



# Quest of Agency and Identity: A Feminist Reading of Kate Chopin's "A Respectable Woman"

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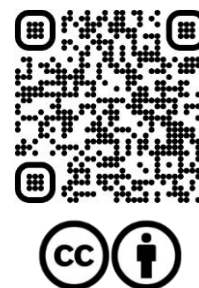
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**Abstract**— *The present paper critically examines how Kate Chopin's short story, "A Respectable Woman" encapsulates women's aspiration for their unconditional agency, distinct personal identity, and the subsequent existential authenticity. It focuses the female protagonist Mrs. Baroda's mental restrictions caused by social norms and her struggle to overcome them. By applying Simon de Beauvoir's notions of transcendence and immanence, it analyses how Mrs. Baroda strives to affirm unconditional and unproblematic agency as an individual as a part of her attempts to negotiate her sexuality, freedom and identity. The paper posits that Chopin defies the contemporary patriarchal codes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American society as she reveals women's awareness of their precarious situation, desire for freedom and emancipation from societal constraints that seek to strip them of their independent agency and identity.*

**Keywords**— *Kate Chopin, "A Respectable Woman," Simon de Beauvoir, women's agency, identity, immanence, transcendence*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Women have been struggling against patriarchal norms, values and beliefs that tend to deny them distinct identity and unconditional agency. The 19<sup>th</sup> century American society exercised varied ideals to control dreams and desires of women, especially middle- and upper-class white women. The then "Cult of True Womanhood" defined "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" as their cardinal virtues (Welter 152). It was, in fact, a patriarchal ideology rather than a cult that subjugated women with nearly no chances of advancement in their life. With their chances severely limited to marriage and motherhood, their life was plagued with "domestic dependency" – dependency on their husbands for security, survival and social recognition. The "Cult of True Womanhood" evolved into New Woman movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Kate Chopin emerged as a strong feminist voice on the literary horizon of America. The ideals of New Woman movement "focused primarily on entirely "emancipating" women from the social expectations and conventions forced upon them by tradition" (Cruea 198). Inspired by the New Woman movement, Kate Chopin focused on crafting powerful

feminist texts exploring women's so far subdued aspirations for freedom, dignity and identity in the male-dominant society.

An unconventional woman writer from 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Chopin belongs to the feminist school of authors who have lent voice to women for their freedom and identity. Born as Katherine O'Flaherty in St. Louis in 1851, Chopin is regarded as a pioneer of feminist writers. "Feminism" did not even exist in its usual sense when she wrote (Cruea 187). She did not openly advocate for feminist ideals, but her oeuvre is strongly marked by feminist voice. She defied the then social conventions and taboos in her life and literary work as well. She struggled to have some of her short stories and novels published as she wrote on women's sexuality and desire for freedom from societal constraints through portrayal of strong female characters. Female sexuality is a common theme in her oeuvre as in her short story, "A Respectable Woman." Published in the *Vogue* magazine in 1894, this story is one of her most anthologized stories with ambiguous ending that have drawn varied interpretations and critical analyses.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Steele focused on the female protagonist's dilemma and lack of her clear stance on her approach to her husband's friend in the story. She applied reader's response theory in her analysis of the story and concluded that readers can "find and create their own meaning from the text" (1). Dyer focused on the theme of sexual passion, suggesting that Mrs. Baroda's infatuation with Gouvernail is matched by the latter's sensuous fascination with her, but his passion is "tempered by a natural respect for women, a sensitivity to Mrs. Baroda's position, and patient self-control" (49). Gurung offered a postmodern feminist critique of the story, underscoring the absence of "biologically located essentialism and male dystopian depiction" and presence of "the co-existence between male and female" (8). Xin Liu in his feminist analysis of the story focused on the theme of women's oppression caused by "the patriarchal ideology, traditional moral and gendered division of labor" (556). Pujimahanani et al. stressed on the female protagonist's conventional subservient identity. They claim Mrs. Baroda's "resolution to step back, to think, and to return to her husband is her approach to define her identity" (93). The current research paper makes a remarkable departure from the studies conducted so far on this particular story as it seeks to examine the issue of women's unproblematic and unconditional agency. It also focuses on Mrs. Baroda's fight against patriarchal values and the burden of social expectation while negotiating her identity.

## III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Simon de Beauvoir's feminist-phenomenological notions of transcendence and immanence delineated in her magnum opus, *The Second Sex* have served as the theoretical framework for this study. De Beauvoir introduced the concept of transcendence as a dynamic realm that contains exercise of freedom, power, and opportunities of advancement. It imbues one with privileges enabling one to act voluntarily, pursue creative goals, realise their full potentials, and transcend themselves. On the contrary, immanence represents the closed-off realm that contains curtailed freedom, limited opportunities, and all sorts of repressions especially that of sexuality. It signifies "the bodily/physical and the involuntary...material existence in general, its perpetuation, and the maintenance of the status quo" (Strickling 36). De Beauvoir argues that social norms, values and beliefs grant men transcendence but consign women in continual state of immanence. However, both transcendence and immanence are necessary for us. "In truth, all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go beyond itself, it must maintain itself; to thrust itself toward the future, it must integrate the past

into itself," states De Beauvoir (443). Exercising one's transcendence is far more significant than exercising one's immanence.

