



*Loss of Self and the Struggle for Individuality in
Kate Chopin's The Awakening*

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Abstract

Using Chodorowian terminology, the present study deals with *The Awakening*, in which Kate Chopin questions the concept of feminine personality, loss of self, vision of womanhood, male oppression of women, mother-woman and female quest for an individual personhood. Therefore, the paper argues that male-dominated society legitimates the victimization of women, creating a sense of selflessness through objectification of the female gender. Being exposed to overwhelming responsibilities from a very young age, women commence to lead a life considered to be precious merely within masculine parameters and are manipulated, both physically and spiritually, by the male ideology. Patriarchy cruelly condemns and destroys women who gradually regain a sense of self-consciousness and reconstruct the fragmentations of their identity. So as to exemplify the issue, the female protagonist of the narrative, Edna Pontellier, is dealt with from a psychoanalytic perspective, applying Nancy Chodorow's principles on feminine personality and the conceptualization of self.

Key words: Mother-woman, Loss of Self, The Invisible Father.

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The bird that would soar above the level
plain of tradition and prejudice
must have strong wings.
It is so sad a spectacle
to see the weaklings
bruised, exhausted,
fluttering back to earth.

Kate Chopin/ *The Awakening*

Since time immemorial, women were entrapped within the strict boundaries of the male-defined institution of womanhood. Conventional social roles were assigned to them. Male-dominated society granted them the privilege to perform merely the roles of wife, “sex object”, “child-bearer” and “commodity” (“Family Structure” 44-45) The others who had the courage to go beyond the boundaries of this traditional concept of womanhood had to endure the outcomes of their daring enterprise. Kate Chopin, in her novella *The Awakening*, conveys such a bold attempt made by a young woman of twenty-eight, named Edna Pontellier.



Similarly, Mrs. Pontellier realized that she was weighed down by the burden of the male-defined concept of womanhood and had to devote, along with her body, her suffocating soul to a marriage she was poignantly caged. Her desperate attempt to gain female emancipation tragically brings her own end. This paper argues that societal vision of womanhood is a hindrance to individual identity and fragments the self. Furthermore, those who strive to step beyond this male notion of womanhood and reject to act the passive feminine, as the narrative reveals, are ultimately punished by being excommunicated from society.

The primary social role of a woman is defined as “being a mother woman and a good wife”. Being a good mother equals being a good wife and any woman who does not possess these stereotypical traits is not depicted as one of “true womanhood” (Schweitzer 168). In the narrative, Edna is accused by her husband of neglecting her two little children even though there seemed to be no genuine reason behind it. As the story progresses, readers become aware that Edna is found guilty of inattention many times by Mr. Pontellier, since the narrator states that “such experiences as the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life” (11). According to Mr. Pontellier, Edna was not, in Chopin’s terms, “a mother-woman” (12). It was Adele Ratignolle who duly deserved this praise:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The motherwomen 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 idolized their children, worshipped their husbands and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and growing wings as ministering angels. (12)

The definition of motherhood denies women the possibility to preserve their autonomy and individual identity. Within the male parameters, a mother woman is depicted as devoting



herself wholly to her children and husband, both spiritually and physically. As Streater claims, “to become a wife and mother is, on some level, to capitulate one’s self to patriarchal systems” (406). Making a hard effort to perform the role of a mother and wife deservedly drains the very energy of women. Being overwhelmed by such a millstone around their neck, women unconsciously or unthinkingly ruin their own selfhood and identity for the sake of their husband and children. Besides, such a male-prescribed definition assigned to motherhood deconstructs and fragments the female personality since “...women are being defined by a male construct of motherhood not only denies their individual identity, but also continually reinforces a sense of inferiority.” (Streater 407). Women feel the need to work harder and harder in blind contentment in order to deserve being depicted as a ‘good mother’ and gradually surrender their own self and identity to the yoke of motherhood. Chodorow asserts that there is a strict relationship built between the female personality and the social roles women are burdened with. (“Family Structure” 58). The roles women have to act paralyse both their identity as an individual and their self as a woman.

