

THE FEMALE ARCHETYPE IN 19th CENTURY FICTION

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Introduction

Critics of nineteenth century fiction represented by its leading genre points to a woman's construct as constrained within the era's dominant consciousness. This idea is supported by Abassi who suggests that being female as exemplified in Chopin's *The Awakening* does not have a choice within the patriarchal boundaries:

By portraying Edna's death, Chopin has shown that woman as a social construct is not free to change her situation and stand before the male law. (39)

As a social outcast unable to make peace with the patriarchal society, she is neither able to remove herself from her former life nor powerful to win over the society. This signifies that any attempt in making a female logic is doomed to failure. (40)

There seems to be a consensus in literary criticism as regards nineteenth century fiction that patriarchal constructs are the basis for analysis of the feminine fate. Literary critics operate within these constructs from which a feminine consciousness emerges in relation to a woman's identity and failure. Female fate interpreted from the ideals of patriarchy considers it a common source of her doom. By employing Foucault's notion of power relations in social constructs, it is possible that critics may rethink their position beyond the status quo paradigms in favor of human will and untether themselves from relentlessly placing the responsibility for female failure to the dominant consciousness. He writes:

I don't construct my analyses in order to say, 'This is the way things are, you are trapped.' I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them" (Foucault 294-5).

Downing notes that Foucault attributes "agency and free will to individual consciousness, arguing that authentic freedom was a genuine possibility and that its assumption was a matter of responsibility for each citizen" (3). Foucault therefore links pivotal moments of individual agency and transformations to the repercussion of a person's choice. However, literary analyses in regard to the female dilemma depicted in nineteenth century fiction have been constructed on the idea of her being constrained within male boundaries and hence, trapped by overwhelming forces that seem outside her control. Foucault's response to these readings suggests that a woman think and analyze beyond the mind set: "This is the way things are" therefore "you are trapped". This sense of entrapment paves the way for transformations expressed in the transgression of boundaries, which confirms Butler's assertions that critics operate within certain confinements:

any effort at empirical description takes place within a theoretically delimited sphere, and that empirical analysis in general cannot offer a persuasive explanation of its own constitution as a field of enquiry [and] that theory operates on the very level at which the object of inquiry is defined and delimited, and that there is no givenness of the object which is not given within the interpretative field – given to theory, as it were, as the condition of its own appearance and legibility.(274)

While it is assumed that literary analyses are somehow constrained due to a "theoretically delimited sphere" as Butler writes, there is a need to think beyond the usual critics' object of blame for the female fate. Other critics that Abassi mentions like Bradley, Gray, Ramos, and Hochman link the female fate to the prevailing ideology, and they respond to it positively because it suggests freedom from servitude or subjection within the patriarchal tradition. However, although a woman faces the challenges of the predominant culture that is still shaped by the past, the critics' generalization that she is represented as bereft of free will is overstated.

My paper attempts to show that the presence of social forces strengthens the female protagonist's resolve to resist the status quo and permanence within patriarchal paradigms. It explores female freedom as a possibility and catalyst of fate vis-a-vis the social roles as a female with views on marriage and sexuality, family and society that verge on radicalism. My reading of *The Awakening* will demonstrate that female fate does not depend solely on patriarchal conditions. She is far from the image of a marionette shorn of a mind of her own, promoting the denigration of her intelligence and femininity in society. Instead, her fate is attributed to her choice for adaptability or destruction within a highly restrictive system. Her resistance to conformity and permanence is explored in this paper. Two other types of female characters portrayed in *The Awakening* are examined as well to show that the heroine is not the only type of woman who resists patriarchal values. It presents other female characters with agency and choices while responding to their various concerns in society. This paper, however, does not depict men as women's only adversaries or competitors.

Female culture and transformations

Showalter cites Carol Smith-Rosenberg's perception of the early nineteenth century female culture where she points to a focus on "veneration of motherhood", "intense mother-daughter bonds", and "intimate female friendships" (171). The strict adherence to the traditional "code of values" for women is expected and strengthened through "sermons, child-rearing manuals and sentimental fiction" (172). It is during these years that female writers of sentimental fiction are still uncomfortable in identifying themselves with the "figure" of the "artist", the "genius," or the "poet" disseminated by the predominant male ideology (173). They feel excluded from male memberships like the "male club or circle of brothers". Instead, these sentimentalist writers align with female organizations such as the "literary sorority" described as

a society of sisters whose motives were rather moral rather than aesthetic, whose ambitions were to teach and to influence rather than to create. Although their books sold by the millions, they were not taken seriously by male critics. (173)

The end of the civil war inspired women to aim for “higher education, the professions, and the political world” (Showalter 173). They were enticed to the “male worlds of art” and asserted themselves as “daughters of literary fathers as well as literary mothers” (173). They presented themselves as artists, and write about the “art of fiction” as represented in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s 1897 essay, ‘Art for Truth’s Sake’ (Showalter 174). Domesticity was relegated to the background with priority given to their “literary ambitions” (174). Women who catered to their literary ambitions were challenged by what their predecessors called “selfishness”. Motherhood is now seldom the focus of their writing. Literary ambitions require focus, mental effort, and time, implying that domesticity is anathema to a woman’s literary aspirations. The female writers of this period hint that a woman can only focus on one thing at a time because “artistic fulfilment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfilment meant giving up artistic ambitions” (174).