## IV. ANALYSIS

Women's self-identity in a patriarchal society has been a major feminist concern that Chopin deftly projects at the beginning of "A Respectable Woman" when she introduces the protagonist – Mrs. Baroda. She is the central figure of the story, but her first name is never mentioned. She is always referred to by her married name in a way that her husband Gaston is not. Our name is an indispensable part of our personal identity; it is what people call us by. The woman protagonist's husband does not mention her name either; he calls her "ma belle" (my beautiful) and "chere amie" (dear friend). Meaning lies in her husband's addressing her as something else but not her name. Chopin has denied the protagonist personal name as a part of her narrative strategy to suggest her society takes her only as Mr. Gaston Baroda's wife who has no personal identity.

The central conflict in the story lies in the protagonist's mind as her internalized social norms and values clash with her private desire. Unlike radical feminist texts, "A Respectable Woman" does not pit husband against wife or male against female. Both male characters of the story—Gaston and Gouvernail—are kind and compassionate towards Mrs. Baroda. She receives proper attention, affection and care from each of them. The antagonizing force, in fact, stems from patriarchal values that she believes in as they seek to stop her from realizing her full potentialities.

Mrs. Baroda's chances are seriously limited to marriage. She is living as a housewife with her husband Gaston, a sugar planter, on his plantation. When the story begins, we find her looking forward to "a period of unbroken rest" and "undisturbed tete-a-tete with her husband" (Chopin 141). She feels "provoked" to learn from Gaston that his college friend Gouvernail is about to come and live on their plantation for one or two weeks, which is certain to spoil her plan. Like a typical Victorian housewife, Mrs. Baroda seeks her husband's company for relaxation and enjoyment, but Gaston, on the other hand, is looking forward to enjoy his friend's company. Gaston's chances are not limited only to marriage as it is in the case of his wife. Unlike Gaston, Mrs. Baroda is stuck in domestic sphere in which she relies on her husband for fulfillment. De Beauvoir notes:

A man marries to anchor himself in immanence but not to confine himself in it; he wants a home but also to remain free to escape from it; he settles down, but he often remains a vagabond in his

heart; he does not scorn happiness, but he does not make it an end in itself; repetition bores him; he seeks novelty, risk, resistance to overcome, camaraderie, friendships that wrest him from the solitude of the couple. (550)

Subjected to domestic dependency, Mrs. Baroda relies on her husband not only for enjoyment and relaxation but also her social recognition. Her situation corroborates what de Beauvoir calls immanence, a closed-off domain in which she is bound to suppress her desire for the sake of her duty as a housewife.

Gouvernail's arrival stirs novel feelings within Mrs. Baroda. Despite her negative presumption of him, she happens to like him when he presents himself on the Barodas' sugar plantation. She seeks her agency as a woman for the first time in disliking Gouvernail though she has never seen him. She fancies him to be a cynical and impractical intellectual with hands in pockets, glasses and a worn out figure. This could be her first line of defense, a psychological effort to ensure she does not defy the virtue of "True Woman" by getting tempted to any other male as it could disturb her self-conception of being a respectable woman as well. The ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Cult of True Womanhood" – purity and faithfulness to husband – seem to be working well upon her mind at this point in the story. She is trying to maintain the patriarchal values imposed by the male-dominant society.

Mrs. Baroda's fascination with Gouvernail complicates her situation. She tries to comprehend her feeling for him but fails. He sits "mute and receptive before her chatty eagerness" (Chopin 141). He behaves with her in courteous and respectful way, but shows no clear sign of reciprocal affection that she might have expected – "His manner was as courteous toward her as the most exacting woman could require; but he made no direct appeal to her approval or even esteem" (Chopin 141). Then, she imposes her company on him to break his reticence, and her failure in doing so results in annoyance to her. She cannot comprehend why she likes him and what she expects from him. "She had never known her thoughts or her intentions to be so confused" (Chopin 142). The first conspicuous instance of Mrs. Baroda's seeking her agency is her decision to quit her home, leaving her husband and guest on their own. She grumbles to Gaston that his friend is boring, and declares she is going to the city to live with her aunt until Gouvernail is gone from their home. She felt "a distinct necessity to quit her home in the morning" (Chopin 142). Mrs. Baroda's bold assertion of her agency as a woman is not, however, unproblematic because she is apparently seeking to avoid Gouvernail or her feelings for him. The night before she leaves her home, she feels strong sexual

attraction towards Gouvernail while sitting with him on a bench beneath an oak tree.

