

THE WOMEN WHO DEFY: EXPLORING THE NEW WOMAN IN CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

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Abstract:

"I would give up the unessential; I would give my money; I would give my life for my children; but I would never give up myself," utters Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. This statement by Edna reflects Chopin's explorations of New Woman who dare to flout the expectations of the world, but who also falter in their attempts to embody autonomy fully. This research looks into how Chopin writes about characters such as Edna who represents the notion of a new woman blooming in the 19th century. As women began to establish their voices this novel was a subtle satirical attack on the restrictions imposed against them. Using a feminist lens, this research will take a glance back to a leading point in literary and social history to again illuminate the struggles for identity and autonomy in terms of traditional gender roles.

Key Words: New woman, autonomy, feminist, literary history, social history, identity, gender roles

INTRODUCTION:

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is considered one of the most controversial pieces of literature published during the late 19th century, primarily for its portrayal of female autonomy and desire. Elaine Showalter writes "The Awakening in its frank, unapologetic treatment of the subjects of its time that it aroused, on its publication in 1899, a storm of controversy violent enough to end its author's young career. The fact that we have the book at all is the most convincing tribute to its enduring, un-suppressible power (Elaine Showalter, 1991).

Throughout history, and particularly during the Victorian era women had little opportunities beyond those of hearth and home. The New Woman was a response to these limiting roles of wife and mother. New Woman was "intelligent, educated, emancipated independent and self-supporting" (Sally Ledger 8).

The phrase "New Woman" was invented by the author Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in the *North American Review* in March 1894. It was Henry James who developed the phrase new woman when he used it to describe American emigrants living in Europe. So, one can say that the roots of new women can be found in the organized movement of feminists of the 19th century who raised women's issues in public debates, in print media and during election rallies.

In Chopin's *The Awakening* Edna Pontellier embodies the New Woman by defying societal expectations but in the end, she falters to attain freedom. This research explores her conflict with traditional gender roles and points out the complexities of women's autonomy. The significance of the study lies in the exploration of the struggles of women for identity and autonomy in terms of traditional gender roles.

Objectives of the research:

- a) To explore how Edna Pontellier represents the new woman.
- b) To assess the transitional nature of Edna Pontellier's character.
- c) To look at how the novel critiques traditional gender roles and the expectations society places on women

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) and *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985) explore the intersection of mental illness and gender in literature, framing women's roles within societal constraints. Sally Ledger's *The New Woman* (1997) shows the formative process of this "New Woman" figure in late 19th-century fiction this resonates with the character of Edna Pontellier. Donald Ringe's analysis of *The Awakening* (1972) and Ann Heilmann's essay (2008) further examine Edna's rejection of traditional roles, positioning her as part of the New Woman movement.

Scholars like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sandra Gilbert have similarly explored female autonomy and liberation themes in their works.

This research focuses on how Edna's character exemplifies the transitional phase of the New Woman, drawing upon feminist theory and New Woman fiction to analyse her role in the evolving discourse on female autonomy.

The Concept of New Woman:

Elaine Showalter argued that toward the end of the 19th century, women started shifting from the margins to the centre of culture, opposing the strong institution of norms and narrowly defined social roles within their gender. In trying to achieve further educational access, job opportunities, property rights, and suffrage, they inevitably

required legal reforms in marriage and divorce, to be granted independence and security. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization came the empowerment of women towards more active participation in public life, and all these in turn modified the approach of culture to gender. In this era, the "New Woman" appeared: a more informed, independent, nay, worldly figure as opposed to traditional, home-based expectations. As Sally Ledger states new woman was "intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting" (Sally Ledger). Such a woman represented a very strong turning tide toward female self-determination.

Directly opposing all conservative Victorian ideals of femininity, the movement introduced the "New Woman." Allen states that through this movement women could escape the "prison" built around them and the "pedestal" defined by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, referring to the life of a free woman from social bounds (Allen). Even though England saw marriage and motherhood as something to be despised about women, Morgan notes that the low consideration of women socially in society made the New Woman nearly inevitable (Morgan).

This term, "New Woman," was first coined by Sarah Grand and later Henry James used it as a way of describing women as intelligent, independent, and self-sufficient, then breaking away from the standard conventional ideal (Stevens). In addition to social, political, and economic changes, legislative reforms like the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 empowered this movement further. As Lyn Pykett says, New Woman novels were confronted with the so-called "Woman Question," which it answered in its pages: questions such as domestic violence, celibacy, and the less prestigious status of women (Lyn Pykett). All these issues reflected the societal changes of the Victorian era.

New Woman characters in literature broke all taboos and words for Victorian purity and domesticity. They were complex women who were freed to their elements and were released to freedom and autonomy. Eliot's quiet way of questioning Victorian prudence perhaps puts across his work as a subtle revolt against Victorian norms. Of course, Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Lady Chatterley's *Lover* depict the passionate woman, an assertive woman, with and through which the New Woman left an indelible mark on literature and society.

Edna Pontellier: A Character Analysis

The character of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* represents an exploration of personal freedom, societal constraint, and the difficulties of self-discovery. Almost from the beginning, her characterisation is intertwined with the themes of freedom and bondage, often reflected through symbolic and narrative devices.

