

EDNA'S AWAKENING: A JOURNEY FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM AND TO DESTRUCTION

EDNA'NIN UYANIŞI: KÖLELİKTE ÖZGÜRLÜĞE VE YIKIMA BİR YOLCULUK

ПРОБУЖДЕНИЕ ЭДНЫ: ПУТЕШЕСТВИЕ ОТ РАБСТВА К СВОБОДЕ И РАЗРУШЕНИЮ

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ABSTRACT

The oppressed and suppressed female figure in a male-dominated society has been a case of debate since the beginning of human history. Although it is unfortunate that women and men experience the imposed duties inevitably, what and why they are obliged to do is a topic of controversy. Traditionally, men go to work, earn money, whereas women stay at home, take care of the house, and look after of children. The reason why such daily routines are regarded as a customary task is religious morality and culture in the background of society. Kate Chopin deals with the situation of the female figure in *The Awakening*. There, Edna Pontellier, the female protagonist of the novel, is depicted as a dynamic character, who gradually becomes aware of the dictates of the society represented by her husband and family institution. She has children to look after, a husband to satisfy, a house to take care of, and a patriarchal society to serve. In this article, the case of Edna is examined with a view to gender roles, especially defined according to Third Wave Feminism.

Keywords: The Awakening, Gender Roles, Third Wave Feminism, Kate Chopin, Patriarchy

ÖZ

Erkek egemen toplumlarda ezilen ve bastırılan kadın figürü, insanlık tarihinin başlangıcından bu yana anlaşmazlık konusu olmuştur. Kadın ve erkeklerin kendilerine dayatılan görevleri kaçınılmaz olarak yerine getirmek zorunda kalmaları talihsiz bir durum olsa da neyi, neden yapmak zorunda kaldıkları tartışma konusudur. Geleneksel olarak erkekler işe gider, para kazanır, kadınlar ise evde kalır, evle ilgilenir ve çocuklara bakar. Bu tür günlük rutinlerin geleneksel bir görev olarak görülmesinin nedeni toplumun arka planında din temelli ahlaki öğretiler ve kültürel değer ve uygulamalar yatmaktadır. Kate Chopin, Uyanış'ta kadın figürünün durumunu ele alıyor. Burada romanın kadın kahramanı

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Edna Pontellier, kocası ve aile kurumu tarafından temsil edilen toplumun emirlerinin yavaş yavaş farkına varan dönüştürülen bir karakter olarak tasvir ediliyor. Bakması gereken çocukları, tatmin etmesi gereken bir kocası, bakması gereken bir evi ve hizmet etmesi gereken ataerkillik bir toplum bulunur. Bu makalede Edna'nın durumu, özellikle Üçüncü Dalga Feminizme göre tanımlanan toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri açısından incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Uyanış, Cinsiyet Roller, Üçüncü Dalga Feminizm, Kate Chopin, Ataerkillik

АННОТАЦИЯ

Угнетенная и подавляемая женская фигура в обществах, где доминируют мужчины, была предметом споров с начала человеческой истории. Хотя, к сожалению, мужчинам и женщинам неизбежно приходится выполнять возложенные на них обязанности, вопрос о том, что они должны делать и почему, является предметом споров. Традиционно мужчины идут на работу и зарабатывают деньги, а женщины остаются дома, занимаются домом и присматривают за детьми. Причина, по которой такой распорядок дня рассматривается как традиционная обязанность, заключается в религиозных моральных учениях, обычаях и на культурных ценностях общества. Кейт Шопен рассматривает статус женской фигуры в "Пробуждении". Здесь героиня романа, Эдна Понтелье, изображена как трансформирующийся персонаж, постепенно осознающий диктат общества, представленный её мужем, и институтом семьи. У неё есть дети, о которых нужно заботиться, муж, которого нужно удовлетворять, дом, за которым нужно следить, и патриархальное общество, которому нужно служить. В нижеследующей статье ситуация Эдны рассматривается особенно с точки зрения гендерных ролей, определённых в соответствии с феминизмом Третьей волны.