While the sentimentalist writers seek refuge in the company of other women writers, Chopin and other female writers of the 1890s have more independence because they move forward from the “female bonds and sanctuaries of the past” (Showalter 175). The 1890s female writers are “hostile to women’s culture, which they often saw as boring and restrictive” (175). They have acquired radical “attitudes towards female sexuality” (175). Showalter, however, clarifies that “not all New Women advocated female sexual emancipation” (175). Darwin’s revolutionary ideas may have influenced Chopin’s literary work because it has empowered her to create and portray a new woman who questions the status quo. It was in the 1890s (Chopin’s time) that the theories championed by Darwin (175) and applied by Zola et al were at their peak. Chopin wrote novels beyond the literary prescription of her period that showcased female protagonists marrying older men of means and remaining blissfully content in domesticity. Edna’s story equates to “Chopin’s literary awakening” (Showalter 170) when she deviates from the narrative formula of the period:

Both the author and the heroine seem to be oscillating between two worlds, caught between contradictory definitions of femininity and creativity, and seeking either to synthesize them or to go beyond them to an emancipated womanhood and an emancipated fiction. (170-171)

Showalter confirms that Chopin as author has a “need for independence and individuality in writing”. This is shown when Reisz, the heroine’s friend, advises Edna that “the artist must possess the courageous soul”. This is the “brave soul ... that dares and defies” (Chopin 71). Female resistance to confinement within patriarchal paradigms in *The Awakening* corresponds to Chopin’s literary ambitions to write stories “that go beyond female plots and feminine endings” (Showalter 171). The rejection of motherhood and domesticity as reflected in her novel suggests that her heroine is identified beyond the image of the patriarchal female, as a representation of the modern woman who caters to her sexuality, passions, and imagination. Chopin’s literary work toys with the possibility of women escaping or resisting their subordinate position to be considered men’s equal in society.

Parrish, on the other hand, notes the reactions of readers to Chopin’s nineteenth century fiction as “a story unfit for proper telling” because of its “vague distaste for the rebellious” and “unclean dispositions” (2). She adds that “public discomfort” with the female protagonist “reflected more than just displeasure with the unconventional and immoral aspects” of her disposition (2-3). These readings show that literary critics and scholars like Parrish and Pollard continue to view Chopin’s depiction of the female within patriarchal demands – that a woman exercise submission to her husband, total devotion to the household, and compliance to societal norms. Chopin, however, presents different types of women that exist in society. It exposes one of the social realities of her time that affect women in relation to marital servitude, psychological oppression, and double standards of gender treatment. Readers are presented with an alternative type of woman who caters more to her natural self through individual expression, a woman who is determined to effect change in society by defying expectations of gender roles and relations and upholding resistance to confinement within patriarchal traditions.

The heroine’s society and family

Chopin’s heroine in *The Awakening* belongs to a middle class society. Her name is Edna Pontellier. Married to a wealthy Creole, she enjoys the trappings of a privileged woman. Her society is traditionally a

man's world where the husband, for instance, engages in activities without his wife's presence i.e. Mr Pontellier spending his evening in the men's club in hotels or going out to dinner with his friends, even during a family vacation in the Grand Isle. Edna does not question the arrangement, an attitude that indicates her independence as a wife. She does not interfere in her husband's activities because they suggest instances where she relishes her own space and time. For instance, when her husband goes on a long business trip, she would breathe a "genuine sigh of relief, a feeling that was unfamiliar but was delicious" for her (80). Showalter comments on the separate social activities of the couple:

Léonce is fully absorbed by the business, social, and sexual activities of the male sphere, the city, Carondelet Street, Klein's Hotel at Grand Isle, where he gambles, and especially the New Orleans world of the clubs and red-light district. (185)

In Edna's society, therefore, men are free to stay out late at night, and her spouse, Léonce, represents the typical nineteenth century husband:

For one thing, her husband expects her to assume all authority and management of the home and family. He doesn't want to be bothered about it. When he makes the money he feels he has done his whole duty, and he leaves the rest to her. When he comes home, tired out, after a day's work, he wants to rest, to read his paper, to think out some scheme in which he is interested. (Dix 129)

Edna's society expects the husband to provide for the household, while he expects his wife to submit to him without question. Dix writes that "it is the theory of the perfectly unselfish woman that she must bear everything without complaint" (128), which means society expects the wife to regulate herself and live for her husband and family. He is the head of the family, and he expects his wife to fulfil her traditional roles in society i.e. devoting full time and attention to childrearing and domesticity. As suggested in the novel, Edna's husband is a conventional Creole who treats her as his property. In his society, women are expected to show subservience to men. They are "objects" with a low social position in a predominant male culture:

The hegemonic institutions of nineteenth-century society required women to be objects in marriage and in motherhood, existing as vessels of maternity and sexuality, with little opportunity for individuality. (Gray 53)

Edna's father is one of the traditional but powerful male figures in Chopin's novel. He is a Presbyterian minister, and he thinks that Leonce is lenient in his treatment of Edna who has become assertive, inflexible, and unyielding to male authority. Edna's father is a perfect example of the traditional male subject who obliges his wife to fulfil the expected female gender roles, and yet, he cannot convince Edna to fulfil her familial duty to be present at her sister's wedding. Edna's resistance to her father's authority prompts him to tell Léonce to assert his influence over Edna as her husband:

You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Leonce, asserted the colonel. 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. (79)

Chopin does not give explicit reasons for Edna's refusal, but from Edna's words, she finds attending a wedding "pretentious". Léonce also admits that Edna says that "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (73). One implication for this is that Edna is upset with social activities because they require her to show expected manners as has happened when she decides to stop giving dinners at home for her friends. Her refusal to attend the wedding signifies her non-acceptance of social activities with expected requirements. Her defiance of social conformity and tradition suggests a call for individual integrity. It may indicate her disappointment in marriage as an institution because of her experience with Léonce's disposition (i.e. he treats her as if she is his property). The heroine's defiance may also suggest Chopin's criticism of the Church's tradition (in the conservative Creole society) in relation to the institution of marriage which requires the fulfilment of vows despite the presence of inner discord and incompatibility, and the growing conflict between "Edna's interests and desires and Léonce's obsessions with the stock market, property, and his brokerage business" (Showalter 179). Edna's attitude seems an expression of her sorrow because a wealthy man with

business acumen and intelligence marries her, and he, as a husband, has no inkling how he can make her happy.

