. Firstly, feminist criticism became much more eclectic, meaning that it began to draw upon the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism – Marxism, structuralism, linguistics, and so on. Secondly, it switched its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. Thirdly, attention was switched to the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence.

Feminism is a doctrine related on images and ideas advocating women’s right for the equality of sexes, identity and freedom. Feminism tries to redefine women’s activities, works and goals from female-centered perspective. It is

concerned with against the marginalization of all women; that is, with against their being relegated to a secondary position, a second sex, a submissive 'other'. It seeks to liberate women from the subordination to men, and to reconstruct society in such a way that patriarchy is eliminated. And it efforts to create a culture that is fully inclusive of women's desires and purposes. It demands equal rights and opportunities for women in a political, economic, psychological, social and individual sense. Now feminism represents one of the most important social, and economic and aesthetic cannon of modern times.

When we trace the women's subjection by men, we find that they are subjugated from the beginning of human creation and civilization. Adam's first wife Lilith objected the domination of her husband and demanded equal rights and she left him. She challenged the patriarchal marriage and preferred punishment from the Gods. In Bible, Jesus Christ's attitude towards women is also guided by biasness.

In many historical and mythical incidents females are subordinated by male authority. In male constructed stories women are named either as witches or madwomen. It becomes clear when we examine some characters of some literary pieces. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, (1606) Lady Macbeth is considered monster while Macbeth a noble. Similarly, in Sophocle's *The Oepidus Rex* Medea is merely a witch while Oedipus is heroic figure; and in King Lear (1605-06) Lear's madness is gloriously universal while Ophelia's just pathetic. The subordination of the female characters is the causes of the structure of male dominated model of the society.

Some of the mythical figures like, The Gorgons, Medusa, Circe are the powerful females having extraordinary power and creativity. But they are representatives of monstrous women in patriarchal society. But actually, they are simply the women who seek their own identity.

Geoffery Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* presented Wife of Bath with subversive vision of patriarchal institutions in the form of hag, the mad woman who demands supreme power over her own life and that of her husband. Even nowadays the threat of it still lurks behind the compliant paragon of women's stones encouraging the modern feminists to revise the old literature from feminist perspective.

In the seventeenth century New England, we find dogmatic history of Puritanism which subordinated the women too much. How hateful the puritan authority was towards women can be clear if we observe the note in his journal by John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Here, he severely criticizes a woman for her crime of being involved in reading and writing being a woman. Gilbert and Gubar cited in *The Infection in the Sentence* what he wrote:

Anne Hopkins has fallen into a sad infirmity the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her drivers years by occasion of giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books; adding that if she had attended her household affairs, and such things belong to women [...]. She had kept her wits. (Adams 1237)

The nineteenth and twentieth century women had to come across various challenges as the writers in the society. Gilbert and Gubar argue that in the past and into the present the writer's creativity has been identified virtually completely with men and that "the anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship'" (Adams 1236). They further assert that women do not fit into Bloom's patriarchal model. Their anxiety is more pronounced, since the woman writer has from the beginning of her life had to

struggle against the effects of socialization, which becomes a struggle against men's oppressive reading of women. Gilbert and Gubar write:

Unlike her male counterpart, then, the female artist must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile....And just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreading, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. (Adams 1237)

Feminism became a dominant approach in literature only in late nineteenth century. It had, however, two centuries struggle for the recognition of women's cultural roles and achievements. The campaign was earlier started formally through the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).

Wollstonecraft, in her book, claims for the political and social rights of women and goes beyond of strictly patriarchal society. She writes:

Every thing that they see or hear serves to fix impressions, call forth emotions, and associate ideas, that give a sexual character to the mind. False notions of beauty and delicacy stop the growth of their limbs and produce a sickly soreness, rather than delicacy of organs; and thus weakened by being employed in unfolding instead of examining the first associations, forced on them by every surrounding object. (Adams 395-96)

She advocates that mind does not know sex and blames that society views women in the role of convenient domestic slaves and alluring mistress by denying their economic independence and encouraging them to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else.

The seventeenth and eighteenth century and even nineteenth century women writers were afraid to write something about their own experiences and ideas because they might be considered mad women for their audacity. But in course of time, when the women became more conscious of their rights, they tried to prove themselves equally powerful as male writers. Margaret Fuller's *Women in Nineteenth Century* (1845) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) were only two major works of feminism which advocated for social, legal and cultural freedom and equality.

Twentieth century major feminist writes like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir had made a great contribution in the field of feminist theories with their major famous works. Woolf, in her *A Room of Her Own* (1928) explained about how women are imprisoned within the domestic premises and are stopped from trying the pen. The social and economic obstacles extended before them always obstructed the women's creativity. She believed that these obstacles often stood as headraces before their literary goals. In her another essay, "*The ideal of The Angel in the House*" Woolf called for women to be sympathetic, unselfish and pure. She says that the literary genres were made by men for their own use. Only the novel gives women workable space and even then the form has to be reworked for its own new purpose expressing the female body.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) established the principles of modern feminism. This book is a wide ranging critique of the cultural identification

of woman as merely negative object or “other” to man. ‘He’ is subject or self, ‘she’ is object or not self – that is she is otherness. In the Chapter X of her essay, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir clearly acknowledges these ideas, referring to patriarchal myths about women:

We have seen woman as *flesh*; the flesh of the male is produced in the mother’s body and re-created in the embraces of the woman in love. Thus woman is related to nature, she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man the fertile soil, the asp, the material beauty and the soul of the world. She can hold the key to poetry [...] she opens the door to the supernatural, the surreal. She is doomed to *immanence*; and through her passivity she bestows peace and harmony – but if she declines this role, she is seen forthwith as a praying mantis, an ogress. In any case, she appears as the *privileged Other*. (Adams 994)

This notion of the otherness of woman has the effect of equating masculinity and humanity, and so our language conditions us to speak of mankind instead of human kind. So according to Beauvoir, for feminists to break this patriarchal power it is necessary to challenge men at the level of theory, but without entering the theoretical domination of men’s terms.