Ключевые слова: Пробуждение, гендерные роли, феминизм третьей волны, Кейт Шопен, патриархат.

Introduction

Gender roles are discursive. That is, they are shaped in time according to the dictates, points of view, religious beliefs, social and conventional practices, moral codes and other values of a society. They are established by the "powerful" forces of the society (mostly men as the powerful subject), stipulated upon the "weak" side (females in patriarchy), strengthened through practices and rituals, ingrained through the teachings of religions and formal education institutions, and dictated with laws. Both females and males are expected to comply with these roles, and when anyone reacts or defies them, these people are oppressed, punished or forced out of the society as they become a big threat for the established system.

Society structures and configures people's attitudes, emotions, and behaviour (Neculaesei, 2015). There are some mechanisms which the system makes use of as tools of shaping the individual perception and behaviours. Among such tools is literature; "Literature has an important function in the shaping of human emotions and ideas, which makes creates an aesthetic, ideologic and emotional effect through constructing fictional themes, plots and characters." (Aşkaroğlu, 2020: 199). In American literature, Kate Chopin, as one of the most successful female authors of her time, found the way to cope with the difficulties of her life in writing and brought the facts of life to these days in a very clear language. In many of her works, especially in *The Story of an Hour* and *The Awakening*, she is interested in the pressure of society on women. She made a material of anything what she felt because of responsibilities, and made valuable criticism that was

difficult to make in her time, especially as a woman. Even though criticizing the society would not be welcomed and reacted by the society itself, she never gave up.

The Awakening is the story of a woman who lives in a patriarchal society, with full obligations and responsibilities that have prepared her end and destruction. How much the patriarchal system may harm a woman is handled fictionally in Kate Chopin's works. It shows the consequences of repressed emotions, burdensome responsibilities, and self-forgetful compulsions. She was a pioneer of isolated women in this regard, with her works that enabled many people, particularly women, to "wake up" even at that time.

In this article, first the period the novel deals with is explained with a reference to the gender roles and practices. Next, some information is presented about the author Kate Chopin to shed light upon the background of the relationships in the novel. In general, the position of women, represented by the female protagonist Edna Pontellier, is examined with a view to Third Wave Feminism.

1. A Non-conformist in the Victorian Society: Kate Chopin

The 19th century, the Victorian era, is the period that started with Queen Victoria's coming to the throne. This is the period when Britain was at its peak time, especially in terms of literature. Queen Victoria ascended the throne at the age of 18 and is still known as a symbol of glory. She is known as the grandmother of Europe because she cleverly and strategically bonded her 9 grandchildren with the Royal family in other continents. This was a new period after the Romantic revival, and the literature of the period encountered Realism and the age was under the effect of it. Significant writers such as Charles Dickens joined this trend and transferred the harsh face of the period onto papers. It is also known as the period of strict morality, because with Queen Victoria, under the name of "*Victoria Values*", *the facts of hard work, thrift, religious observance, family, awareness of duty, honesty, and responsibility in the sexual matter have been emphasized.*" (Britain for Learners of English, 2018: 27). In other words, the society and traditional approaches turned people into a mono-type person and character. Under the name of morality, society tried to become stable with the rules and prohibitions imposed on individuals, especially through marriage. It was injected into society that in order for a marriage to last long and to be holy, it should be without love, that there should be a hierarchical structure within marriage, that it should know the duties of women and men who act accordingly. Particularly marriage became stereotyped by society in Victorian Era. To get ready for marriage, a woman was set in such a good condition, such as being able to sing, play an instrument and speak a little French or Italian in Victorian period. Norma Basch describes the power and importance of marriage; "*Marriage was the simultaneously private and public contract that defined the obligations between husband and wife, bound their union to the political order, and shaped constructions of gender.*" (1999: 3).