Edna therefore represents the woman who rejects the rigid family structure and the demands of society on expected female roles, in general. For Chopin, the perpetuation of outdated patriarchal hegemony that considers women subjects of their husbands is non-negotiable. Edna's attitude is also a message to women that they are not properties of their husbands. Instead, they are equal partners in marriage who have needs that require fulfillment. Edna represents a woman who wants to be productive as a person, and Chopin shows that her being a woman is not a hindrance in the author's vision for the needed transformations in society. Her actions specify a woman's need for self-fulfillment beyond what the social norms require of her. She is depicted as a female outsider in the Catholic Creole society questioning the role of a housewife dependent on the kindness of her husband. Her actions show that she wants to prove that she, too, can have the material freedom of men in society. This is perhaps the reason she "resolves never again to belong to another than to herself" (Chopin 89) to suggest "self-ownership" and supports the idea of "a woman's right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity" (Gray 53).

The language of silence in marriage

Edna's marriage to Léonce is compared to the image of noisy caged birds that cannot understand each other because they speak in a different language. Because her husband's perception of her is affected by social conventions, Edna uses silence as a form of communication in response to the "indescribable oppression" (Chopin 8) she feels in her marriage. Some feminist theorists consider all language as masculine, implying that Edna "has no language to express an authentic feminine expression". Her silence points to her nonconformism to traditions (Streater 410). According to Foucault, silence is "an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (3). Edna's silence suggests the futility of intended expressions between a husband and wife who cannot see eye to eye because they belong to two disparate worlds with distinct ideologies. Perhaps, she understands that any attempts at a "heart to heart" dialogue will just be misunderstood, so she chooses to keep quiet which may be her unique expression of female power in marriage. Downing notes that Foucault too acknowledges silence to denote power:

One of Foucault's most striking and far-reaching points regarding power and knowledge is the insight that power operates according to and by means of secrecy and silence ... instead of by voicing its presences in loud and oppressive interjections and orders. (vii)

The silence of Edna indicates power at work because she uses it as a strategy for her eventual move towards autonomy from domesticity and marriage. Her silence is a form of resistance to issues of disempowerment within marriage.

Léonce's authority is formed from his acquired views of femininity in reference to a wife's role in the household, and through the couple's misunderstood verbal and non-verbal gestures, this demand on Edna results in a relationship that is soiled with seclusion and constant tension in communication:

This is an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of communication. Edna experiences this in her marriage to a rich Creole husband, and so do other women who spend their summers with Madame Lebrun, the strong Creole woman who runs the cottages in Grand Isle and is the mother of Edna's beloved Robert and Victor. (Clark 337)

Edna's individuality is juxtaposed with the traditional consciousness of Léonce, "a rather courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife" (Chopin 63). Edna receives his anger only for her "absolute disregard of her duties" (63) which implies that he is exacting in regard to her domestic and social roles. Léonce insists they have "to observe *les covenances*" (57) which means they consider social conventions and proprieties. Thus, he keeps an eye on scheduled social functions. Since Edna feels the presence of "indescribable oppression" (8) in her marriage, she aligns with the natural world because it is outside societal confines. Enden notes that "traditional dichotomies connect women with nature while men with culture" (30). There is some truth to Enden's statement because Edna's awareness of being in harmony with nature suggests for her a sanctuary for inner happiness:

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 sunlight, the color, the odors the luxuriant warmth of some perfect southern day ... (65)

Modern woman versus traditional woman

Chopin's novel acknowledges disparate images of women. For instance, it shows one woman's awareness that is still tied to the past, while the other woman is more at ease with change. The heroine's society portrays images of traditional married women who are comfortable with their own men, the Creoles. These are women who are not side-tracked by romantic thoughts with other Creole men who entertain them when their husbands are elsewhere. For instance, Edna's friend, Adele, knows how to handle Robert's expressions of intimacies because in their Creole society, he is one of those who entertain guests-wives, as a son of the owner of the retreat site in Grand Isle. Thus, when Léonce goes to work while the family is vacationing in Grand Isle, Edna is entertained by Robert although she thinks: "I wonder if Léonce will be uneasy!" She welcomes Léonce's business trips for several days or when he is not home in the evenings. She confides: "What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (Chopin 76). These thoughts project the clash between modernity and tradition as reflected in her marriage. She represents modernity as suggested by Clark (336) while her husband embodies tradition. Her comment on the difference between the summer in Grand Isle from other summers also suggests the tension between her two selves: "She could only realize that she herself – her present self – was in some way different from the other self" (45), to suggest a "present self" that is more alive and natural than the "other self". This means too that there is a clash between Edna's self that entertains individuality and the self that is tied to social conventions.

The novel comments on Edna's awakened state: "That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect" (45). Adele cautions Robert: "She is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously" (23). Adele represents the voice of morality and integrity as reflected in her

culture. The Creole society therefore is concerned with Edna's behavior as a female that is different from the Creole female. She has all the indications of a liberated woman as an American descendant of the Anglo Saxon race. Adele's warning to Robert implies further that Edna may be tempted to submit to her erotic impulses due to her openness for new experiences and progressive nature. From her society's perspective, Edna is unfamiliar with the Creole code of conduct, the reason Adele gets worried because Edna might misread Robert's engaging approach with the guest-wives in Grand Isle. This suggests that the introduction of a new or different code of conduct in a traditional society like the Creole is considered unthinkable and perhaps a taboo in relation to their values and culture.