Mothering, as Chodorow argues, is a significant element in the construction of female identity and personality. From a very young age, girls are trained to be a good mother and a good wife, as the male-dominated system demands (“Family Structure” 54). Therefore, they may become confused about their identity due to early sex-role training continually comparing and contrasting them with the adult world. (54). Thus, these socially determined and helpless/selfless women are labelled as “little women” devoid of childhood experience while men freely enjoy the childhood (54). Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* can be read as a crucial justification of Chodorow. The protagonist is revealed as being part of such a social structure that reduces women solely to their social roles. A woman is called a woman as far as she acts



“the devoted wife of a man who worshipped her” (Chopin 22), receives her guests “on Tuesday afternoons,” (54) “idolized their children” (12) and “were delicious in the role” (12). Feminine personality and female identity are merely judged in terms of a woman’s ability to perform her social roles assigned to them by the patriarchal conventions. This suggests that society prioritizes solely traditional gender roles rather than the concept of integrated female self and the wholeness of woman's psyche. What the conventional womanhood requires, according to the patriarchy, is utter conformity to society. Edna Pontellier felt acutely weary of this societal assumption of gender. She gradually became aware that social conformity was actually a great threat for her individuality and female identity. By delimiting her life to the expectation and vision of society, she was sacrificing her own self and individuality. “Edna had once told Madame Ratignolle that she would never sacrifice herself for her children or for any one” (52). These words uttered by Edna reflect that she ultimately realized that motherhood and the weighty responsibilities being a wife brought together destroys and fragments her sense of selfhood and individuality. In the course of the novel, readers are made aware that Edna’s view of children underwent a drastic change. She commenced to define her own children as “antagonistic” (58), since she conceived that “Edna’s struggle for autonomous selfhood entails a rejection of her responsibilities as mother” (Schweitzer 162). Motherhood is a hard-to-overcome obstacle before her identity and self, in Killeen’s terms “... and motherhood are dangerous and painfully rites of passage for women, against which they should fight” (Killeen 418). The rise of the selfhood is only possible with the fall of motherhood.

The puritan society is seen to generate certain codes to consolidate and advocate the objectification of the female sex. In the beginning of the narrative, the narrator depicts the



scene in which Mr. Pontellier chides his wife for sunbathing in such a blistering heat, uttering “you are burnt beyond recognition” he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (7). The use of the phrase “personal property” suggests that Edna is considered as a commodity by her husband, not an individual or even a woman. As she gradually gains a feminist consciousness, she attempts to liberate herself from such a male oppression, “I am no longer Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not” (113) vehemently objects Edna to Robert. This sort of sexual inequality which is the product of the male constructs is argued by Miller, too, who states that “... our culture creates women as repositories for a myriad of devalued and denied psychological qualities...” (“Oedipal Assymetries” 479). The objectification of the female sex creates in women loss of self and causes the exclusion of women as individuals. This leads women to see themselves as an object rather than free individuals and the outcome of submission to this male-defined conceptualization is having no personal selfhood. As a result, women realize that they have to go against male-ruled society to emancipate their personhood, since “the struggle for the woman is to free herself from being an object or possession defined in her functions, or owned, by others” (Killeen 419).

Women are not defined in terms of individuality, but by being associated with men. Chodorow expresses that “women in most societies are defined relationally (as someone’s wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law; even a nun becomes the Bride of Christ” (“Family Structure” 58). From the very beginning of the work, Edna is introduced to readers as Mrs. Pontellier rather than Edna. Through this, the narrator tries to reveal that the male institution denies the female sex individuality and Edna is only one of them. As the narrative progresses, Edna gradually reconstructs her own individuality and rebuilds her sense of self. Then, the narrator begins to



address her by her name. This suggests that Edna establishes herself as an individual more and more. When Robert explains the seeming reasons behind his exile to another country and his endless fight with his emotions, he says to Edna “because you were not free; you are Leonce Pontellier’s wife” (112), depriving her individuality and defining her merely as the wife of another man; Edna bitterly opposes to him, uttering “I am no longer Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (113). Edna has gained an awareness of the fact that she is to free herself from “a male model of selfhood from which normative cultural standards for women sharply diverge” (Schweitzer 168) in order to create “a person’s consistent sense of self” (“Family Structure” 43). Defining women through associating them with men causes the exclusion of women as individuals and thus brings about loss of self.

The Awakening represents a miserable matrimony that destroys and ruins the individual selfhood of the female sex. The narrator reveals that Edna does not feel any satisfaction from her marriage to Mr. Pontellier since “her marriage to Leonce was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of fate” (22). What is worse is that Mr. Pontellier does not seem to be pleased with her wife, either, complaining about her all the time, since “her wife had failed in her duty towards children” (12). Both being quite unhappy in her marriage and having two little children dependent upon her care and affection, Edna felt suffocated under the burden and noticed that marriage had taken away so many precious things from her.