Queen Victoria defined sexuality as the most serious crime during this period and she banned and punished everything related to it. The use of the word 'breast' was banned, animals in the zoos were dressed in clothes, and even the legs of the tables were covered with a cloth so that they would not evoke sexuality. In order to eliminate women's sexual urges, doctors massaged their genitals with the method of pelvic finger massage. These rules and traditions, which influenced the whole of Europe, naturally put the people in a great oppression and forced them to remain silent and under control due to pressure.

Kate Chopin, who lived in this period, was also very impressed by this atmosphere and dedicated herself to writing in order to deal with such feelings. She was very brave because she got a lot of backlash for what she wrote. However, after publishing her first novel, she also received good feedback from critics; "*Critics called it "charming," "fresh,"*"

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and "glowing with intensity." (Springer, 1976: 180). Kate Chopin can be accepted to be one of the luckiest ones of her time as a girl who was raised by a self-sacrificing, brave, visionary, and proud grandmother and mother. It is a good thing that she did not feel male pressure exactly at first. Nevertheless, this did not prevent her from being a victim of family pressure and society. Moreover, she became a victim of marriage for a wealthy fate at the age of 19. Before she knew herself, she got married at a young age because of the necessity of marriage and was stuck in a house. As a rule of the Victorian Age, she started to look after children, do the housework, and please her husband's heart.

Marriage was like imprisonment, both bodily and spiritually, for her. As Drysdale (1876) suggests, marriage is one of the chief instruments in the degradation of women. It perpetuates the old inveterate error, that it is the province of the female sex to depend upon man for support, and to attend merely to household cares, and the rearing of children – a belief which is utterly incompatible with the freedom or dignified development of women on the one hand, and with the economical interests of society on the other. This definition is one of the best summaries of a loveless marriage. Then Chopin started to write with the feeling of freedom she felt after she lost her husband early, and found the solution to the depression attacks by devoting herself to writing. It was not accepted and seen as abnormal for the repressed women to express their thoughts so clearly at that time, but Chopin ignored the dictates and expectations of the society and after the death of her husband at the age of 36, she became aware of herself and took a sigh of relief and continued to express her thoughts.

2. A journey to self realization: Edna's questions

The story begins in the Grand Isle, where Edna Pontellier, a 27-year-old housewife, and her life with her wealthy 40-year-old husband, Leonce, spend their summers together, which is the only activity they have in their mundane and boring marriage. Young Edna and her wealthy older husband seem to be an imitation of Chopin's own life. Kate Chopin was also married at a young age to someone older and wealthy. Furthermore, considering the oppression on the 18th-century woman, it is not difficult to understand how Edna felt and thought. Kate Chopin has also created a young, beautiful, and married character to explain the effects of the period on women. Her husband is also a reflection of the responsible men of the Victorian era. Again, like every summer, something happens that is not ordinary for every summer in this place they go, and it completely changes the family's life. The story begins again on one of her routine days at the cottage. Edna is quite lonely because they only spend time on weekends as a result of her husband's more intense work this summer and her children spend the whole day with their caregivers. Due to the fact that the cottage is on the ground, it becomes more intertwined with the sea and can feel the free spirit a little more. The understanding of service to men taught to the women of that time seemed baseless when there was no man in the middle and caused Edna to fall into void.

Due to the "ideal" roles and figures imposed by society on men and women, both sexes have heavy burdens on their shoulders. A good mother will be a good wife, she will cook, clean, be well-groomed and devote her life only to her family, whereas the man will work, earn for home, take care of his family, and become authoritarian. For this reason, Edna, who does not have the chance to fulfill these imposed responsibilities during the summer vacation, finds a chance to take care of herself. In addition, she begins to open her eyes after learning about freedom of thought and expression from her young and married friend Adele, the dating of the young Robert working with Edna, and the deeper bonds with the sea and swimming. The occurrence of all these events on a summer vacation triggers

Edna to get out of the world she built on lies. Such a formation can be compared with creating a ‘subjective reality’ within the frame of postmodern approach as Aşkaroğlu (2023) declares in his work for examining the relation between self and other in terms of the transition from modern to the postmodern. It is doubtless that Victorian period is also a transition time from classic patterns to modernity and the universal feelings of people have always become a matter of material for literary researches.