To juxtapose the modern Edna from the traditional woman, Chopin introduces the heroine's friend, Adele, a woman devoted to her husband and children. However, her situation suggests she does not exactly lament her traditional role of wife and mother in society because she blends well with the system for her own comfort and advantage. For instance, she listens to her husband, but then she also makes her point after he speaks. Clark explains that Adele earns the respect of her society because of her dedication to her family (338). She is committed to social roles. Her experience is a case of domestic acceptance and preservation of comfort within her marriage and family. She is the patriarchal image of a "mother-woman". Margraf comments that she "lives the life of maternal self-sacrifice" inspired by the Bible (99). However, despite the society's perception of her as a woman-wife who fulfils the roles expected of her, she represents a different form of female resistance within the bounds of patriarchal constructs (Streater 408). Streater argues that although Adele is considered by literary critics as a traditional wife who embraces the feminine gender role in a dominant male society, she can also be seen as the embodiment of "home-based feminism". Adele uses the status quo consciousness to her advantage while Edna calls for its rejection (408) when she employs a quadroon to take care of her children so that she can indulge in creative pursuits. Thus, within the confines of domesticity, Adele is perceived as "a great performer, overdoing her mother role while at the same time allowing glimpses of her true self to emerge from that role, and that self is confident, powerful, and sexual" (Streater 408).

Adele and Edna's verbal interactions with their husbands differ in style. While Edna uses silence to show female power, Adele listens to her

husband constantly and completes his sentences suggesting “domestic compatibility and familiarity” (Streater 410) and the “ability to usurp and claim patriarchal language as her own” (411). The “exchange also signifies that in the home sphere, Adele is an equal, perhaps even dominant, partner in marriage” (Streater 410). Streater regards Adele’s “strong feminist voice at home realistic, reassuring, and reaffirming” (411). One example Streater presents regarding Adele’s “strong feminist voice” is when Edna lives separately from her husband and at the same time allows Alcee Arobin to her house. Adele’s husband instructs her to warn Edna about the possibility of tarnishing her name due to society’s speculations. The solution is to invite a woman to live with her to counter possible assumptions. An obedient wife, Adele cautions Edna, but she takes back her advice: “and don’t mind what I said about Arobin, or having someone stay with you” (Chopin 106). Streater hints that the act of Adele disregarding her husband’s explicit instructions implies she ignores when necessary the male rule, generally the same as society’s norms, in support for and understanding of a friend’s preferences (411). While literary critics labelled Adele as a patriarchal woman subservient to her husband, Streater rightly favors Adele’s solution in addressing female tension within the status quo because she aligns with a domesticity where feminine expression is life-affirming:

With Adele, Chopin gives us a vision of feminism that not only addresses patriarchal reality, but addresses women’s existence in that reality, allowing for an accessible and life-affirming form of feminism. (415-416)

Edna, on the other hand, is considered strong-willed because she has a mind of her own, an image of female individuality. Her role as a woman is differentiated from the role of the Creole women like Adele by stating that Edna is “not a mother-woman” (Chopin 10) because she lacks “maternal feeling” (Glendening 43). Chopin describes the mother-woman in her Creole society: “They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (10).

The extreme image of female

The introduction of Reisz, Edna's friend, shows that in the Creole society, it is possible for a radical type of woman to exist and still be acknowledged for her individualism. Reisz is the other image of female power although she represents an extreme version of Edna. Three types of women therefore exist in the upper echelons of nineteenth century society: the non-traditional married woman represented by Edna, the traditional married woman represented by Adele, and the radical unmarried woman represented by Reisz. Chopin describes Reisz as "a little disagreeable woman" who is "no longer young" (28). She "quarrels with almost everyone" because she has "a disposition that tramples upon the rights of others" (28). Her being "self-assertive" however, is appealing to Edna because it suggests she sees herself in her, and she understands how Reisz perceives herself and others. Clark comments that Reisz "is recognized as an artist, which allows her to indulge in small eccentricities. The latter is accepted in social gatherings only to play music" (339). Reisz plays the piano, and she is portrayed as the type of woman who resists acquiescence in the predominant male ideals. For instance, she reverses the idea of a woman who is expected to marry when she reaches a certain age. Reisz remains single, but she is dedicated to her career as an artist. She represents the modern woman who is married to her career as an artist. The emergent non-traditional wife, Edna, admires Reisz's freedom as unmarried woman. Both women use their free will to address their specific concerns. Reisz conceives the role of a woman-artist as something different from the patriarchal woman, but nevertheless one that is accepted in this society. Chopin suggests that to succeed in this society, a woman need not abide by the conventional image of femininity. She does not have to marry and have a family because social acceptance is not determined by the expected paradigms of womanhood. Reisz' example as a woman with different values in society suggests that resistance against conformity with tradition does not always lead to female failure.

