



The Dual Consciousness of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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Abstract— *Kate Chopin's The Awakening deals with the conflicting discourse on gender and sexuality proliferating in Nineteenth-Century American society. Published in 1899, the novel deals with the story of Edna Pontellier who is caught between the prevailing ideals of femininity closely associated with domesticity, filial duties and motherhood, as opposed to the more radical ideas of individualism, sexual emancipation and transgressive femininity emerging in the age. The Awakening radically questions and unsettles the patriarchal configuration of a woman's life who is caught between two hostile voices, the oppressive societal voice and her own radical transgressive voice. These two contradictory ideals of femininity in Postbellum American South, is primarily manifested in the figures of Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz. This paper explores the conflict between individual autonomy and social conformity as represented in these two characters and how they influence the trajectory of Edna Pontellier's life. Unable to negotiate between the two, Edna Pontellier is driven to the precipice and forced to annihilate her own self. This paper will try to locate Kate Chopin amongst the different ideological positions propagated by the antebellum novelists and discuss the politics of gender and identity in postbellum American South.*

Keywords— *American Literature, Gender Politics, Identity Politics, Kate Chopin, Nineteenth-Century Women's Writings*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is often characterised as a polemical novel because of its proto-feminist sensibilities which provoked a lot of controversy at the time of its publication. As the title of the novel suggests, the narrative deals with the self-discovery or "The Awakening" of Edna Pontellier, the main protagonist of the text. Set in New Orleans in Postbellum American society, Edna Pontellier is a member of the Southern Creole Community, caught up between an intricate web of social constraints and her innate desires to break through them. "Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin, 2009, p. 17). These contradictory influences

within Edna are further fuelled by her interactions with two women, Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, who both occupy two diametrically opposite extremes of contemporary feminine ideals. Through her experiential encounters with these oppositional characters, Chopin presents us with a radical female protagonist who violates social taboos and discards the societal obligations expected of her. However, the text neither condemns this act of transgression nor does it applaud the main character's endeavours to break through the restraints. Rather, Chopin refuses to authorise any moralistic judgement on her female protagonist who calmly walks into the sea in the light of her "awakening".

The Awakening deals with the "conflict between individual autonomy and social conformity" expected of women in

that age which is manifested in the dual consciousness of Edna Pontellier. The narrative is embedded in an identity discourse where Edna is forced to choose one identity and reject the other. Her inability to compromise results in the ultimate act of annihilating her existence. Many critics have argued that Chopin's resolution of the novel proclaims an ultimate act of defeat against patriarchal ideals. As Susan Wolkenfeld says, "Chopin places Edna's suicide as a defeat, a regression, rooted in a self-annihilating instinct, in a romantic reality" (Wolkenfeld, 1976, p. 220). However, Edna's suicide can also be interpreted as a valiant act of reclaiming feminine agency and power, as she refuses to limit herself to any socially sanctioned role enforced upon her. This paper will argue that Edna's ultimate act of self-destruction is not an act of surrender to the societal norms, rather it is to be seen as an act of protest and rebellion in itself.

"At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin, 2009, p. 18). One consciousness derives from the dominant culture of nineteenth century Creole community and from the prescribed image of an ideal woman promoted by that culture. The other consciousness derives from that part of herself which resists acquiescence to these cultural prescriptions. Adele Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz represent these two consciousnesses respectively, and exert contradictory influences on Edna Pontellier. Adele appropriates the Creole idea of a "mother-woman", while Reisz is the model of an emancipated but isolated woman artist. Maternity and artistic creativity are set in opposition to each other, as the contemporary nineteenth-century Creole community did not provide any vocabulary of negotiation to women. As Jennifer B. Gray notes, "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, 2004, p. 53).

Chopin draws on ideological positions of her literary predecessors whose voices are intricately interlaced into a heteroglossia. Adele Ratignolle is a quintessential representation of the figure of "mother-woman" propagated by the antebellum novelists who celebrate motherhood. The antebellum novelists of 1850s and 1860s America, celebrated motherhood and intimate homosocial bonds between women. This period observes a proliferation of sermons, conduct books, sentimental fiction and child-rearing instruction manuals for women thus called "The Empire of Mother". Adele Ratignolle is a product of this culture of "mother-women who has internalised these matriarchal ideals and demeanour, and

idealised the idyllic mother-child bonding. On the other hand, the Post-Civil war period (1870s-1880s) witnesses the advent of women into what was then considered "masculine" domains as artists, professionals and politicians. Mademoiselle Reisz voices the concerns of the "epoch of single women" of Post-Civil War era, who believe that "...artistic fulfilment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfilment meant giving up artistic ambitions" (Showalter, 2000, p. 207).