3. Edna: a to-be free bird

During the summer time, she has now become completely self-thinking, spending time with her friends and especially Robert, spending most of her day there as if she were living in the sea. This is the beginning of the painful process. Later, it will be understood how “dangerous” it is when women’s repressed emotions begin to emerge. There is some shyness in the life of the woman based on the husband and family, as these things are not welcomed. Again, with the pressure of society, she hesitates about whether to live her own feelings as she wishes. Although initially, their relationship is innocent by simply standing at sea, swimming, and having idle conversations on the shore until the evening, these innocent feelings turn into love when Edna discovers herself. For Edna, who has just discovered her body, even her sexuality, this is an irreversible way.

Victorian period tradition causes the “*objectification of female body*” (Stone, 2020) and Edna is a reflection of this in Chopin’s work. From the male point of view, the woman’s body is objectified. The woman is devalued especially in terms of sexuality, as if she were a robot used to blunt the self, so to speak. As Edna learns to swim during her friendship with Robert, she notices herself in the mirror while looking at the swimsuits she wears. It is the first time that she examines her own body lines in such a detail. She becomes aware of her sexuality. Perhaps she has seen herself as men see herself until then. In other words, her own body does not matter when she is aware that she has no duty other than just satisfying her husband. Her feelings and thoughts are so suppressed that she is even a stranger to herself. It belongs to her husband and he can do *whatever he wants* with her body. To oppose him is disrespectful, it is not right. He can make a child *if he wants*, they have intercourse *if he wants*, Edna is obliged to do *whatever he wants*. When she sees the facts in her life, just like a property, as if the owner was her husband, nothing can remain as before. Their friendship with Robert continues in this way until the end of the summer, when they return home. Meanwhile, she is quite unhappy with her husband, but when she is with Robert she feels alive and lively as in her youth. In other words, the feelings she has suppressed from the beginning come to the surface. The roles of men and women are given sharply in the novel, the best example of which is the conversation Edna has with her husband at midnight, “*Mr. Pontellier returned to his wife with the information that Raoul had a high fever and needed looking after. Then he lit a cigar and went and sat near the open door to smoke it.*” (Chopin, 2011: 12). In these words, it is seen that the motherhood duties are on the shoulders of women. Her husband wakes up Edna to take care of the children while he is awake. He thinks that he is doing her fatherhood only by earning money and waiting for Edna to do her motherhood, which clearly reveals this mentality. However, as Edna opens her eyes, she can no longer act as society expects from women, ignoring her own life and devoting herself to them; on the contrary, she realizes that she is an individual, she turns to herself and looks after herself. This is unacceptable for that society. Thanks to her emotional bond with Robert, she realizes that she is married to a man she does not love and lives according to society’s expectations of her. As she discovers herself, she becomes interested in painting and begins to do it, as she used to do. This is proof that Edna is getting younger, filled with the joy of living as in her old days, returning

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to the way she was before marriage when society looked after her as a mother and a wife. Now she can think, feel, and most importantly fall in love, as before the children and her husband. Considering that all these experiences were in the 1800s, this story becomes much more meaningful. Considering that adultery, falling in love with someone else while married, and speaking about sexuality are experienced in a society where issues such as crime and punishment were deemed worthy, this life story gets deeper into thought. In that society with strict moral values, sexuality is an indestructible taboo, a crime, and a shame: *"The fact that Edna Pontellier is described as falling asleep whilst reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on Self Reliance, is significant and unsettling. Emerson's work, written in 1841, explains the need for individuals to stand up for what they believe in, regardless of public opinion, and makes it clear that: To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, - that is genius".* (Rennemo, 2015: 549). This shows us that Edna is preparing herself consciously or unconsciously for this awakening. Edna, one of the glorious women who realized her existence, enjoyed it until the end of summer. Being a woman who has a say and control over her own body and identity, without belonging to someone, makes her forever no longer a woman who doesn't question and believes in a lie. At the end of the summer, when she is now close to going to their home, that is, New Orleans, Robert goes to Mexico, saying that he cannot do with a married woman, with a woman someone else has and leaves Edna. Robert is so afraid of public pressure that he even ventures to abandon his love. This is a very good example of the reaction and influence of society, even if he were a man in that period.