Encountering through different crosscurrents like the Suffrage Movements, Civil Rights Movements, and Liberation Movements, in the early parts for twentieth century, feminism took shape as a concrete feminism with its ideological core; power and status. Mary Ellman’s *Thinking About Women* (1968) is probably the first book involved exposing the sexual stereotyping of women both in literature and literary criticism and demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical school and

methods to deal fairly or sensitively with works written by women. Kate Millett analyzed the sexual politics of literature in her *Sexual Politics* (1969). She added a note of urgency of the Ellman's scornful anger. By 'politics', Millett signifies the mechanism that expresses and enforces the relations of power in society. She analyzed that western institutions have manipulated power to establish the dominance of men and the subordination of women. In her book she also attacks the male bias in Freud's psychoanalytic theory and the fictions of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Sonet as revealing the ways show they expose their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects.

Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) is a prominent masterpiece of theoretical work of feminism. It examines British women novelists since the Brontes from the point of view of women's experiences. She described the change in the late 1970s as a shift of attention from 'andro-texts' (books by men) to 'gynotexts' (books by women). She coined the term 'gynocritics', meaning the study of gynotexts. Showalter in her essay *Toward a Feminist Poetics* writes:

The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture [...] Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female

subculture including not only the ascribed status, and the internalized constructs of femininity, but also the occupations, interactions, and consciousness of women. (Adams 1227)

The subjects of gynocriticism are the history, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; and the evolution or laws of female literary traditions. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* mentions:

Showalter detects in the history of women's writing a *feminine phase* (1840-1880), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a *feminist phase* (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained ; and finally a *female phase* (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience; the reasons for this liking for 'phasing' are complex: partly, it is the result of the view that feminist criticism required a terminology if it was to attain theoretical respectability. More importantly, there is a great need, in all intellectual disciplines, to establish a sense of progress. (Barry 123)

The literary subcultures which, as Showalter proceeds with, the women writers are participating in, is more, exhilarating in the sense that it energizes the modern female writers who revise the ancient literary works. Showalter divides feminist criticism into two distinct varieties. The first mode is woman as a reader, which considers the images and stereotypes of woman literature, the omissions of misconception about women in criticism and breaks in male-constructed literary history. She writes in her essay, *Towards a Feminist Poetics*:



Feminist criticism can be divided into two distinct varieties. The first type is concerned with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature, and with the way in which the hypothesis of a female reader changes our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes. (Adams 1225)

She also asserts that '*Woman as a reader*' is concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, especially in popular culture and film; and with the analysis of woman-as sign in semiotic systems.

The second stream of feminist criticism is concerned with *Woman as a writer*. She labels it 'gynocritics'. Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology. Anthropologists study the female subculture in the relationship between women as mother daughter, sisters and friends. Showalter writes:

This type of criticism is concerned with woman as a producer of textual meaning with the history, themes, genres and structure of literature by women. It includes the psycho-dynamic of female creativity and the problem of female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and of course, studies of particular writers and works. (Adams 1226)

Showalter further categorizes the historical development of feminism within three phases. They are feminine, feminist and female. The stage marks female voice but immensely influences by male literary tradition started from 1840 to 1880. This stage includes the writers like G. Eliot, and Bronte Sisters. The second stage demands for the political and social equality and protests against the dominant tradition, social values and injustices of women. It is dated from 1880 to 1920. The

writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, France Trollope and Olives Schviener belong to this stage. The third stage is 'female' which seeks the independent identity and existence of women. It is dated from 1920 to present. It includes the writers like Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf who ventured the counterbalance: the male dominated literary sphere.

Virginia Woolf suggests that language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is 'no common sentence ready for her use'. The female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use the prose writing which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes. This view that the language is 'masculine' is later challenged by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is one of the prominent books on historical study of feminism. It stresses especially the central arguments in the nineteenth-century women writers who choose to express their own female anger in a series of duplicitous textual strategies whereby the both angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman, are aspects of the authors self image, as well as elements of her treacherous anti-patriarchal strategies. They suggest that the woman can begin a struggle only actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, prove by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. Nineteenth century women overcame their 'anxiety of authorship'. This shift from Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' reflects the deeper problems of women writers in the culture, for such as necessarily prior to that influence.

When we analyze the development of whole feminist literary criticism, we can find the existence of feminism from the very earlier literary history. At first

females were presented as stereotypical figures like angels, monsters, and witches. Gradually women writers became conscious and insisted for a literature of their own whose historical and thematic as well as artistic importance had been observed by patriarchal norms and values. Finally there is a radical rethinking of the conceptual ground of literary study and try to revise the accepted theoretical assumptions based on male literary tradition.

