



The Woman Question in The Late Nineteenth Century: *The Awakening*

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Abstract

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* is described by Sandra Gilbert as a regenerative and revisionary genre proposing new realities to women by providing new mythic paradigms through which their lives could be understood (1899). It is useful therefore, to read Kate Chopin's novel in the social climate and ferment of the late nineteenth century 'woman question' amidst which she wrote.

Keywords

New Woman, Puritanical, Patriarchy, Feminism, Suffrage, New Woman.

Introduction

In 1854 Coventry Patmore's poem about femininity titled 'The angel in the house' appeared, summing up current perceptions of womanhood as self-sacrificing and self-effacing. The ideal of the frail or even sickly female underlay the nineteenth-century ideology of femininity. Glorifying the dead woman, Edgar Allen Poe wrote in 1846 that the most fruitful subject for literature was the death of a beautiful woman. These ideations of womanhood were formed by the sociohistorical processes of the time which relegated women to an inferior position in society. The laws governing marriage contract decreed the wife's property, including self-earned money, as belonging to her husband. Furthermore, in the event of a divorce the husband got the custody of the children. Article 1591 of the laws of Louisiana amply convey the secondary status of women whereby four groups of people were deemed "absolutely incapable of being witness to testaments..." (Culley 118), namely, children below sixteen years, persons insane, deaf, dumb or blind, criminals and women of any age whatsoever.

In 1848, at the first American Women's rights convention in Seneca Falls New York, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote the Feminist Declaration of Rights and Sentiments protesting against such discrimination. It demanded for women "All the rights and privileges which belonged to them as citizens of the United States" (Showalter Modern American Women Writers x). Writing was one such privilege through which women could gain money and fame. Margaret Fuller's *Women In The Nineteenth Century* appeared in 1845, saluting female authorship as a sign of the times, exhorting women to self-fulfillment: "I have urged upon the sex self-subsistence in its two forms of self-reliance and self-impulse, because I believe them to be the needed means of the present juncture" (Fuller 308).

The 1890's saw the full impact of social changes impelled by the industrial revolution. Women were forced out of their homes and into the factories. There was dissatisfaction amongst women due to discrepancy between the professed ideal and prevailing female reality in the late nineteenth century. On the one hand she was awarded the subordinate role of the angel in the house and on the other was exiled and treated as an inferior in the working world. The 1890's began with political reforms which were seminal to the fight for women's rights and votes. In 1892 the first suffrage organisation, Portia Club was formed. In 1896 a second suffrage organisation, Era Club, joined hands with the former and before the turn of the century women had won rights to vote on matters of local taxation. By the 1890's the 'new woman' was a prominent phenomenon. The upper-class women attended colleges, demanded the right to vote and entered the professions, while lower class women made themselves heard by forming unions and combating unfavorable working conditions. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* was the first major American newspaper to be edited by a woman namely, Dorothy Dix. It supported many women causes. Dorothy Dix wrote many articles like 'Are Women Growing Selfish?' 'The American Wife' 'Strike for Liberty', lambasting the bastions of patriarchal prejudice. In 1895 Luard Mutchion put forward the view that women who did not accept economic dependency were the ones who opened floodgates of vice. Replying to statements of such reactionary nature, Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Women and Economics* described the warping of marital relationships as "the inevitable result of sexuo-economic relation" (136), affirming that progress would flow smoothly when men and women stand equal in economic relations. Commenting on this aspect Margaret Fuller wrote, "But that is the very fault of marriage and of the present relation between the sexes that woman does belong to the man, instead of forming a whole with him" (309).

Discarding the sanctuaries and ties of past, the 'new woman' challenged puritanical belief about female identity and sexuality, attributing female sexual apathy to prudery and repression. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her diary in 1883, "a healthy woman has as much passion as a man." (Showalter *Sister's Choice* 68) Despite these efforts gender inequality remained a glaring fact towards the end of nineteenth century. The 'new women' were yet misfits in the society. They sought freedom in both form and content in their writings, experimenting with impressionistic narratives to explore what Egerton calls the 'terra incognita' of female consciousness, telling stories of female loneliness and isolation. Herein lay Chopin's fascination for Maupassant's impressionistic technique. She called him a man who had escaped tradition and authority and saw through his own eyes.

The Awakening was poignantly relevant to a decade preoccupied with the phenomenon of the 'new women', exploring as it does the process of intellectual, sexual and personal freedom. Reflecting the reactionary nature of a patriarchal society, the contemporary reviews were vehemently condemnatory in their responses. Their moral sensibilities were affronted by the portrayal of a woman forging her own social reality and sexual morality. Reviews in *The Mirror* stated "what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster passion can be". *Chicago Times Herald* called it "Sex fiction", while *Los Angeles Sunday Times* reviewed it as "unhealthy introspective and morbid". Other contemporary reviews were similar in tone. Predictably the book was banned and it was only in the 1950's that there was a revival of interest in the book and it claimed its rightful place in the pioneer writer's group of 1890's.