4. Non-conformism and Edna

Nothing is the same when they return to New Orleans because Edna has returned there as a very different and new woman. She no longer accepts the responsibilities imposed, does not identify with the mother role, does not embrace her home, and devotes time only to herself and to her painting. She mostly spends time with her friends and enjoys her life. Even though Adele is a close friend, she tries to return Edna to her old life as Adele is a woman who is completely suppressed, causing her to lose her identity. *"Adele, pressing her cheek, whispered in an exhausted voice: "Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!"* (Chopin, 2011: 185). Realizing the changes, Edna and her husband also consult a doctor who is a family friend. He cannot make sense because it shows how much women do not even allow them to open their eyes and realize their selves and enjoy their valuable time. *"The years that are gone seem like dreams—if one might go on sleeping and dreaming—but to wake up and find—oh! well! Perhaps it is better to wake up, after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life."* (Chopin, 2011: 188). Although the doctor realizes that the result of a relationship has changed, he advises her husband to leave Edna alone. Taking this into account, Leonce goes on a long business trip and their grandmother, who thinks that their mother is not looking after them, takes the children and leaves Edna alone at home. This is now the part where Edna's awakening process is completed because Edna realizes how comfortable and happy she is in the absence of her husband and children. Finding peace without them, Edna makes a radical decision to keep a small house for herself and leaves the house in which she has already been in only physically. She loves her children very much, but as she mentioned, she cannot give up herself: *"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."* (Chopin, 2011: 54). She is brave enough not to even care about the reaction she would see by the society that made it her duty to restrict people, saying that motherhood is the most sacred duty of women. She makes her living by selling the paintings. And now she completely leaves

everything behind and starts living for herself. Whether speaking from the West or from the East, all feminists are united in the conviction that there is something wrong with women's situation that needs to be rectified (Labayen, 1998). So the awakening of Edna in Kate Chopin's work is completely a matter of feminist reading for any researcher who is to analyse women's getting the capability of self-actualising during the marriage time.

Edna begins to live with Arobin, who represents the self-satisfaction situation men do to women without an emotional bond. She has an artificial relationship because she only feels sexual interest in Arobin without feeling love. Edna, who lives only for herself now, feels a little uneasy, but she continues, considering that men do not have any discomfort from this situation until she coincidentally meets the man who made her awakening. Even if it looks as a positive development at first, that period will collapse her life order later. The end of the couple, whose love and passion have rekindled, is not different from the previous one. It has been just a repetition of negative experiences as community pressure and fear of oppression can easily turn any joy of life into a traumatic swirl. One day, when they sit down and talk, Robert says that he feels bad because she belongs to someone else and that he cannot do this, and these iconic sentences come out of Edna's mouth; *"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."* (Chopin, 2011: 182). The promise she made to herself on the way to her little house, which she called the pigeon-house, shows how strong Edna is now: She will never belong to anyone but herself again. Edna is lucky to realize that she is seen as an asset by her husband, resisting her claiming and ruling as she wishes. Later, Edna leaves after her friend Adele falls ill, telling Robert to wait, and that day is the day Edna is destroyed because when she arrives, she finds the note stating that he left her. Robert states that he is afraid of the pressure of society, that his love is not greater than the reactions he will receive, he does not want Edna to be stigmatized, and that he leaves because he wants her to live a comfortable life. Because of this corrupted society, these people, who have one life, cannot live as they wish as a result of degenerated culture and traditions. Women can justifiably awaken that warrior within and let her do the job that nature gave her (Ellen, 1998). But as long as women are not able to get rid of degenerated society's bond, they cannot get a complete independence.