Facing many challenges and ups and down, the feminism has been a board concept which covers a broader scope and includes different aspects of humanity despite its focus on the issues of women. It is somehow linked with the adoptions of Psychoanalytic, Marxist and diverse Post-Structuralist theories. Despite its broader meaning, feminism can be studied on the basis of three different models.

#### 1. British Model of Feminism

This model of feminism is associated with Marxist and social feminism. It mainly focuses on the concept that the text is a part of process of the social construction of meanings and subjectivities. And, literature is one of the ways in which gender relations and gender ideologies are produced and reproduced. British feminists tend to focus on class along with gender as a critical determinant of literary production. Gender, in their opinion, is not produced simply by masculine thoughts, but rather it is the product of that thought as it is related to the particular ways in which women's productive, reproductive and domestic life is organized.

British feminism derives its impetus from the changing economic, social conditions and the changing balance of power between the sexes. The Marxist view of the necessary dialectical relationship between theory and practice also applies to the relationship between female experience and feminist politics. They consider that the concept of femininity and masculinity are myths or ideologies. For these feminists,

such beliefs are values that are not detached from social life but rather are lived or embodied in what we say and do, and have no other existence.

Mary Jacobus, Rosalind Loward, Michele Barrette, Juliet Mitchel and Cora Kaplan are some of the major British feminists who combine Marxist Theoretical interest in the production and ideology of literature with feminist concerns for woman's writing.

## 2. American Model of Feminism

American Model of Feminism is also called socio-historic feminism. It is known as textual feminism too. It is socio-historic in the sense that it takes the text as historical experience whether it be social, emotional or psychological. It centers its focus on the awakening of the female consciousness reflected in literature by and about women. The American feminist try to use language as a means of close reading and replace with their own. They have their own impetus from civil rights, peace and protest movements. The American model of feminism practiced in two ways. One group feminist critique denotes to the gender aware reading that uncovers patriarchal assumptions, stereotypes and values. And another group practiced 'gynocriticism' which refers to gender-aware reading that focuses on women who write from women's experience.

Eliane Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are the major feminists of the American school of feminist criticism. They seek for the social and historical position of females writers.

## 3. French Model of Feminism

French feminism is psychoanalytic and destructive in its nature. It is concerned with feminine writing from the position of woman and accepts Lacan's account of language/culture as a masculine order but do not accept his positive

affirmation of that masculine order as equivalent to civilization or society. They question the assumption of that femininity can only be seen from the point of view of phallic culture. French feminists assume that language constitutes human reality. Through language representation, culture inscribes social and sexual identities in the bodies and minds of biological or psychological individuals. They are of the notion that women discourse can be inserted into phallogocentrism by finding or writing blind spots, contradictions and gaps. French feminists essentially is psychoanalytical. They believe that femininity offers a possible procedure for subverting and marginalization mechanism of power, thereby breaking it up. A

*Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* mentions:

French feminists who follow Lacan, particularly Helen Cixous propose a utopian places - a primeval female space which is free of symbolic order, sex roles, otherness and the law of the father and in which the self is still with what Cixous calls the voice of mother.

(204)

Most of the radical French feminists are concerned with the rhythms of the female body and to sexual pleasure, though in common understanding. Julia Kristeva's "*From one Identity to Another*" (1975) and Helen Cixous's "*The Laugh of Medusa*" are the two prominent essays to psychoanalytic and deconstructive feminism both of which emphasize women discourse that breaks with tradition is a political act of dissidence, a form of feminist action, and for Helen Cixous women's writing has genuinely revolutionary force.

In recent years a number of feminist critics have used poststructuralist positions and techniques to challenge the category of "woman" and other founding concepts of feminism itself. A *Glossary of Literary Terms* mentions:

They point out the existence of differences and adversarial stands within the supposedly monolithic history of Patriarchal discourse and emphasizes the inherent linguistic instability in the basic concept of “women” or “the feminine” as well as the diversities within the supposedly universal and uniformed female identities that results from differences in class, race, nationality and historical situations.

(Abrams 93)

Beside these major approaches of feminism, it includes other many aspects such as radical and liberal feminism black feminist criticism, lesbianism, bio-feminism, post-colonial feminism and feminist myth criticism.

The above mentioned feminist approaches have helped us to ‘generate arguments’ and justify the protagonist of Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* why the female protagonist, Edna chose to die after all as she claims she is AWAKE!! The feminist discourse has provided us the chances to know that many critics commented the novel as a good piece for the feminist issues. It has opened the way to understand the female psyche, identity ad existence and their longing for self-fulfillment and emancipation.

There are some important keywords in feminism that carries great significance for the clear understanding of female related issues. The terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’, and ‘feminine’ appear to have similar meanings but as Toril Moi explains, the first is ‘a political position’, the second ‘a matter of biology’, and the third ‘a set of culturally defined characteristics’. Similarly, there is crucial distinction between sex and gender in feminist criticism, the former being the matter of biology. The latter the construct, something learned or acquired, rather than ‘natural’. Simone de Beauvoir seems to be impressed by such distinction. That is

why, in Part Two of *The Second Sex* she writes “One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman” (Adams 995).