Reisz's perception of Edna is that she is not a "devoted homemaker, but rather an independent artist" (Clark 338). Reisz's understanding of Edna as an artist indicates she cannot function devotedly as a mother, which implies that a woman has to choose between being a devoted mother or a consummate artist. She cannot focus well on the two roles. Her time, attention, and efforts will be divided between the two. Edna's interest in Reisz suggests she is fascinated by her sense of independence although Edna does not want to be a spinster. Reisz's choice to remain single indicates perhaps her rejection of marriage as an institution. Her role is that of Edna's confidante and refuge in connection

with questions of the heart. Reisz advises her that in order to succeed as an artist, she “must possess the courageous soul” which means that she must have a “the soul that dares and defies” (Chopin 71). Edna’s pursuit of the arts includes a focus on her paintings to suggest that a woman can also contribute to creative activities in society. Despite a woman’s expected role as wife and mother, Edna shows that a woman is capable of engaging in fulfilling projects just like the men in her society. From Edna’s standpoint, both men and women are on equal footing with regard to attaining financial freedom or pursuing individual interests despite gender role expectations. The female characters’ various forms of resistance therefore show that although they live within the dictates of patriarchy, they can display signs of female empowerment and succeed. How they treat these “dictates” depends on how determined they are in exercising free choice and using their ingenuity.

Radicalism and the woman-mother

Edna’s radicalism is highlighted in the novel when she declares boldly: “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” (Chopin 53). Her refusal to sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone (126) implies that her individuality and personal integrity will not be sacrificed in favor of society’s views on gender roles. Her assertion though recognizes motherhood as an important aspect of a woman’s life. Her assertion also suggests she is a modern woman set to cultivate other interests for self-fulfillment because she observes that within the Creole society, women have no other interests apart from their families.

Edna’s modern outlook includes her radical ideas about childrearing. Her children are important to her, but her assertions specify that she does not have to adore them because they are in good hands with a quadroon. This approach towards childrearing is unusual in her society. She does not believe in the idea of full-time mothering. The family quadroon attends to the children most of the time. Her privileged status in society allows her to employ a sitter. Therefore, she is not negligent in her role as a mother because she demonstrates love and care for her children. An example would be when she attends to his son one night while he goes to sleep: “Edna took him in her arms, and seating herself in the rocker, began to coddle and caress him, calling him all manner of tender names,

soothing him to sleep” (Chopin 44). She would also tell the children bedtime stories after sending the quadroon away for supper and “told her she need not return” (48).

Then she sat and told the children a story. Instead of soothing it excited them, and added to their wakefulness. She left them in heated argument, speculating about the conclusion of the tale which their mother promised to finish the following night. (48)

Because of Edna’s interest in painting, Chopin suggests that Edna as a woman cannot just offer all her time to her children. She cannot be a fulltime mother as shown by the service of a quadroon in her household. Edna’s modern approach to childrearing relates to the observations of Dorothy Dix about child-rearing which is one of the leading oppressors of women (132) in the nineteenth century. She explains that mothers sacrifice exceptionally for the well-being of their children who get “unreasonable” at times because they require ample time from them. Dix hints that children can be a source of household tension because even if sitters are available, they still need their mothers’ physical presence so that they fall asleep or feel comforted. Mothers are sometimes obliged to leave their houseguests in the living area just so they can attend to their children who crave attention (132). Dix elaborates on the role of mothers who are willing victims of their children’s self-centeredness:

In her desire to be a good mother, and to do everything possible for her child’s welfare, the average mother permits herself to be made martyr before she realizes it. It doesn’t take a baby but three days to develop all the amiable traits and the despotic power of Nero and a Caligula, and there are plenty of women who never saw a single breath of freedom after their first child is born. They may have the best nurses, but angel Freddy howls like a Commanche unless his mother sits by his side and holds his hand until he goes to sleep, or darling Mary won’t let the nurse undress her, and so no matter how interesting the conversation downstairs, or how important the guests, the poor mother has to leave it all, and spend her evening in solitary confinement in a dark room to gratify the whims of a selfish and unreasonable creature.

Edna challenges the dominant idea of “woman” as defined by the role of “mother”. She finds it unnecessary to cater to her children’s every whim that is why she employs a quadroon. Edna declares “that she would never sacrifice herself for her children” (126). It does not mean she refuses parenting tasks. It suggests she has time for other things that call for female creativity. In other words, Edna is a wife and mother, but she does not highlight these expected feminine roles because she also considers the creative aspect of her personality for individual expression and self-fulfillment.

Edna’s unusual childrearing is contrasted to Adele’s traditional childrearing. When she delivers a baby, Adele advises Edna to consider her children: “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (122). As a full-time mother, Adele’s reminder implies that Edna is not known for fulfilling her maternal duties religiously. Clark compares Adele to a caged bird that “does not see beyond her limits and is always in the same environment” (337). Adele’s situation is juxtaposed to Edna’s position who explores the possibilities outside of her cage:

Edna Pontellier, on the other hand, starts to take walks and distance herself from her surroundings. This freedom of body movement allows her to meet different people and to alert her senses to new experiences, such as swimming and being in solitary contact with nature to think about her life. (Clark 337)

Adele’s statement endorses the expected role of wife-mothers, which is to focus on their children and stay devoted to their husbands. Society’s perception of Adele is that she is an ideal mother because of her dedication to her family. She is an example of a traditional wife content with her role as a house companion. On the other hand, Edna is an example of a non-traditional wife who lives not just for her children, but also values her freedom and personal integrity. She represents a woman who does not want her husband or children to possess her. She disapproves of her husband treating her as if she were his possession, and in the process, she rejects social conformity in favor of individuality. Chopin’s novel therefore portrays Adele to represent accustomed standards, and Edna to represent new standards.