After reading the note by Robert, Edna goes through everything she lived until the morning; her children, her husband, Robert, those years she lived blindfold, and everything. Everything seems extremely bad in her eyes at once. The selfishness, the disappointment, and emptiness she experienced when Robert left her results in her inability to find a reason to live. She realizes that there is not even one thing she wants or expects in life and finds the solution to go to the sea where everything started.

The sea is immense, full of fear and mystery, but quiet, peaceful, relaxing, and far from everyone. This long journey started with her learning to swim, discovering herself, realizing, and learning. She comes to the conclusion that it is to go without belonging to anyone. It is the first time that she disobeys society in front of their eyes. Later, she realizes that she wants nothing more than to swim naked, without thinking about the consequences. For Edna, a sea is a place where she takes refuge in order to escape from this patriarchal order and its impositions, and as she takes refuge, the more she looks at the society from the outside, the stronger the place where she becomes herself.

Chopin used a lot of symbolism in this work, but the most important symbol is undoubtedly the sea. The sea symbolizes return, rebirth, cleansing. For Edna, a sea is a place where she finds peace of mind and the opportunity to listen to herself, even when she says that the water softly wraps her body, comparing it to her mother's womb. And this

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adventure, which started in the mother's womb, ends in her mother's womb. In a way, she wants it to belong to no human being, including her children, but to belong only to herself, she swims away from this crowded and empty noise and leaves herself to this sea, which is the beginning of everything and writes its end in the same place. It is a clear fact that the oppressive culture, which is called this society dominated by men, destroyed not only the lives of Edna but also the lives of many women. Any insurrection or rejection of women (or anger of women in other words), can easily be manipulated by a patriarchal genesis. Kylie Cheung (2020) states that women are taught early about the consequences of expressions of anger. They are called crazy or too emotional to be trusted, or simply dismissed all together. They don't get another chance. The manner in which they conduct ourselves is often the deciding factor in whether they have any prayer of a chance to be heard or believed.

Conclusion

With Edna, Chopin has revealed the real inner worlds of maybe herself, maybe the women of the period around her, for centuries. However, the fact that there are women like Edna even in this century and the male mentality still remaining at that time is also undeniable. In other words, it is the proof that there is still not a full development in the name of civilization. This 'personal is political' situation, which is advocated and emphasized by 1st and 2nd wave feminists, in particular, becomes concrete with Edna. They argue that women are not only mothers and wives, but also human beings and do not have to devote their lives to their home, they have the right to reject their spouse, not want to have sexual intercourse, and not want to become pregnant. In a society where women are not treated as human beings, they are devalued as if they are a robot and their only responsibility is their home, women cannot be expected to be happy. Edna understands better how small she is at sea and her insignificant her place is in the universe, and she wants to escape by associating it with society.

At a time when even books on other subjects written by women were published under fake and male names, Chopin writing on a subject that would create such a sensational effect and expressing such a deep and reactive subject with a clear word was not a move that would be expected at that time. The main reason for this courage is that she did not grow up in a patriarchal family and her grandmother, who was a role model. Furthermore, Chopin's sensitivity on the independence of women can be seen in her other works, too. As an example, her famous short story 'The Story of an Hour' also stirs the wish of freedom in women.

Her dedication to writing where she "should" have been destroyed after her husband's death is also a signal that Edna is Chopin. With this work, in which society criticizes and questions the roles of motherhood, housewife, and marriage, which society assigns to women, she has given hope and opened new horizons for many women. The fact that her writings are still the same as today is proof that Chopin's writing is far ahead of her time. Edna's story is a very effective work encouraging women by Kate Chopin. Any woman who wants to see the seeking of independence can read *The Awakening* because Edna realizes that herself. Having no freedom and even no say over herself, Edna literally awakens from her powdery pink dreams, even if the end is painful.

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