

SOLITUDE AND INDEPENDENCE IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

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ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin [1851 – 1904] was an American white, of the south and she wrote of a woman and her life, from an angle that was very new to her age. The newness led to a lot of hostility and Kate Chopin quit writing because of that. When we read the novel *The Awakening* today, we do not understand how it should have created such hostility in those days. That is how perhaps we would respond to a reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* today. Her original readers thought that it was an obscene book. They thought the book obscene because the woman betrayed acknowledged social proprieties in man – woman relationships. That also shows how this conventional society was, and perhaps is, hypocritical and partial. Society was unkind to Kate Chopin because, she presented Edna's transgression of the marital bond. Would this society have responded equally critically, if Mr. Leonce Pontellier had been unfaithful to his wife in a nonchalant way? Women of conventional society have always accepted the male-sponsored and male-centred norms, without question.

KEYWORDS: Solitude, Independence, Society, Custom, Tradition

INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin was a nineteenth century writer, who wrote of ideas and emotions characteristic of the late twentieth century. That does not mean that, she wrote about ideas like women's liberation, individuality and equality. When such ideas had not emerged into the consciousness of the average woman, even in America, Kate Chopin presented with extraordinary sensitivity, on the mind of a woman, who responds to experience and social conventions in a very individual way. She does not want to say that, such attitudes and ideas are right or wrong, sinful or virtuous, and so on. She presents some of her stories men and women, who are extraordinary in their ways. They become not mere personalities, but elemental forces of nature. Edna Pontellier, the heroine of *The Awakening*, is not a woman who breaks contemporary sexual mores and meets with a miserable end. She is not an Emma Bovary, who shifts her love from person to person, in quest of certain illusory distinctions.

When the novel opens, she is a handsome woman of twenty-nine, wife of a successful New Orleans merchant, mother of two little sons and mistress of a fine house on Esplanade Street, one of the best streets in the French Quarters. During her summers on Grand Isle, Edna receives frequent gift boxes from her husband in the city and she agrees with the view of her friends that "Mr. Pontellier is the best husband in the world" (AOS, 9).

The Awakening is the history of Edna's slow awakening into real and complete consciousness as a human being. Upto this point, she has lived the life of an average woman in high society. She has passed through the emotional excitements and disappointments of a girl who does not have very distinguished minds. N She has fallen in love twice or thrice, but those disappointments do not affect her later domestic happiness with her husband Pontellier. Upto this point

she has been very loyal to her husband. She has reasonably good tastes, but has not had the earnestness to develop them. She has been more or less a conventional wife, satisfied with herself and with everything connected with her. She is even satisfied with her husband's treatment of her. Pontellier is just an average businessman who thinks of his wife as a sort of live personal property. She had not resented it all these years. But, now she slowly wakes up. She finds herself disturbed by odd events and experiences. Gradually, her dissatisfaction grows in intensity, where defying society's norms do not frighten her at all.

Kate Chopin presents her society very convincingly. Writing expressly for her own people she does not bother to explain the social and other background of her people. For instance, she presents the varied social customs and gradations of people without any special notes. The story is based in South America where the possession of lands marked the aristocrat and the genteel. It is a leisured class to which, the world of the common people makes little sense. It is a self-contained society with its own norms and mores. In this society purity of blood is highly valued, but yet a few discrete deviations from the standard do not declass the person. The Creole is not the native white men but whitemen mostly of French ancestry. They speak French habitually. These people, rich of the white people of the region. Edna is a pure white but has married Creole. Social norms and family norms are all equally intimately presented in the novel. This effortless and unexaggerated, unselfconscious presentation gives the novel a certain sense of sincerity and spontaneity.

Human relationships – relationships within the family circle -- of the nineteenth century southern society come with traditional morality. In this society, the head of the family is the husband. The wives are the things that belong to them. The wives have no sense of belonging. There is no individuality for the wives. They should act according to their husbands' orders.