The concepts of subjectivity and identity are closely connected and virtually inseparable. However, subjectivity refers to the condition of being and the processes by which welcomes a person, that is, how we are constituted as subjects. Subjects are associated with persons; we are subject to social process, which brings us into being as subjects for ourselves and others. To the concepts we hold of ourselves, we may call self-identity. Subjectivity is related to the question; what is a person? And ‘Identity’ enquires how we see ourselves and how do others see us? Identity is a mode of thinking about ourselves. Identities are wholly social constructions and cannot exist outside of cultural representations. There is no known culture that does not use the pronoun ‘I’ and which does not, therefore, have a conception of self and personhood. The manner of using ‘I’ has differences from culture to culture. Self-Identity, on the other hand, is not a collection of traits that we possess. Post structuralism, the third wave of feminism, abandons the concept of a single collective identity. Instead it offers ideas of ambiguity and difference as a means of understanding the unique issues and interests of feminism. Its critics argue that the notion of identity is itself fundamental to the analysis of oppression. In Chopin’s *The Awakening*, the protagonist, Edna is the representative of women trying to seek her identity under the oppression of male dominated society, challenging the social norms and values of her own Creole society as well as the contemporary thought of the time.

Self-perception is associated with our individuality, what type of person we are, especially the way we normally behave, look or feel. Our individual selves are irreducible, endowed with the ability to use our rationality according to our own

dispositions and desires, and ought to be free civic agents. It is associated with individualism. Every males or females possesses their own 'self' and they try to perceive their selves in the circumstances and environments they live in. self perception is linked with the social and cultural phenomena. Society determines the self of a male or a female with in social structure. Because of the social construction the self is different from person to person and culture to culture.

Because of social values, the position and identity of women are guided by biasness. They should confine themselves within the household territory in patriarchal society. And the selves of women are dominated. So, to change the structure, the women should change their perception and revolt against the tradition. Edna of Chopin's *The Awakening* does exactly the same to revert the traditional role of wife, women and mother.



### III. Conflict Between Inner and Outer Self

Chopin's *The Awakening* is a novel about women's emancipation and the conflict between their inward life and outward existence in the suppressive patriarchal society of the nineteenth century. It is a story about a woman who begins a journey of self discovery that leads to several awakenings: to her separateness as a "solitary soul," (the original title Chopin chose for the work), to the pleasures of "swimming far out" in the seductive sensuously appealing sea, to the passions revealed in music, to her own desire to create art, to a romantic attachment to a young man, to living on her own, to sexual desire.

Right from the beginning, the plot is almost conveniently evident. We find a woman, Edna Pontellier, tired of living her life as a pampered and "owned" wife and mother. She is searching for much more in her life, some sort of meaning for her whole existence. She searches for a long time but in the end, the inevitability of her life's pattern and direction wraps around her, suffocating her. She is overcome with wonder, confusion, and guilt for what she believes and what she does to express her beliefs. She finally finds a way to beat the "proper" 1890's lifestyle by committing suicide.

It is the unwritten rule that a woman should marry, have children, and be happy and content with that as their life. Society portrays this to be a woman's rightful job and duty. A woman should act and look "proper" at all times. This is what Edna is fighting against in this novel. She feels that, though many women agree with this "know" rule, it isn't fair. For six years Edna conforms to these ideas by being a "proper" wife and mother, holding Tuesday socials and going to operas, following the same enduring schedule. It is only after her summer spent at Grand Isle that her "mechanical" lifestyle becomes apparent to her. She sees how much she

is unhappy with the expectations, held by her outward existence, of her life and she wishes to erase them and live her life as she wants.

Edna has an independent, almost self centered, nature about her. Her need for an uncontrolled lifestyle is what leaves her feeling “owned” and wanting to break that label; she fights to do as she wishes. Little by little she breaks free of society’s image, letting her independence shine through. She cancels her Tuesday socials and helps out around the house doing little chores. The biggest step she made was her decision to move away from her mansion and into the “pigeon house”, a little cottage around corner. After this move she was free to explore her new profound freedom and desires. She succumbed to the passion in her heart and had a meaningless affair with Arobin, a man of dreadful reputation. She was in control of this new relationship and she loved feeling in control. True, she felt nothing beyond lust for the man but she was able to do as she wished.

Her love for Robert Lebrun was truly her biggest obstacle she was to overcome. Every thought and feeling she had sprouted from the love she had for him which kept growing long after the brief summer in Grand Isle. She thought about him always and was in constant yearning for him to return from his escapades in Mexico. When he finally did return, his love for Edna was apparent and he wished to be married to her. Once again she felt trapped, not wishing to become “property” to a man. She just wanted to be with him and love him without having to give up her independence. When she left to assist her friend in her childbearing, she bid him to stay and wait for her. Alas, when she returned he was gone, in his place was a letter. He stated his love for her and his inability to keep interfering with her life and her duties to her husband and children. Robert, afraid of the social repercussions of their affair, leaves town with a slip of paper stating, Good bye because I love you. That

was the end of Edna Pontellier. She feels alone, with no one who would understand to confide into. She failed to find fulfillment in her life without a man; she failed to reconcile her roles as a good and faithful wife and mother while becoming an artist and she also failed in love. Rather than be forced to live in such a world of tyranny and succumb once again to the mechanical lifestyle she had lived for so long, she chooses death. Edna commits suicide by drowning herself in the sea. In death, there are no expectations, no one to impress of be “proper” for, and most importantly she has no one to answer to, except herself.

It is all these aspects of the plot, in the story, that make it enticing. It was so rare for a woman to feel this way back in those days. Edna is truly an admirable character. Her fight for independence against a social world that shows no mercy was a courageous task to try and accomplish. She tried hard and even thought she failed, it is her strength in which she fought that captured the hearts of the readers. Her struggle and fight in the plot is inspirational and makes a person realize just lucky they are to be able to speak their minds and do as they wish.