Edna's modern outlook includes her discussion of "the eternal rights of women" (Chopin 73) according to Leonce who confides to Dr Mandelet about his wife's unexpected change: "She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown overboard her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street card, getting in after dark" (73). Dr Mandelet explains that women are "highly organized" organisms, resonating with Darwin's theory of natural selection. The doctor adds that as organisms, women are "peculiar and delicate" as well as "sensitive and highly organized" (74). This statement suggests that nineteenth century's society's perception of women is geared towards the heart to recall Cixous's binary language of oppositions in the hierarchical social structure. Edna's modern outlook creates a concern to her husband and Dr Mandelet because it implies that they exert more effort to require a woman to conform to their expected image of "female". Edna's symbol as a modern woman reflects Chopin's criticisms of established institutions such as the Catholic Church as Margraf (24) observes:

When the author refers to Christianity, she either portrays it as one of the institutions of civilization from whose moral code Edna seeks to liberate herself (Ch. 7, 13) or simply ridicules the outdated customs of Catholicism (Ch. 15).

Despite the "moral code" that Edna strives to release herself from, Chopin portrays her as having experienced religion at one point in her life: "...during one point of my life religion took a firm hold upon me; after I was twelve and until - - why, I suppose until now, though I never thought much about it - just driven along by habit" (19). This statement suggests that her knowledge of religion is something inherited through tradition because her father is a Presbyterian minister, and she acknowledges that she does not think of religion often. For her, religion is just an experience and not something that is rooted in her consciousness, which implies that for Edna, spirituality must be spontaneous (i.e. felt within) and not simply enforced by the environment or society's predominant ideology. Her reservations about her observations on religion confirm her preference for the inner life: "Even as a child she had lived her own small life all within herself" (16). As a child, therefore, Edna has already shown traces of individuality because she favors her inner-spiritual life of detachment over the outside reality as shown in her society.

Radicalism and the single woman

The radical view pertaining to gender roles and relations is also evident in Reisz who lives alone and remains unmarried bereft of children in old age. Her kind of female resistance suggests she knows her position in society. For instance, her antagonism to society's constraints has not deterred her from her assumption of the role as a successful artist. She enjoys society's acceptance of her despite her individualism and difference. This means she is able to "modify" the identity she assumes in society, and she takes an active role in the continuance of her creative pursuits and transcendence of gender role expectations. She has risen above these expectations by assuming an identity she desires for herself. Her "self-ownership" enables her to realize her identity as artist. "Self-ownership connoted a woman's right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity" (Gray 53). As a result, Reisz becomes herself – free from the demands of society on women. She projects will power for independence or self-determination:

By taking control of the very means of representing or determining their social selves in a society that would otherwise determine or represent them, strong, dedicated women – like those in other marginalized groups – have overcome many of the social restrictions they faced (and in many cases, continue to face). (Ramos 148)

Ramos, by contrast, suggests that Edna refuses to assume any of the social roles in society. However, the novel suggests that she refuses to accept these roles because she questions the idea of female subjugation to men. Like Reisz, she is an artist, and she dislikes being relegated only to the household. According to the traditional view, a woman's education must be focused on the family. Edna silently disagrees with this rule. She does not want to be compared to a caged bird where her body is restricted from movement to imply an absence of "opportunity for individuality" (Gray 53).

Female sexuality and nature

In depicting female empowerment through sexual questing, Chopin uses personification to highlight the impact of nature on Edna's emotional state for Robert: "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (16). In an early response to the novel, Pollard critiques Chopin's representation of a married woman with her implausible awakening:

It was Robert who awoke her. But when he went away, it was another who continued the arousal. Do you think Edna cared whether it was Robert or Arobin? Not a bit. Arobin's kiss upon her hand acted like a narcotic, causing her to sleep "a languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams." You see, she was something of a quick-change, sleep-artist: first she slept; a look at Robert awakened her; Arobin's kiss sent her off into dreamland again; a versatile somnambulist, this. Yet she must have been embarrassing; you could never have known just when you had her in a trance or out of it. (161)

Pollard points to Edna's sexual awakening. His criticism suggests annoyance and displeasure because Edna is a married woman, whereas, as Foucault writes about the Victorian female sexuality, "proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitised one's speech" (3) because a wife is expected by tradition to assume her feminine role. Victorian sexuality suggests that a woman deny her passions because she is subject to her husband who expects her devotion to the household. The resistance of Edna therefore is Chopin's reaction to the Victorian bourgeoisie's perception of sexuality which according to Foucault "was carefully confined" and "moved in the home" where the "conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction" (3). The "awakening" of Edna, however, is not limited to sexual freedom as a result of her unhappy relationship with Léonce. Her awakening is also in reference to her need for domestic and economic independence. A woman with intelligence and privileged background suggests that she is not cut out for home life alone. The natural creative juices in her seek out the needed release from the ennui of domesticity.

Edna's sexual quest is not explicitly condemned by her Creole society, and in this instance, Chopin shows that perhaps femininity may be constructed beyond the patriarchal image of a woman. This means that

because a woman has desires, she, too, can act on them just like the men in her society. Writing in 2011, Recep, however, criticizes Edna's sexual exploration:

Is it 'awakening' or being schizophrenic when a married woman with two children cannot control her "id" by her "ego", and lusts for a young man's love; and while longing for that love, upon being rejected, she cannot avoid having a liaison with another man for whom she doesn't even feel anything sentimental? (416)

To explain the behavior of a woman who submits to her desires, Recep points out Freud's model of the psyche which consists of the id, ego, and superego. She explains that the id is the "impulsive aspect of the person" which "occurs from birth to age two" and Freud calls it the pleasure drive (Recep 416). The ego appears at age two to five. It "deals with reality by balancing out the impulses coming from the id". The superego, on the other hand occurs at age five along with moral principles. This deals with "knowing between right and wrong" (416). Freud's theory suggests that "If the ego is not strong enough to balance out the demands of the id and superego, abnormality occurs" (Recep 416). Despite claims that Chopin's heroine cannot be considered a "proto-feminist character" (Recep 417), Edna is portrayed to have exercised her aspirations for female autonomy from tradition. The nineteenth century social culture regards her sexual assertions as radical because tradition considers women without sexual desires. The novel hints though that both men and women have sexual needs that require fulfillment.