Her physical being was for the moment predominant. She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice. She wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips. She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek—she did not care what—as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman. (Chopin 143)

She suppresses her sexual urge in her efforts to maintain the virtues of "True Woman" such as sexual purity and faithfulness without which she could not be a respectable woman. "In Victorian England and America, moreover, the repression of sexuality could mean security...autonomy and social respectability" (Rosenberg 149). Patriarchy tends to treat women's bodies as sexual object solely for husbands. They are expected to maintain the "priceless virtue" of preserving their virginity for husbands without which they would become a "fallen woman." Welter notes:

A "fallen woman" was a "fallen angel," unworthy of the celestial company of her sex....The marriage night was the single great event of a woman's life, when she bestowed her greatest treasure upon her husband, and from that time on was completely dependent upon him, an empty vessel, without legal or emotional existence of her own (154-155).

Mrs. Baroda thinks she is a respectable woman for whom it would be inappropriate and adulterous to have sexual contact with some other male. "The stronger the impulse grew to bring herself near him, the further, in fact, did she draw away from him" (Chopin 143). Thus, she asserts her agency in suppressing her natural desire that is a part of her individuality.

Simon de Beauvoir claims, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (330). She argues gender is rather a cultural construct that imposes traditional gender roles on women and expects them to behave in particular way conforming to the social norms and values. Mrs. Baroda behaves more like a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century American woman than an independent individual. She has learnt from her patriarchal society that she is a "woman" who is expected to compromise and sacrifice to conform to her social norms.

Mrs. Baroda shows some glimpses of transformation when she decides not to tell her husband Gaston about her sexual temptation for Gouvernail. She controls another temptation; that is, the temptation of seeking her husband's assistance in resolving her mental conflict. "Besides being a respectable woman she was a very sensible one; and she knew there are some battles in

life which a human being must fight alone" (Chopin 143-144). She determines to fight her battle on her own, and thus, asserts her independence and individuality for the first time in the story. This is the first indication in the story that Mrs. Baroda seeks to cast off the ideals of "True Womanhood", and act as a conscious independent individual. However, the mental conflict still persists within her; she is caught between societal expectation and her personal desire for Gouvernail outside her marital boundary.

Mrs. Baroda comes back home from the city only after Gouvernail's departure from their plantation. Next summer, Gaston wants to invite Gouvernail again but is enforced to give up his plan after strenuous opposition from her. Her mental conflict is not resolved yet. Disturbed with her extramarital sexual fascination with Gouvernail, she seeks to avoid him. But before the end of the year, She proposes Gouvernail be invited to their plantation. With her mental conflict resolved, she seems to be ready to acknowledge her private desire as a distinct part of her being, and hence, she is ready to face Gouvernail. Pleased with her proposal, Gaston remarks she has overcome her dislike for his friend. Mrs. Baroda responds in ambiguous manner; she says, "I have overcome everything! You will see. This time I shall be very nice to him" (Chopin 144). In fact, Mrs. Baroda does not have the feeling of dislike for Gouvernail. So, it certainly is not dislike that she has overcome. She might be referring to her mental restrictions that stopped her from affirming her own natural private desire. Mrs. Baroda's ambiguous response that she has overcome "everything" and her willingness to be "very nice" to Gaston can have varied interpretations but one thing is clear that unlike other strong female characters in Chopin's oeuvre, Mrs. Baroda is unable to openly defy the patriarchal ideals to fulfill her extramarital sexual desire and thereby assert her agency as an independent person.

## V. CONCLUSION

Freedom of choice is an innate part of human nature that contributes to the sense of distinct personal identity and existential authenticity. Patriarchal ideologies and their impact ingrained in the mind of women at their young age, however, function to deny them. Mrs. Baroda struggles to make choice as she tries to uphold the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals of "True Woman". She gets caught between societal expectation and her natural private desire. Casting off conventional patriarchal ideals of womanhood that stifle her individuality, she seeks unproblematic and unconditional agency as a conscious independent human being. Being aware of her predicament and awakening consciousness, she seems to wish for control over her body,

needs, and life-condition, and thus, negotiates her personal identity.

In the beginning, she seeks agency as a married woman, which is problematic as it helps to further strengthen her allegiance to patriarchal norms, and thus consolidates her immanent state. But she appears confident and clear in her mind with her mental conflict resolved at the end of the story when she proposes Gouvernail be invited and declares to have "overcome everything" and to be "very nice" to him. She seems to have shaken off the burden of societal expectation, and is ready to acknowledge her natural private desire and act upon it that can give her the sense of freedom and individuality. This is how she seeks to affirm her identity and agency as a free individual. Through her portrayal, Chopin shows women's aspiration to come out of their immanent realm and assert transcendence. Her ambiguous statement, however, suggests she lacks enough courage and boldness to defy the patriarchal barriers; her "long tender kiss" upon her husband's lips reveals her intention of maintaining her marital status. Thus, Mrs. Baroda, stuck in *ménage à trois*, remains down to her varying and volatile mood, drawn and driven to the prospects of immanence.

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