Each portion of the text should be thoroughly analyzed in order to understand how Edna confronts the conflict between her outward existence and her inward life, and ultimately why she chooses to commit suicide.

### **Edna’s Transformation from an Imperfect Wife-Mother to an Equal Other**

Mr. Pontellier looks at “his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 201). At the beginning of the text, returning from the hotel late at night, Mr. Pontellier wakes up his wife and wants to relate the fun he has just engaged in. Frustrated that his wife shows little interest in his sphere of work, Mr. Pontelieir “thought it very discouraging that his

wife, who was the sole object of his existence, evinced so little interest in things which concerned him, and valued so little his conversation” (204). Then he proceeds to attack her for being not good enough mother. Mr. Pontelleir reproached his wife:

with her inattention, her habitual neglect of the children. If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it? He himself had his hands full with his brokerage business. He could not be in two places at once; making a living for his family on the street, and staying at home to see that no harm befell them. (204-5)

In doing so, he implies that as a woman, she must necessarily limit herself to domestic duties, and at the same time, that she herself lacks certain maternal traits to do the job well. His attitude indicates a desire to control his wife, rather than any real concern for the health of his sons, whom he thinks have a fever that night. Mr. Pontellier thinks that unlike Adèle Ratignolle, who represents the epitome of idealized femininity, who “is voluptuously and romantically beautiful, sews elaborate clothes for her children, and is constantly pregnant” (208), his wife, Edna is not a mother-woman: she is not one of the 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” (208). Mrs. Pontellier does not devote all her energy to her husband and her children, and in Mr. Pontellier's eyes, this makes her an imperfect wife and mother.

Edna often feels “an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish” (205). Edna seems to understand quite well that Mr. Pontellier could never treat her as an equal other, that he wants to limit her into domesticity and

motherhood. She, therefore, thinks that “her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident” (220). Not having children around is “a sort of relief” for her:

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them... Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (Chopin 221)

Not submitting to her husband’s command, Edna thinks that “her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant” (237). She slowly begins to realize that “she herself--her present self--was in some way different from the other self” (248).

### **Edna’s Journey to Self-Fulfillment and Emancipation**

Edna’s journey to self-fulfillment is accompanied by Robert who helped Edna realize that just like males she is also an individual in the society. They treat each other as real, exciting people, rather than as mere possessions. Their relationship stands in striking contrast to that of Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier; it is one of mutual respect and interest.

At the beginning of the novel, Robert proposes Mrs. Pontellier to go to the beach. Edna’s outward existence made her refuse to do so since she is a married woman. Here the reader can easily notice that her outward life is trying to conform her identity as Mr. Pontellier’s wife. Therefore, she “wonders why she first refused to go to the beach with Robert, then went anyway” (214). The narrator describes “a certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her” (214) - a light that makes her recognize that she has a place in the world, that she is an autonomous agent and at

the same time, she is subject to the constraints of society and to the expectations of other people. Edna experiences a great deal of confusion and turmoil as if she were "walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided" (218).

Mrs. Pontellier, who has been trying to learn how to swim the entire summer, suddenly and miraculously begins to swim through the ocean. For the first time, Edna can swim: she is gaining control over her body and becoming aware of its full potential: "How easy it is! It is nothing. Why did I not discover before that it was nothing" (232). She is discovering herself as a full human being, with sexual desires, intellectual capacities, and emotional needs. The ocean helps her realize that her body is her own, and this moment of physical awakening accompanies and heightens her mental and emotional awakening. Edna is on her way to self-discovery and personal self-fulfillment where Robert is always there to accompany her. From this point onward, we immediately see the first signs that Edna has moved onto a new life path.

When Mr. Pontellier gets back from the beach, he asks his wife to come inside. She refuses to go inside to bed when her husband calls her, thinking that "on another time, she would have gone in at his request. She would through habit, have yielded to his desire" (236). But this time, with this refusal, she is acknowledging that she can make choices in her life, no matter how trivial. She could no longer submit her will to her husband's command. Slowly, Edna grows more rebellious.

Edna begins to take Robert to go in the boat with her without worrying about what he or anyone else might think. In order not to let her outward existence conform her identity she will continue to act without really considering future consequences or public opinion throughout the rest of the novel: "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” (238).

Edna was becoming a new, freer woman who decides to temporarily forget about her husband and children and stay on the island with Robert with whom she thinks she has begun to love. She is just discovering herself as a whole person, and she will not give that up (her personality, her desires, and her happiness) for anyone, not even her children. The passage where Edna tells Madame Ratignolle that she will never sacrifice herself for anyone, including her children, is very significant:

I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me. (Chopin 257)

When Robert leaves Mexico, Edna begins to sob and realizes that she is completely infatuated with him. She simply feels miserable and empty.

### **Edna and Her Changed Lifestyle**

From this point onwards, we can notice that Edna gradually changes her lifestyle. Mr. Pontellier scolds his wife for not paying due respect to certain members of the social elite and complains about the dinner and the cook. But Mrs. Pontellier doesn't bother with what her husband thinks. She enjoys the rest of the meal even without the presence of her husband: “Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. Her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them” (263). And then she even stamps on her wedding ring and throws a glass onto the floor.