The feminist archetype

Although she does not belong to a feminist group, Edna's sentiments and actions point to the right of women for equal opportunity with men. She is unwavering in her desire for financial freedom. She wants to live self-reliantly through her "sketches", substantial winnings from the horse race, and "mother's estate" (88). Her decision to leave the family "mansion" (109) in Esplanade Street in order to live alone in a four bedroom "pigeon house" (95) demonstrates her courage and desire for "independence" as she resolves to belong to herself alone and not to her family or society (89). Edna's actions imply these questions: Why should

childrearing be the territory only for woman? Why does society expect women alone to be responsible for child rearing? What about a woman's right to pursue personal interests? What about a woman's right for self-fulfillment or self-reliance? Edna may not be a member of a feminist group that advocates equal opportunity, right to property, education, etc., but she represents the female voice for equal opportunity in all dimensions – personal, family, social, economic and political as she concerns herself with the “eternal rights of women” (73). She challenges the psychological oppression and other forms of disadvantages married women experience in her own families. Edna is therefore the archetype of a feminist image with her quest for equality between genders for a sense of achievement in society.

Clark elaborates on Edna's sentiments: “She does not accept patriarchal stereotype that try to fix her into a determined essence, so she fights the physical and psychological oppression she has internalized to discipline herself” (346). A woman is free only if she retains control and secures her right over her body and mind, suggests Clark, who advises “that the first step of a dependent housewife towards liberation is to be in possession of her body and mind” (335). She applies “Fry's theory of oppression in order to discuss the systematic nature of oppression, its internalization according to Sandra Lee Bartky, and the modernization of power, as expounded by Foucault” (336). She notes the “drastic resolution taken by the strong wife who belongs only to herself, as the New Woman who is born out of this text” (336). Chopin's novel presents female power through the heroine who wrestles with various tensions: her passions, her inner conflicts, and her response about expected roles to society. Her youth and passions are a reflection of the reality about young, independent-minded women who question traditions.

A woman's innermost sentiments, individuality, and spirituality are to be valued more than her physical relation with her family and society as shown by Edna. Her spirituality is in relation to her quest for love and fairness in relationships and in a society that is free from prejudices where she is accepted as she is. Her physical-material self is actually fulfilled by her “husband's bounty” (88), but she abandons her “allegiance” (88) to him because of her desire for equality, individuality, and spirituality. She feels her spirituality has deepened when she experiences living alone in the “pigeon house” (104): “There was with her a feeling of having descended in a social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual”

(Chopin 104). Even when she dines lavishly with her guests the night before she leaves her family mansion, this longing for something more, for a sense of the spiritual in her, is portrayed in the novel when Edna senses the inner vacuum in the midst of her guests: "There came over her the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of unattainable" (98). Margraf also hints that the heroine's spirituality is awakened in the Grand Isle (99) when she is "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" (Chopin 16).

The novel's initial publication was generally condemned by critics because it dwells on the question of female sexuality and celebrates non-conformism and individuality. However, Chopin's novel was rediscovered in the 1960's by "feminist scholars and theorists" who consider the heroine "a prototype of feminism" (Recep 413). Recep, however, argues that Edna's actions as a protagonist are far from advocating "women's freedom":

The women's rights movement of the second half of the 19th century is known to be the first wave of feminism that mainly struggled for equality in property rights and for women's suffrage, i.e., women's right to vote. Considering the characteristics of this first wave of feminist struggles for women's rights and Chopin's protagonist Edna's behaviours, it is difficult to say that Edna longs for women's freedom and that she should be regarded as a prototype for feminists. (414)

Critics point to Edna's challenging marriage as an institution, sexual desires, absolute freedom and rebellion from the social expectations of women indicate feministic perspectives (Recep 414). However, the concept of feminism is "a liberation's struggle against patriarchy. But this struggle is exerted to construct equality of both men and women in social, economic, and political spheres" (415). Feminism, however, "is not regarded as a luxury of fulfilling one's all intrinsic desires, be it emotional or sexual" (415). Feminism promotes equality between men and women as regards social, economic, and political spaces. It is not a rejection of social institutions such as marriage, family, and society in favor of one's emotions and sexual desires with men other than a woman's husband, explains

Recep. However, the novel suggests that Edna's modern outlook indicates self-reliance and emancipation from patriarchal stereotypes. For instance, Edna's leaving her husband's house and securing a smaller house for herself implies that she exercises her right to property she can call her own. Her radicalism emerges with her self-reliance to show that women are capable of existence outside the domain of their husbands.

Hooks as cited in Recep regards feminism as "a movement to end sexism and sexist oppression" (23). Recep suggests that feminism is therefore "not as a movement to dismantle and dismiss the social institutions such as motherhood and marriage". It is liberation against the patriarchal system that promotes "sexism and sexist oppression". She argues that feminism is not about dismantling motherhood and the institutions of marriage and social structures such as the family, stating:

Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier does not employ any exertions in pursuit of women's rights. She rather makes efforts to fulfil her amoral desires. She is enthusiastic to push away all her matrimonial, familial and societal bonds, (be it the father, the husband, the children or social mores), for the sake of her impulsive feelings. (415)

In Léonce's words, however, Edna promotes the "eternal rights of women" (73) in her attempts for equal status with men and recognition of her rights as female. The novel exposes middle class society where dysfunctional families are a reality. It portrays female natural desires, and the tension between social pressure and self-fulfillment. It offers a type of woman who resists stagnation and patriarchal stereotypes in order to live a life of freedom as a solution to an unhappy marriage. Recep claims that Edna "does not employ exertions in pursuit of women's rights". However, one of the basic rights of a woman is to pursue individual interests for self-development. Edna pursues her art and rebels against expectations that thrust women to focus their time totally on the family, motherhood and childrearing tasks. Her radical actions suggest she has an inner resolve to effect the needed change in her society by resisting the psychological oppression experienced by married women Edna refers to as "indescribable oppression" (8).