Mrs. Pontellier, though she has married a Creole, is not in the society of Creoles. In the Creole social world of which Edna is a part, freedom, independence, on the part of a woman, cannot exist. In this society women are to be pious and pure, obedient and domestic before they are to be anything else. Mr. Pontellier, as absolutely a conventional man and he expects his wife should also follow the conventions. When we find that Edna comes into conflict with the traditional morality, the result is that the accepted order is disturbed, and there is chaos and disorder. When Edna decides to live with Robert conventional morality is violated. Her violation of conventional norms creates chaos and disorder in her own life and in the life of her social environment.

Mr. Pontellier complains to Edna very mildly and impotently that she has failed in her duty as a wife and as a mother. He cannot and does not do anything to prevent her actions. Mr. Pontellier thinks of his wife as the sole object of his existence, shows little interest in things that are not concerned with him. As a matter of fact, Edna does not take her husband too seriously. Her answers to his queries are very casual. She pursues her own inclinations mostly and he does not question her.

Edna slowly detaches herself from her husband and children. Edna is not a "mother – woman". Chopin so aptly puts it:

The mother – women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolised their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels (AOS, 10).

Like other women Edna also had led a very social, conventional life in the beginning. Everything happens according to conventional life without any rippling until Robert enters her life. To Pontellier his wife is "a valuable piece of Personal property" (AOS, 4). During the six years of her married life Edna too has lived like any other southern wife, in her beautiful house in New Orleans. She is well immersed in her home and social circle. But the entry of Robert Lebrun in her life awakens her into a sense of herself as a person rather than as a piece of personal property. What is unique with Edna is that she finds it difficult to accept her role as wife of Leonce and mother of his children. Her own individual self, and her own womanhood, are struggling for recognition. The contrast to her character is Adele Ratignolle. She is one of the best companies to Edna in the Lebrun cottages and also in New Orleans. Adele is a physically splendid, matronly figure, possessed of charm and beauty. She is Creole, outgoing and communicative, whereas Edna, an American from Kentucky, is reserved and withdrawn.

This is one of Kate Chopin's principles of construction. She arranges characters and events in such juxtaposition that we get a subtly contrasting picture; Mrs. Ratignolle is just a conventional type of woman in every way accepting the ways of her society. Mrs. Lebrun is another of that type. Edna begins to realise her own difference from such people when she begins to think of herself. To Mrs. Ratingolle an original talent is somebody is a matter for the greatest admiration. When she finds that Edna has a tolerable aptitude for painting, she loses herself in admiration for her. Yet her enthusiasm is all limited to conventional, socially accepted ways. For instance, while she can admire everything that Edna does, she cannot very well stand the wayward genius of Mlle. Reisz. She is certainly a good artist but her ways are excentric and she cares very little for fashionable society. In retaliation fashionable society ignores and slights her. Edna, while beginning to step out of the range of this fashionable society, is attracted to Mlle. Reisz. That rebel against all acceptable norms is also charmed by this beautiful young society woman.

Mr. Pontellier is an orthodox society man – proud of his beautiful wife and his healthy children, and more than anything else, of his considerable success in business. In town, he is quite confident of his business success. On the Island he is busy thinking about his business. In between he tries to be a kind and considerate husband and father, sending them boxes full of titbits. Mr. Pontellier is not very different from this pattern of a middle class businessman husband. Robert the young man somehow fascinates Edna but he is in no way very different from these other men. Yet each one of them has his own identifiable character.

As a young woman, Edna has been shallow in her attitudes as any other provincial girl is. It is important to remember that in those distant days women in America had no means of formal education. Whatever refinement they had, had been picked up from what was supposed to be the manners of high society. At three different stages she falls in love with three different men and then marries Pontellier because she has nothing against him.

Her marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate. It was in the midst of her secret great passion that she met him. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with earnestness and an ardour which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further for the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband.

The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this world. As the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her, she felt she would take her place with a certain dignity in the world of reality, closing the portals forever behind her upon the realm of romance and dreams.