By refusing to attend Tuesday callers, Edna is refusing to help her husband in his never-ending pursuit of money and refusing to accept the rules of high society. In stamping on her wedding ring and shattering the vase, she is expressing her feelings of being trapped in marriage and wanting to break out. She is asserting her independence. These two events are the symbol for the gradual disintegration of their marriage.

Edna decides to seriously pursue painting following the example of her friend, Mademoiselle Reisz, who is currently living the artistic lifestyle. Like her friend, however, she runs certain risks: of being considered eccentric, of neglecting society and being ostracized, and of being completely left alone. She occupies herself so much time in painting. However, she does not seem to be painting because of any deep-seated artistic conviction. In fact, she seems to have taken up painting because it is the only way she knows how to break free from the life she has been leading. Painting allows her to organize her time differently, to spend a lot of time in a distant part of the house, and to alter her relations with the people around her.

One day concerned about his wife, Mr. Pontellier even visits the doctor because "Edna's new and unexpected line of conduct completely bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him" (268). According to Mr. Pontellier, Edna's symptoms are: neglecting the housework, provoking him to quarrel with her, refusing to sleep with him, and talking about women's equal rights: "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women" (279). The Doctor asks him if she's been associating with "pseudo-intellectual" feminists. Dr. Mandelet, a family physician has own view about women. He says:



Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism--a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs.

Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with their idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical. (280)

Doctor Mandelet and Mr. Pontellier's conversation makes clear that women were considered ill, or even mentally unbalanced, if they dared to defy convention and ventured outside of the domestic sphere assigned to them. They consider women to be childish, inferior beings with reduced intellectual capacities and unstable temperaments. To these men, the feminist movement of their times is analogous to a disease that transforms good wives and mothers into atypical, deluded beasts; it is a misguided social movement that recruits and brainwashes vulnerable young women.

Their attitude towards women resembles also with Edna's own father, who is of the opinion that wife should be forced to obey the husband. He says: "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" (287).

As the story progresses, Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding and also begins to flirt with men, an indication that Edna is beginning to entertain adultery. She develops friendship with a man of dreadful reputation, Alcee Arobin while going to the races. Arobin often drops her off at home and stays for dinner in her house. One day he shows her a scar from a sword on his wrist. While observing the scar, Edna touches his hand and suddenly squeezes it impulsively. She instantly rushes away and makes an excuse, while Arobin follows her closely. Here, Edna

first exhibits sexual desires of her own. When Arobin shows her the scar on his wrist, she seizes his hand in a manner that is not simply friendly. In associating with Arobin on such intimate terms, she is risking her marriage and her respectability.

At the time that the novel was published, it was unheard of for women to be portrayed as having sexual desires of their own, and passages such as these were considered scandalous. By attributing sexual desire to Edna, the narrator makes the relationship between Arobin and Edna one of equality.

It is quite interesting to note that when Mrs. Pontellier realizes that she should not have let Arobin kiss on her hand in a moment of passion, she is suddenly overwhelmed by the Victorian notion of infidelity, but this fear of infidelity, she thinks, belongs to Robert whom she loves, not to her own husband:

There was with her an overwhelming feeling of irresponsibility  
[...]. There was her husband's reproach looking at her from the  
external things around her which he had provided for her external  
existence. There was Robert's reproach making itself felt by a  
quicker, fiercer, more overpowering love, which had awakened  
within her toward him. (Chopin 301-2)

Although she has no shame or remorse, she regrets that she slept with someone because of lust, rather than love: “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” (302). Edna sleeps with Arobin because she desires him at that moment, and she simply acts on her impulse. Edna, therefore, shows an almost surprising lack of emotion towards Arobin. She feels slightly guilty towards her husband only because she is still living in his house. After sleeping with Arobin, Edna feels an increased sense of understanding. She has learned what it is to act

completely in the moment, without regard to consequence, and she now knows what it means to use her body for purposes of pleasure. She has broken the paramount rule of marriage and has crossed outside the realm of social respectability. From this vantage point, she can see the rules of society for what they are: just rules, and rules that can therefore be broken.

For Edna, love rather than marriage is the most significant tie binding a man and a woman. Such thinking is counter to everything that her society believes and is quite radical for her time. Even if Edna is true to herself and acts according to the dictates of love, her outer existence will always judge her by the conventions of marriage and deem her unfaithful.

Her gambling at the racetrack parallels her sudden change in lifestyle. In real life Edna is playing a dangerous game: she is trying to live as an independent woman, without following the set rules prescribed by her society.

Another surprising thing in the novel comes when Edna moves out of her house to a smaller one that she calls “a pigeon house”. She wants to escape from her husband's possessions which surround her. She justifies her shift to a small house and says:

I have a little money of my own from my mother's estate I won a large sum this winter on the races, and I am beginning to sell my sketches [...] I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence. (Chopin 297)

Edna enjoys the feeling of having descended from the social elite and experiences an increased sense of freedom and clairvoyance:

The pigeon house pleased her [...] 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. She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to "feed upon opinion" when her own soul had invited her. (314)

But Mr. Pontellier is displeased to know that his wife has begun to stay in another house. He scolds her for being foolish and irresponsible. He reminds her that she must not neglect her social obligations and that people might think she moved out of the big house because of financial reasons. Mr. Pontellier seems to care more about his business prospects than his wife. Rather than discussing with Edna her reasons for leaving their home, he contacts the architect and the local newspaper. He takes it for granted that his wife will always be his wife and that she will always remain faithful to him and that she could not become interested in other men during his absence.