Clark cites Bartky's three types of psychological oppression of women: "stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification" (339). Women are constrained for subordinate roles because they have internalized their oppression psychologically as has happened to people who have been colonized (339). Similarly, the Creole women represented, for instance, by Adele have accepted the male culture making them "colonized" by the prevailing consciousness. This is the reason Adele partially submits to her husband and to her role as a woman-mother. She has internalized the psychological oppression of patriarchal "stereotyping and cultural domination" so that she becomes content in her semi-subservience. She is an obedient wife who reads the Bible. Her partial subservience suggests, however, that she is not totally convinced of her role as a wife and mother. Clark explains that when patriarchy stereotypes women, "their bodies are restrained and made to fit the stereotype of the real woman or woman-monster" (339). One example would be when Edna is obliged to smile before her guests at dinner even if she feels upset. Clark posits that freedom from all kinds of oppression is realized through the woman's complete "possession of her body and mind" (335), and the novel suggests that Edna resolves to take control of herself through her radicalism. She is the epitome of everything not Creole because she is a symbol of the new woman with a mind of her own. She resists male authority when she moves out of the family house to declare her independence and free will. The portrayal of Edna as a liberated female, however, deviates from the narrative standard formula of Chopin's era where novelists depict women who are passionless or devoid of sexual desires as reflected particularly in the literature that precedes naturalism and continues in the nineteenth century. Showalter comments on female sexual indifference: "A few radical feminists had always maintained that women's sexual apathy was not an innately feminine attribute but rather the result of prudery and repression" (175) in a male-centered society.

Edna's acquisition of a new house she calls "pigeon house" (102) is symbolic because it implies she is like a bird that is free and away from others' restrictions. Edna's independence is considered a blow to the male ego, prompting her husband to write her a letter to reconsider her decision in order to save appearances. His Creole society considers men responsible for the family image. Husbands encourage their wives to submit to them for the preservation of the patriarchal family structure. Léonce suggests they go overseas (104) for a vacation perhaps as a reconciliatory offering while their mansion undergoes renovation. He does not want his name tarnished. He finds it embarrassing to experience the

collapse of his marriage. However, Edna seems determined to persist with her decision to have the freedom she longs. Her reply to him suggests “friendly evasiveness – not with any fixed design to mislead him, only because all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference” (Chopin 115).

The emphasis on domestic education for women is implied as the norm in nineteenth century society because it has been encouraged by the prevailing mode of consciousness. The family remains the female focus of achievement as it has become synonymous with “a woman’s place” where her success as a person is continually aligned. Clark confirms:

It seems that the family unit became the measure of success, as well as the center of production and reproduction of the new values for women. Thus, women’s education was focused on domesticity. (343)

However, Chopin portrays a reversal of this mode of consciousness with the connotations on female resistance to domesticity in favor of her search for individuality and rights within marriage. The idea of the passionless woman tailored for home life has been transformed in *The Awakening* with its attempt to debunk this outmoded image of woman. And the answer is Chopin’s projection of the idea that a woman can explore worlds other than domesticity. Household servitude resonates with a caged bird, and citing Wollstonecraft, Clark says: “This metaphor of the caged bird partly alludes to women’s entrapment in marriage or remarriage, a social constraint which Edna Pontellier is forced to confront after her awakening” (336). A caged bird functions as an ornament analogous to a woman confined to domesticity. A caged bird is passive, limited, and decorative just like a woman restrained to a man’s house. And domesticity is not the only option for women. Edna’s independence from her husband’s house represents agency and free will. It shows she is not a property subject to his authority because she is his significant Other with rights. Both man and woman therefore have to learn more about how to penetrate into the male and female sensibilities for them to accept and understand each other much better for family solidarity and wellbeing of society, in general.

Conclusion

The Awakening presents a woman in pursuit of equal opportunities with men. In a society where women are relegated to the household, she stands out in her search for self-fulfillment. Her story suggests equality for both sexes which is demonstrated when she pursues her art and lives alone quietly in a smaller house away from the attractive “cage” of her husband. Doing so allows her to experience relief from her husband’s psychological oppression, freedom of expression, and the right to property. Although she has the material comforts that her husband provides for her, there are other things of equal importance for her such as her need to be true to herself and her integrity as a person with her marriage that has become a sham as it is fraught with hypocrisy and unhappiness. She transforms from a woman silenced by patriarchal consciousness with space and movement confinements to someone who embraces personal integrity and clamors for a sense of balance between life’s external and inner or spiritual spheres. She is no longer a woman who bows down easily to society’s constructs of female. She is a new woman who rethinks society’s stereotyping of women and their roles, and resists the excessive adulation of women-mothers towards their husbands and children. Overall, she challenges society’s dominant expectations of the female that is anathema to creative expression, individual freedom, and gender equality. And she eludes their confinements because they inherit still the male tradition that upholds a woman’s low position. Her defiance against social stereotypes represents the triumph of the human will, individual expression, and spirituality defined by Waaijman as a human dimension marked by courage, energy, and detachment (59).

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