The Awakening is a pioneering book in as much as it deals with female impulses and offers a bold treatment of female sexuality. Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser also delineate female experience, but with almost a studied exclusion of any sexually explicit scenes. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, all robustly question the woman's position in society. However, in the figures of Maggie and Carrie there is an attraction towards rich life. As Per Seyersted points out, their experiences are shaped by the socio-economic realities around them (184). They both enter the mainstream and fight for their place within the given mores for mere survival. In contrast, Edna is a solitary soul in her newly awakened consciousness. She deliberately places herself outside social experience to question a woman's position and role in society. Whereas Maggie and Carrie are both

victims of circumstances, Edna is agentic in forging her own course in life. As Per Seeyersted points out, Kate Chopin agrees with the naturalists in her views on basic urges as imperative, but she allows Edna to decide her own destiny in an existentialist way (184). Interestingly, Edna's rise on the spiritual plane is directly proportionate to her decline on the social scale.

Appropriately, Kate Chopin subtitled this novel 'A Solitary Soul'. The main thematic concern in the novel is about the initiation of an individual into self-awareness. This is accompanied with her increasing alienation from social and familial bonds. Edna, as the author tells us, "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognise her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 14). She starts her story as a wife and mother, roles which she is aware do not suit her. She realizes she is not one of the 'mother women' who like Adele, "idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (8). She has different kind of wings which, as Mademoiselle Reisz points out, will have to be strong if she wishes to "soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (89). Her prescribed place in her husband's house is that of a "valuable piece of personal property" (2). The loveless relationship with her husband generates within her an indescribable oppression. The image of the sea functions a symbol of the womb, where Edna's initiation into a sense of her own individuation takes place. Awakened by her experience in the sea she is acutely aware of Leonce's tone and can see through his entreaties to her, not to stay outside at night, as a thin mask for his determination to subdue and control her. But the sea has already imparted to her the power to "control the working of her body and soul" (29).

Interestingly Edna's awakening takes place between the two polarities of the traditional homebound woman Adele and the liberated free individual, Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna's wish "to swim, far out, where no woman had swum before" (29) expresses the extent to which she rebels against prescriptive female reality. She can appreciate Adele's marital harmony and yet conclude "It was not a condition of life which fitted her" (60). She tells Adele that she would give up her life for her children but not her 'essential self. As to the nature of this self itself, she is not very clear. She is so far able to define herself in terms of that which she is not. Placed in a social reality which denies any translation of her innermost experiences into it, a definition by negation alone is possible. She ignores social protocols and even refuses to attend her own sister's

wedding, “she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (62). As a result, Edna’s social sphere becomes an increasingly shrinking horizon. Having started on the solitary road of self-realization, she moves to the ‘Pigeon house’ putting her own money into it, a far cry from the dependent wife who delight-fully accepted money from her husband.

Robert and Alcee Arobin both awaken her to her own sensuous nature and sexual desire. Desire, she now understands, can exist independent of love and she feels ‘neither shame nor remorse’ for it. Love continues to hold a magical aura for her but Edna has reached a level of consciousness where she prizes above all, her freedom and inviolate self. She asserts that she is no longer Mr. Pontellier’s possession and will give herself where and as she chooses. She has made the transition from being Mrs. Pontellier to becoming Edna. Finding Robert gone she is saddened but can now unflinchingly face a vision of her future “Today it is Arobin, tomorrow it will be someone else” (123).

Nothing except her inviolate self matters to Edna. However, unwilling to ruin the life of her children she gives back her life to the waters that had awakened it. Solitary and a towering Miltonic figure in her isolation, she sheds the last vestiges of social inhibition. Discarding her clothes she enters the water completing the circle of her vision of sexuality and individuality where she had envisioned a naked man by the shore. Once awakened she refuses to compromise her inviolate self to suit social norms. Her death is no defeat, just the price of awakening, not wages for sin. She tells Dr. Mandelet, “It is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (120). She embodies this truth by embracing death rather than compromising her soul to slavery. Her memories towards the end are those of awakening from freedom of childhood to limitations of female sexuality. Her death is an assertion that, none but herself will possess her body and soul. It is tragic that the social reality around her denies her the sense of her own ‘essential self’. Sadly, instead of a constructive realizing her true self through a life lived in truth, the only way of actualization available to her is through in death.

Kate Chopin succeeds in rendering female experience in all its complexity and richness, bringing into focus the question of women’s identity and integrity. *The Awakening*, in the ultimate analysis, is a pioneering work with relevance to the issues of the ‘new women’ raging in the late nineteenth century.

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