Edna calls herself a wicked example of femininity, "a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex" (300) because she is consciously refusing to be everything that society demands of her: the devoted wife, the self-sacrificing mother, and the chaste maiden. Edna does not really feel bad about herself because she is following the dictates of her inward life. Although she recognizes that she does not measure up to the ideals of society, she also feels that she is being true to herself and that she cannot be otherwise.

During Robert's absence, Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz who helps Edna realize that she is in love with Robert, and she encourages this love by showing Edna the letters he has written. Through her music, she helps Edna to realize that she

is a sensual being, with confusing emotions and an intense appreciation of beauty. She teaches her to be strong and courageous and to be unafraid to confront emotion and art directly. Besides that, she also cautions her that people have begun to talk about Arobin, a man of “such a dreadful reputation” visiting her alone. She tells Edna that she acts without adequate reflection. Madame Ratignolle attempts to remind Edna that she cannot live completely free of social constraints. Even though Edna wants to ignore them, she must realize that people will continue to expect her to follow them. She warns her that her actions will have consequences that she must be aware of. Edna casually brushes off her warning and Madame Ratignolle had to apologize for even mentioning it.

Robert’s return brings profound joy to Edna’s solitary life but she is disappointed when Robert does not come to visit her for three days. And one night she accepts Arobin's offer to go on a drive. They sleep together. Arobin could understand “the latent sensuality, which unfolded under his delicate sense of her nature's requirements like a torpid, torrid, sensitive blossom” (327). However, Edna responds to him sexually without any commitment to him. Unlike Robert, Arobin does not have the power to affect her emotions. He is peripheral to her life, though they use each other for mutual pleasure.

One day Robert admits in a small café out in the suburbs that his love for Edna was what kept him away from her for so long. He tells her that he could not pursue her because she was married and that he dreamed of Leónce setting her free to become his wife. Edna quite frankly tells him that she is not a possession and can give herself to whomever she wants:

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me

free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both.

(Chopin 331)

It is significant to note that Edna declares herself to be the possession of no one. She is not simply property that Leónce can give to Robert, and she tells Robert he is foolish if he thinks this to be the case. When she asserts that "I give myself where I choose," (331) she is alluding to the fact that she has already given herself to Arobin. Robert seems to suspect something of the sort because he turns pale at her words. Thus, while Edna is deeply in love with Robert, she is still rejecting the traditional definition of marriage, which declares a woman the property of her husband. Acting on her sexual desires even though she is married, Edna is a remarkable character in early twentieth-century fiction. She is breaking all taboos and trying to have not just one, but two, extramarital affairs. Whereas upper-middle-class women were expected to repress all traces of their sexuality, Edna's sexual desires are central to her personality, and she acts on them with pleasure and confidence, rather than shame.

At this climatic moment when Edna and Robert are expressing love to each other, a servant comes with the message that Madame Ratignolle has gone into labor and that Edna's presence is required. Edna tells Robert to wait for her there; and before she leaves, they kiss passionately. Edna says that she loves Robert and that he awoke her from a dream last summer and that now they can live together. With Robert pleading with her not to leave, she says goodbye to him seductively.

Edna finds her friend in great pain, looking haggard and sick. Edna begins to feel uneasy and remembers the pain and confusion she experienced when she was in

labor. Edna remembers her own birthings and the accompanying pain. She relives the entire ordeal and experiences it as torture. This exposes childbirth as the painful, gut-wrenching process. She wishes she had not come. When she says goodbye, Madame Ratignolle whispers to her, "Oh think of the children! Remember them!" (Chopin 334).

On her way back to her small house where Robert is waiting her, Doctor Mandelet offers to walk with her. She acknowledges with him that she has responsibilities to her children that get in the way of independence and freedom from illusions. She says that even though she feels comfortable flouting convention and doing her own thing, she still feels guilty about possibly hurting her children. It is significant to note that in following her inward life she cannot simply ignore her outward existence as a mother, she cannot simply forget this responsibility, which she thinks is "like a death wound" (336).

She is excited to remember that Robert will be waiting there when she will reach her house. However, much to her despair, she finds Robert gone and a brief note that says "I love you. Good-bye because I love you" (336). She lies on the sofa awake for the entire night. Finally, after blindly doing her own thing for so long, Edna realizes the full meaning of her awakening. After witnessing Madame Ratignolle's ordeal and hearing her warning, Edna understands that she cannot simply do whatever she wants without regard to consequence. No matter how hard she tries to disregard convention and the people around her, she cannot escape from her responsibility to her children. She is not acting in a vacuum, and she cannot simply abandon her children to fend for themselves in a difficult world. Even though she is willing to risk social ostracism for herself, she recognizes that she needs to protect her children, and in order to do so, she must compromise some of her ideals

and desires of her inward life. But at the same time, Edna thinks that she is not going to sacrifice the one true emotion she has had in her entire life - her love for Robert.

### **Edna's Suicide: an Escape from Outward Existence**

Next day in the morning, she walks down to the beach without thinking about anything. She has already done all her thinking on the night that she stayed up all night. That night she realized that she could have a string of lovers and that soon she'll even forget about Robert. However, her children are the one thing preventing her from forging her own path and that threaten to chain her to a life of misery. She stands naked on the beach, in front of the ocean, with its seductive, ceaseless voice. She starts to swim far out into the ocean and is not afraid. She thinks of the meadow in Kentucky that she played in when she was little, and she laughs at her husband and children, who can never possess her. She thinks of Mademoiselle Reisz, who she imagines as laughing at her lack of courage.

