

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kate Chopin's the awakening: A new feminist reading

R.Keerthana

M. Phil Scholar

Department Of English

University of Madras, Chennai-5

Abstract:

Feminism refers to political, cultural and economical movements aimed at establishing greater rights and legal protection for women. Feminists and scholars have divided the movement's history into three "waves". The first wave mainly refers to women's suffering in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The second wave refers to the ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement beginning in 1960's. The third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of second-wave feminism, beginning in 1990's till present. The third wave feminism is also called as new feminism.

The main aim of the paper is to analyze Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in the light of new feministic aspects. Even though this novel has been written during 1899, it has every aspects of new feminism within it. The whole novel circles around growth of the protagonist Edna Pontellier. In this novel Edna breaks free from gender role assigned to her by society in search of herself. When the novel was published during early nineteenth century, there were

many criticisms against the subject of the novel. But modern critics have noted the book's rich imagery and found that it's ironic narrative voice is a rich source for analyzing it under new feministic perspective. *The Awakening* has now earned a place in literary canon for the way it uses the formal and structural technique to explore themes of marriage, motherhood, women's independence, desire and sexuality both honestly and artistically.

Keywords: gender role, ironic narrative

The purpose of this paper is to analyze certain predominant aspects of new feminism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She is an American writer, who is now considered by some scholars as forerunner of 20th century American feminism. She is well known for her many short stories and two famous novels. The characters in her stories are very strong and she portrayed women as individuals with separate wants and needs. Not many writers during late 19th century were bold enough to address subjects that Chopin took on. Her ideas and

RESEARCH ARTICLE

descriptions were not reporting, but her stories expressed the reality of her world. Marquand writes,

Chopin undermines patriarchy by endowing the other, the women, with an individual identity and a sense of self, a sense of self to which the letters she leaves behind give voice. The 'official' version of her life, that constructed by the men around her, is challenged and overthrown by the women of the story.(48)

The Awakening was first published in 1899. It is one of the earliest American novels that focus on women's issue without condescension. It is also widely seen as a landmark work of early feminism. Feminism according to Elaine showalter can be distinguished into three major phases as "feminine, feminist and female"

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its view on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority of rights and values, including a demand

for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.(274)

The Awakening can be classified under the third phase of Showalter, female phase because it highlights the evolution of self through the character of Edna Pontellier. Through this story this paper aims at exploring the possibilities of woman to achieve authentic selfhood and to experience what it is to live as a free and full human female being. However, in general, female independent selfhood is defined by the traditional patriarchy as "theologically evil, biologically unnatural, psychologically unhealthy, and socially in bad taste" (carol pearson 6).

The novel is set in New Orleans at the end of 19th century. The plot centers on Edna's awakening, and her struggle between her view on femininity and motherhood with the prevailing social attitude. The awakening of Edna and identifying a self of her own has portrayed by Chopin through use of many symbols and imagery. The novel circles within the upper class Creole society during Victorian period.

The novel starts off with Edna, her husband Leonce and their children

RESEARCH ARTICLE

vacationing for the summer on Grand Isle, an island near New Orleans. In the beginning of the book, a parrot is in a cage shouting to Mr. Pontellier “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! sapristi!” Which means “leave damit” It is clear that the parrot represents Edna’s unspoken feelings towards her husband. It also represents how Edna is caged in her society, without much freedom to live as she pleases. They stay in a cottage with other Creole neighbors. One of them was Madame Ratignolle who is a close friend of Edna although their attitude towards motherhood differs fundamentally. Ratignolle is the epitome of “mother-woman”, gladly sacrificing a distinct personal identity to devote her entire being to the care of her children, husband and household. She is represented by mockingbird which is also caged with its odd marking and whistling sound it produce. Another Grand Isle vacationer is Robert Lebrun, with whom Edna falls in love. They both almost spend all their time together, and Edna greatly enjoys his company since her husband is always preoccupied with work. Due to his presence Edna starts to experience a change within her. She begins to develop a sense of herself as whole individual. He teaches her how to swim and this signifies her awakening. Edna’s moments of self-discovery are closely tied to the ocean which can be interpreted to represent many different things. It is as if the first swim was Edna’s first taste of freedom and after

which she becomes more and more rebellious.