At the same time, Mademoiselle Reisz represents the ideals of "Self-ownership" prevalent in the age. According to critic Emily Toth, "Self-ownership connoted a woman's right to have possession of her own fully realized human identity. Inherent in this concept was not only sexual freedom and other aspects of person hood, but also "a sense of place in the community and the universe at large," through love, connection, maternity, and other aspects of fulfilment (Toth, 1976, p. 242). Reisz's identity is defined by her artistic sensibilities. However, this artistic independence comes at the cost of social ostracization for women. While Adele is hailed as "faultless Madonna", Reisz is associated with "deformity". She is characterised as anti-social, asexual and non-maternal. Adele is epitome of "self-sacrifice" while Reisz is the embodiment of "self-possession".

Edna's "awakening" as the New Woman of the 1890s is facilitated by both these women but she resists submitting to either of these exclusive ideological positions. Edna's intimate sojourn with Adele triggers a bout of self-exploration where she analyses her first act of childhood defiance against the Presbyterian Service imposed on her by her father. Interestingly, this also enables an intense response to Reisz's music which "awakens" Edna and provides her with a taste of liberation leading to her exhilarating experiences of the midnight swim and her solitary expeditions.

Motivated by her interactions with Reisz, Edna engages in romantic excursions with Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin. She removes her wedding ring and stamps upon it as an act of aggression against matrimony. She refuses to attend callers on her reception day and sets out on solitary expeditions without any male "guardian". She thus defies, normative rules of patriarchy and gets a taste of emancipated womanhood momentarily. Both Adele and Reisz inspire Edna to paint but with different purposes. Adele plays the piano and rationalises her 'art' as a maternal activity that enhances her duties. She rationalises her 'art' as a maternal project, so as to brighten up her home and entertain her husband and children. Art for her is an activity that enhances a mother's duties. Reisz, on the other hand, is an accomplished artist who possess "the courageous soul that dares and defies". The contrary

influences of Adele and Reisz brings out the conflicted notions of fragmented identity deeply rooted in Edna herself. As the narrator notes, "She could only realise that she herself – her present self – was in some way different than the other self. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that coloured and changed her environment, she did not yet suspect" (Chopin, 2009, p. 45).

Edna is both drawn to and repulsed by these women. Reisz "sets her spirit free" but Edna is repulsed by her sordid life. She is physically attracted to Adele but satirises her as a "ministering angel" who has effaced her individuality. Unlike Adele, Edna considers her children as antagonists impeding her development. "The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered her 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, 2009, p. 120). In another such instance, Edna witnesses Adele's "blissful" labour as a "scene of torture" but however, is careful enough to not portray Edna as "non-maternal". There are times in the narrative where Edna considers motherhood as obstruction to her personal emancipation. She relishes in their absence of her children, as she can devote more time to herself and do what she likes. But there are also instances where she ardently misses them and longs to hug them, touch and kiss their cheeks. Patriarchal institutions demand absolute devotion from women as mothers and wives, leaving no room for exploring their own selves. Women who do not perform their marital and maternal duty are either considered mentally ill (as suspected by Leonce Pontellier) or "monstrous" in nature. This conflict leads to the fragmentation of the inner self.

"One of these days," she said, "I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it." (Chopin, 2009, 87). Edna's tragedy lies in the fact that the society that she inhabits cannot and will not allow her to realise any of her hopes and desires. The picture-perfect depiction of marriage as demonstrated by Adele Ratignolle leaves Edna quite dissatisfied and unsettled. As Chopin writes, "Edna felt depressed rather than soothed after leaving them. The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it an appalling and hopeless ennui" (Chopin, 2009, p. 61).

Edna's newly awakened consciousness allows her to momentarily escape the socially sanctioned roles as a

"mother woman" but her experimentation with alternative modes of being as a "free-woman" exploring her own sexuality and identity makes her an outcast in the patriarchal society that she inhabits. She tells Dr. Mandelot that "nobody has any right" to force her to do things, however, this assertion is soon undercut when she says, "Children, perhaps" (Chopin, 2009, p. 116). In choosing her role as a free-woman, Edna needs to give up her role as a mother and vice-versa. Edna is unable to find a middle ground to tread upon where she can synthesise both her individuality and maternity, as well as explore plurality of identity and subjectivity. Unable to choose between such extreme warring faculties, Edna then, chooses to abdicate both roles and retreat into the only source of her awakening, the "vast expanse of the sea".

II. CONCLUSION

Edna Pontellier is like the disabled bird who is uncaged, but its freedom is restricted because of its broken wing. The enunciation of female desire for individual emancipation is considered an act of feminine transgression by the overtly masculinist society. Edna's tragedy lies in the fact that she vehemently desists from choosing, limiting and dedicating herself to any one single societal position. Edna's maternity comes at the cost of her individuality which is a price she is unwilling to pay. She gives up her life but does not sacrifice her 'self' for her children. Edna is thus, "...a solitary, defiant soul who stands out against the limitations that both nature and society place upon her, and who accepts in the final analysis a defeat that involves no surrender. (Ringe, 1972, p. 206)".

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