Once she stopped, and taking off her wedding ring, flung it upon the carpet. When she saw it lying there, she stamped her heel upon it, striving to crush it. But her small boot heel did not make an indenture, not a mark upon the little glittering circlet. (57)



The character is seen to be involved in the bond of marriage infected with fury and desperation. Edna is aware that she is emotionally unsatisfied from this union and “her husband seemed to her now like a person whom she had married without love as an excuse” (82). Edna’s wearing herself out for a marriage from which she cannot expect anything in return numbs her individual selfhood. When Edna relates a story to the guests gathered around the dinner table, she mentions “a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back” (75). The story she uttered vividly reflects her weariness of her matrimony and the life she is expected to lead by society as mother and wife. She comes to the fact that if she is to regain her personal individuality, she is to untie her knots with her so-called husband and her children. When her younger sister, Janet, invites her to her own wedding, she rejects, saying “wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth” (71). Here the protagonist is portrayed to be aware that marriage ultimately steals away the female selfhood and self-definition.

Domestic responsibilities, mostly associated with marriage as institution, fall upon the female sex, since

The father, because his work takes him outside of the home most of the time, and because his active presence in the family has progressively decreased, has become the invisible father. (“Family Structure” 50)

As stated above, the male sex does not need to bother himself with the housework and childcare. He plays the role of breadwinner while all the responsibilities fall on the woman like a sheer task. “Because the burden of nature falls on one sex to a much greater extent than the other, women necessarily have to bear a heavier burden” (418) claims Killeen, in order to



reveal the oppression of the female sex. Such oppression reinforced by social roles and norms, along with a failing marriage, gradually leads to the killing of the soul and diminishing of the female self. Likewise, Edna is lost through the heavy charges a hopeless marriage begets. As the narrator reveals, Mr. Pontellier comes home every weekend during the period Edna settles on Grand Isle. Thus, he turns out to be sort of ‘the invisible father’. Edna has “to mother and manage” the house on her own. Such an extreme self-sacrifice wounds and absorbs her womanly self as an individual. When Edna begins to define her children as “antagonistic” (58) and to distance herself from her husband, she is sure that she is to “freed her soul from responsibility” (37). Otherwise, she eternally remains to be selfless.

Obstacles over the path of recuperating individuality are of consideration in this context. The absence of Edna’s mother, for example, marks such an obstacle. Her mother dies very young owing to the fact that her father “who coerced her own wife into her grave” (76). Edna and her younger sister are brought up by their elder sister, Margaret who “was matronly and dignified, probably from having assumed matronly and housewifely responsibilities too early in life” (21). The narrator depicts the child Edna as “self-contained” (21) and one who “had lived her own small life all within herself” (18). This suggests that the death of her mother severely wounded Edna’s inner world. As Schweitzer asserts, “the birth of her children and the early death of her mother... are of traumatic separations” (179) that left a perpetual effect on the constitution of the personal selfhood of Edna. Streater, too, deems that her being motherless in a patriarchal world remains “psychological burden that has marred her existence” (415). Having no mother to seek as a refuge against the pressures of the male criteria of womanhood, Edna has to confront the dilemma ‘redefining her or submitting to the male definition’ and ‘establishing herself as an individual’. The death of Edna’s mother



traumatizes her feminine personality and individual identity. Nancy Chodorow avows the rationale behind this:

In a situation where household structure is usually nuclear, like the Western middle class, grown daughters look to their mothers for advice, for aid in childbirth and child care, for friendship and companionship, and for financial help. Their mother's house is the ultimate center of the family world. ("Family Structure" 60)

Having no mother to turn to as a shelter destroys Edna's sense of self and individuality.

All in all, womanhood in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* has been revealed as an expressive and manifesting attempt to transcend the boundaries drawn by the male ideology. Women who rebel to the societal vision of womanhood in order to establish themselves as individuals are seen to be suffering from its consequences. The protagonist, as argued by Chodorow and Schweitzer, instead of acting the passive feminine, chooses to refuse the role imposed on women and desires "distinguishing life from self." Once she realizes that she cannot subvert the usual role of the female gender and identity constructed by society, she is viewed as gradually "swimming" into death rather than submissively giving into selflessness.



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