(AOS, 20)

But she is fond of her children and husband. Edna's boys are more self-reliant than the children of the mother-woman. Edna can leave them behind with their black nanny when she goes to the beach at Grand Isle. Yet, she is fond of her children in an "uneven, impulsive, way" (AOS, 20). It is only after her "awakening" she realizes how ambivalent her feeling for her children is. She breathes a big, genuine sigh of relief when they away to their grandmother's for a few weeks. "It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which fate had not fitted her" (AOS, 20). While exchanging words with Madame Ratinole on the subject of children once Edna says that she would never sacrifice herself for her children or for anyone. Adele has been shocked on hearing this, and Edna has tried to explain, to satisfy her she meant:

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

(AOS, 49)

She has passed into a narrow conventional life and suddenly she deviates from it without the guidance and thinking. Kate Chopin narrates in the different characteristics of Edna when she was in her childhood, girlhood and youth. As a lovely and imaginative person, she has given herself to secret and intense infatuations. First it is the "dignified and sad-eyed cavalry officer", at another time it is "the young gentleman who visits a lady on a neighbourhood plantation". Yet a third time it is "the figure of a great tragedian that possessed her mind." But marriage with the tragedian which would have been the highest point of her happiness was not for her in this world.

The struggle of Edna Pontellier to fulfil her desires to find some meaning in her life takes place after her friendship with Robert Lebrun, the son of the resort's owner. They used to chat incessantly about the things around them. But Robert Lebrun, who flirts first casually and then seriously with Edna, provides the stimulus for romantic love. We find immediate manifestations of awakening in Edna. She has freed her soul of responsibility and has placed herself in alien hands for direction; her boat trip to Cheniere Caminada with Robert shows Edna's boldness. Edna's sailing to Cheniere with Robert shows a break in emotion with the conventional life she has lived so far. She moves slowly into her world of freedom.

Kate Chopin has a principle of organisation that has a reverberating impact on the whole of the story. Edna is at this juncture waking into her abiding love for Robert. She doesn't as yet know of the hollowness of Robert. In fact, even Robert perhaps does not suspect it. The unspoken desire in the depth of her heart prompts her to seek his company. Going to the church where marriages are solemnized, she feels sick, and, noticing, it the ever attentive Robert takes her to a neighbouring house on the island. There she rests for a while, and then when she wakes up she is fresh for a pleasant moment with Robert.

This event functions as a beautiful image that sums up the effect of her love of her. It isolates her from others, and she goes away, sick, from her kind and their time – hallowed ways, which are symbolised by the church and the

congregation. The only other person on the island that she takes for herself is Robert. Eventually, of course, even he deserts her.

In this context, it may be noted that Kate Chopin talks of the sea in the present tense, of its seductive voice. At one stage, the sea seems to symbolise the comforting, engulfing, caressing, warmth of society – one who plunges into the sea is comfortable in a sort of anonymity, not obliged to make any move for one's self. This is the sea from which she comes to the isolation of the island but when the island shows up her essential loneliness, she realises the futility of company on the safe shore of the island. And then the sea becomes the symbol of the solitude that her soul desires now. Society and its conventions are now like a barren, bleached island and the sea is the larger reality, vast, warm and inviting.

The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled, down, down to the water

(AOS, 116)

Kate Chopin, it may be recalled, starts the story with the description of a caged bird that is taught to say a few words. Towards the end of the novel is the description of a wounded bird that sinks into the sea. Both the images are appropriate to Edna. For an explication of the earlier image, the appropriateness of this last description is obvious. The quest of the bird for freedom is seldom successful.

Edna's new kind of awakening tortures her when Robert leaves her to seek his fortune in Mexico. Her awakening remains at the sensuous level only and there is no element of sex involved in her relationship with Robert. But before such a possibility arises, Robert leaves for Mexico. Robert cannot match Edna in her readiness for unconventional life. Robert is not ready to come out of his society.

Even after his return from Mexico to New Orleans, Edna frankly declares her feeling to him. Robert too declares his love and confesses his "wild dream" of making her his wife but he wants Leonce to set her free. For him she still "belongs" to Mr. Pontellier. Edna tells Robert:

"You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both"

(AOS, 110)

This statement of Edna's may seem to be her declaration of independence.

Notes

All the quotations from the main text are followed by the name of the text in abbreviation and the page numbers immediately thereafter, all within brackets.

Abbreviation used: AOS – *The Awakening & other Stories of Kate Chopin*

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