For the first time in the novel, Edna has thought extensively about her course of action, and she knows exactly what she's going to do. To the end, Edna remains true to herself. Alone, ignoring warnings intended for her well being, she swims out too far and feels tired. Assuming the role of courageous soul one who "dares and defies" she indicates no desire to return or to be rescued. In deciding to kill herself, she is refusing to sacrifice her illusions for anyone or anything, including her children. The children began to appear before her "like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (Chopin 339).

She sees death as her only path of escape, and to some extent, she may be right. In a world where she is limited to being a wife and a mother, she is trapped in



an unfulfilling marriage and has children who she only sometimes enjoys. She has already been defined by her society, and she cannot redefine herself without jeopardizing the futures of her children: She has 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” (Chopin 339).

However, the novel does not end on a pessimistic tone. Before she dives into the ocean, Edna stands naked in the sun and feels once again reborn. Edna destroys herself, but paradoxically, she is also reclaiming her life.

At the last moment of her life, “she thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (340). She is asserting that her life is hers to have and to destroy, and she is refusing to sacrifice it neither on behalf of society nor on behalf of her husband and children.

In brief, Edna was desperate from the beginning of the novel to attain self-fulfillment and to comprehend herself as an autonomous self, and therefore makes a series of protests against all who limits her into ideological duties of femininity. In an attempt to break free from her domestic confinement, she grows indifferent to her role as ‘self sacrificing’ mother and ‘faithful’ wife. She entertains adultery; pursues art; neglects social obligations; abandons both her children and husband; and lives separately in a ‘pigeon house’. Yet, she still fails to find some sort of meaning of her whole existence. When Robert, whom she loves, does not wait for her at the end, she fails to find fulfillment in her life without a man. She could live alone like Mademoiselle Reisz was living, as an artist. But the frequent thought of children tries to drag her into ‘soul’s slavery’, threatening her inner self that was slowly revealing to herself. At last, in order to prevent any harm to her inner self, she

destroys Mrs Pontellier -- the 'mechanical' and 'hostile' outward existence of Edna. However, choosing death she has been able to sanctify her moral and spiritual height and to get victory even in defeat.

To sum up the whole analysis of the text, we find that a woman, who wants to live according to the dictates of her inner life, refusing to conform the ideals of the patriarchal codes, ultimately fails to survive in such society.

#### IV. Conclusion

“At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life--that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 214-15).

Edna faces the choices between what society expects of her and what she really desires, and she always decides to follow her own path, not society's. In course of following her own path, Edna grows irresponsible, too rebellious and obsessed. She develops extreme sense of freedom and self, which caused her suicide. But one shouldn't sympathize with Edna's suicide. She made bad choices. Why should she have drowned herself? She should be living happily even after when she realizes that she will forget Robert, and after all, she is AWAKE!!

She asserts that thought of Robert would slowly disappear from her mind although he was the only person whom she wanted near her and that she would be all alone. But there is still one thing which tried to suppress her inward life - her desire to sustain her newly awakened sense of freedom, independence and sensuality. Her children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her and who would erase her identity for the rest of her days. However, she knows how to elude them.

In fact, the children reminded Edna of her role as a mother. They tried not to let her escape from this responsibility of motherhood. They tried to drag her into “soul's slavery”. She cannot simply abandon her children to fend for themselves in a difficult world. Even though she is willing to risk social ostracism for herself, she recognizes that she needs to protect her children, and in order to do so, she must compromise some of her ideals and desires of her inward life. But at the same time, Edna thinks that she is not going to sacrifice her newly awakened sense of freedom, independence and sensuality which she has begun to comprehend. And therefore, in the end, despite development into selfhood, Edna drowns herself. She did so because she thought that committing suicide she could at least escape from her biological destiny as a woman-

mother in society; and thus she could commemorate her newly found power which was helping her get rid of illusions that come in her way to freedom and self-perception. Though choosing to favor the dictates of her inward life cost her life, she never surrendered her awakening self to the ideals of traditional society.

Such conflict between the outward existence and the inward life of Edna is quite obvious from the beginning of the novel. The plot keeps on revolving around what society expects of her and what she really desires; and how she reacts in such situations. Edna never liked to be conditioned by her outward existence, which always tried to confirm her identity into roles of motherhood, devoted wife and typical women of conservative Victorian patriarchal society.

Edna struggles with three main opposing powers. First, there is the society's opinion of what a woman's "roles" in life was and how they should act, look, and feel. Second is her independent nature. The last opposing power she comes across is her undying love for the charming Robert Lebrun who ultimately refuses to stay with her and her children.

These opposing forces always kept her disturbed. However, she always tried to be true to her self. She always listened to her real nature. She kept on discovering herself – her real identity not as a mother or someone's wife or someone's daughter. By following her inward life, she realized that like others, she is also a human being who has her own sexual desire and can have extra marital affair with whomever she likes, who can swim like a man can do, who can own a house to live separately, who can take decision on her own, who can make choices in life, who can refuse to be conditioned into certain roles society expects her to perform, and who can assert that her life is hers to have and to destroy.

Edna thus settles the ongoing tussles between her inward life and outward existence and finally succeeds to get rid of this duality of her life.

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