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.(44)

These lines describe the beginning of Edna’s process of awakening. Most of the concepts explored in the novel are mentioned in this passage: independence, self-discovery, intellectual, maturation and fulfillment. As Edna begins the process of identifying her true self, the self that exists apart from the identity she maintains as a wife and mother. As a result of her awakening or discovery of self she becomes almost capricious in meeting her desire and needs. As she is always interested in arts she began spending more time painting and sketching portraits than on households and other social duties. One day when they take a spontaneous day trip to another island in a boat, Edna undergoes a metaphorical rebirth when she falls asleep for hours on the island.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

She also has a friend named Mademoiselle Reisz who is a good pianist and her music gave her a different type of sensual awakening. Certainly, each new character that appears in the novel only serves to highlight Edna's uniqueness. However her heart remains with Robert and she is delighted to learn that he is soon returning to New Orleans.

There was with her 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 obligation added to her strength and expansion as an individual. She began to look with her own eye; to see and apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life.(54)

She has grown more distant from Leonce and also became much better artist. She also started to sale some of her painting through her art teacher. These sales provided her a small income. So when Leonce and her children are out of town she decides to move out of the house. She moved to a tiny rental house nearby, called the "pigeon house" for its small size. She simply decides to do what she wants, regardless of what her husband or society

may think. She feels herself as an independent woman. She enjoys her new found freedom. She eats solitary, peaceful dinner, visits her friend and does painting.

The pigeon house pleased her. It at once assumed the intimate character of a home, while she herself invested it with a charm which it reflected like a warm glow. There was with her a feeling of descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual. Every step which she took toward relieving herself from obligation added to her strength and expansions as an individual.(68)

Her devotion to the awakening causes friction with her friends and family, and also conflicts with the dominant values of her time. She meets Robert and tries to explain herself; meantime she is called to attend Madame Ratignolle's labor and delivery. At the end Ratignolle ask Edna to rethink about her decision. Edna is greatly disturbed and leaves to Grand Isle announcing that she is going to swim, and drowns herself. The ending of the book depends on how the readers perceive it to be because the novel has an open ending. If Edna is thought to be dead, then it's ironic

RESEARCH ARTICLE

death. But many readers believe that the ocean is what Edna believes would free her from the chains that were placed on her by society.

I would give up the unessential; I would give up the money, I would give up my life for children; but I wouldn't give up myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.(71)

The above quotes suggest us that Edna is clear about her decision. As Edna is walking towards the ocean at the end of the novel we see a bird with broken wing. The bird is the representation of Edna finally breaking away from the ideas of Victorian womanhood, this is because throughout the entire novel we see caged bird and now we are finally seeing a bird that is free despite its injury. Though images and symbols Chopin represents the awaking self of Edna.

The emancipation of Edna is represented so well in this novel. Chopin represented Edna as rebellious against the

institution of marriage and has sexual desire of her won and completely independent of her husband through rich images and symbols. Through these images we can interpret this novel in new feministic perspective. As new feminist suggest Edna breaks the stereotypical notion of a women and be herself as a whole individual. Through this character Chopin has represented women as a separate individual like men who has her own desire, wants and needs in life. Men do not want to give women her space, but women should take it herself like Edna because it's her own. Edna in this novel acts as a true representation of new feminism.

References:

- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. New York, NY: Bantam classic, 1981. Print.
- Arun, Irengbam. *Gender studies- A survey*. New delhi: Maxford books, 2011. Print.
- Jain, jasbir, avadhesh kumar singh.ed. *Indian feminism*. New delhi: creative books, Print.
- Martin, wendy, ed. *New essay on the awakening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press,1988. Print.