Edna's journey begins as the narrator positions her first and foremost in terms of to whom she is connected, namely her husband, Mr. Pontellier. In the early pages of the text, she is introduced not by name but as "his wife" or "Mrs Pontellier," thereby situating her within the societal context as an extension of her husband. This positioning captures her lack of independence.

The parrot's cry at the beginning is a metaphor for Edna's state of being. Its cry, "Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That's all right!" (Chopin 1), meaning "Go Away! Go Away! For Heaven's sake!", is symbolic of Edna's inner turmoil: a call to freedom along with the assurance of normalcy. As with the caged bird, Edna functions within the bounds of societal expectations but can find no escape; she cannot even verbalise her feelings.

Edna's emotional awakening begins in the moments of unconscious rebellions against societal expectations. For instance, after a minor disagreement with her husband, Edna cries but cannot verbalise why: "She could not have told why she was crying" (Chopin 7). This moment reflects her stifled emotions and the vague, unfamiliar oppression that she feels but cannot yet understand.

Her interactions with Robert Lebrun further ignite her awakening. When she declines an invitation to the beach only to later acquiesce, the narrator notes her contradictory impulses: "Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined" (Chopin 14). This unsureness between desires showcases her struggle against ingrained obedience and the awakening of her individuality.

The recurring imagery of the sea is pivotal to her journey to transformation. Described as "seductive, never ceasing, whispering... inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude" (Chopin 15), the sea represents freedom and self-awareness. The sensuous embrace of the sea mirrors Edna's growing awareness of her desires and her attempt to reconcile them with her reality.

As Edna's level of self-awareness deepens, she starts rejecting societal expectations stamped on her. She distances herself from her husband and children, realizing that her duties towards them do not determine her being. Her statement, "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 62), expresses her belief in individual autonomy against the will of society.

Her relationship with Alcée Arobin further indicates her defiance. Contrasted to earlier relationships, this affair represents her assertion of the freedom to be herself in disregard for the morals imposed upon society.

Edna's final decision to dive into the sea is symbolic and subjective. It can be regarded as the last sentence of her freedom, unwillingness to return to life in conformity. The repetition of the previous description of the sea as "enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 136) draws an effective parallel with her first awakening. This act has, therefore been interpreted in various ways by critics either as a mythic return to nature, a political act of resistance, or an escape into personal liberation.

- **Edna Pontellier as a New Woman:**

While Edna embodies several qualities of the New Woman, her struggle to reconcile her desires with societal expectations creates an ambiguity about her full realization of this ideal.

One of the defining features of the New Woman is her pursuit of independence, and Edna delivers this through her detachment from society and family ties. When she says, "I would give my money, I would give my life for

my children, but I wouldn't give myself," she underlines her belief in the inviolability of personal identity (Chopin 62). This defiance of the traditional role of women as self-sacrificing mothers highlights her alignment with New Woman ideals.

Edna's relations with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin point to her reaction to conventional morality imposed upon women. An affair with Arobin, in particular, is a statement of sexual independence from the ideal of chastity and female fidelity in wedlock. This aligns her with the New Woman of liberation from sexual repression.

After her husband and children leave Edna moves into a rental house which she calls the pigeon house. Edna's decision to move into the "pigeon house" is a symbolic step towards independence. By creating a separate space for herself and pursuing painting as both a passion and a potential livelihood, she starts selling her paintings to earn money. Edna demonstrates her desire to break free from her reliance on her husband and societal expectations. Her pursuit of art also reflects her search for self-expression, a characteristic of the New Woman's intellectual and creative aspirations.

CONCLUSION:

As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, literary heroines who rebel against patriarchal norms often serve as powerful symbols of female autonomy. As stated by Elaine Showalter and Ann Heilmann, The New Woman is described as having a desire for independence, forsaking traditional life roles, and focusing on individual freedom. These characteristics form the core of the analysis of Edna Pontellier's transformation in the novel. Edna's journey, with its moments of resistance, vulnerability, and self-realization, firmly places her in the tradition of the New Woman, a figure embodying feminist aspiration at the turn of the century.

According to Donald Ringe's romantic interpretation of *The Awakening* and Sally Ledger's exploration of the New Woman, Edna exhibits many of these traits through her rebellion against societal expectations and her pursuit of individuality. Yet, Edna Pontellier diverges from the New Woman archetype in several critical ways, despite embodying its core traits like rejecting traditional roles and seeking personal freedom. Her awakening is incomplete, marked by impulsive emotions and a lack of self-awareness, such as her unexplained crying episodes. Her emotional dependency on men, evident in her infatuation with Robert and her affair with Arobin, further distances her from the self-sufficient New Woman ideal. The novel's ambiguous ending of her swim into the sea complicates her portrayal, leaving readers uncertain whether it symbolizes liberation or resignation. Thus, Edna embodies only certain aspects of the New Woman while failing to achieve others fully.

This research, therefore, demonstrates that Edna's character is an epitome of the transitional phase of the New Woman movement. Her struggle is a reflection of the complexities and limitations that women faced at the time, not merely a transition between traditional expectations and modern autonomy. Drawing on the conclusions of feminist theory and New Woman fiction, it can be concluded that Edna Pontellier is not a fully realized New Woman nor a fully achieved figure, but rather an intriguing figure in the process of becoming one, depicting the evolving character of female autonomy during the century.

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