

# The Feminist Approach Adjoining Edna Pontellier's Freedom in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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## Abstract

This paper is a feminist interpretation of Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, in which the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, a woman, portrays the struggle of women in society to construct their own identity, to have their freedom, and understand their life choices. The purpose of this paper is to present Edna's approach to freedom through the lens of feminism. A feminist approach was used for the text's critical evaluation. For this study, various works of literature related to novel and feminist approaches were gathered from Jstor and Research Gate and cited in this paper using MLA literature rules.

**Keywords:** suicide, oppression, identity, freedom, struggle

## 1. Introduction

*The Awakening*, a novel by Kate Chopin, published in 1899, is centred on the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, a woman trying to find independence and forge her own identity in a harsh and dominated society by men. In addition, the novel shows the shortcomings of a woman as she struggles with the harsh and painful limitations placed on her by a society that men dominate. However, Edna's suicide serves as a statement of defiance against the norms and beliefs of the patriarchal society that limit women's socioeconomic freedom. As feminist literature, this novel revolves around the context of gender inequality and patriarchal pressures imposed on females, which pose significant obstacles to females' pursuit of freedom and individual identity. Even the most privileged women in society cannot escape from this chain of society. Like Edna, despite being the wife of the wealthiest person in town and being able to buy anything she desires with her husband's money, still has to struggle for her freedom, ultimately meeting a tragic ending. Edna, in her journey to the discovery of "self," is brought to a dilemma in which the only way she can secure her "self-hood, which she discovered in the symbolic act of swimming, is through her refusal to accept any of the roles available. To refuse her: wife, mother, or lover" (Elz, 19). The roles she refuses are the ones that are made compulsory for women by society in order to be accepted as social beings. The novel can also be studied as "growing out of an existential confrontation between the heroine and some external, repressive force" (Wolff, 449).

*The Awakening* presents the theme of the female's freedom in connection to Edna's suicide, which has also been interpreted as the "inescapability of fate as a woman who is a "male-defined creature who has identified only with the male" (Vukoicic, 2017). Nevertheless, it is not clearly stated that Edna dies, which can be taken as the metaphorical message for the society that Edna has broken through the restrictions of patriarchal society and has succeeded in creating her own identity as an individual rather than a "mother," "wife," and "lover." Edna's conflict with society and her suicide can be taken as her getting freedom from societal entrapment. The novel can be further explored by using feminist theories as it is about females suffering and struggling to establish

themselves as separate individual, encouraging and supporting women to get an individual identity, financial independence, and sexual liberty.

## 2. Methods

Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, through Edna's awakening, presents the feminist view where a woman struggles against society to establish herself as an individual being. Therefore, this paper has presented the novel from the perspective of feminism. Feminism is a theory that seeks women's equality, freedom, and justice in every single phase of life. In his article, "Feminism: An Overview", Javed Ahmed Raina defines feminism as "a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome" (Raina, 3372). Dependence syndrome in a female means her submissiveness and sense of dependency towards a male, whether it is her husband, father, or son. Feminism argues that a woman must explain her future goals and present herself. However, Edna proves her right to equality by becoming whom she wants to be without hesitation or regret.

Many critics have analyzed this novel from a feminist perspective. One critic states, "Many young women reject the self-sacrificial ideal of true womanhood in favour of the values of personal freedom and fulfilment" (Rooks, 123). The self-sacrificial ideal of true womanhood is about giving up one's identity as an individual and being a wife and a mother, roles assigned to her by the society where there is no space for her freedom. Edna in *The Awakening* denies sacrificing herself for her children, although she is willing to give up all her possessions and money. She is inclined to give her life for her children but denies keeping her children before her "self-identity". Thus, Edna denies the idea of self-sacrifice and rejects true womanhood, which is nothing but a patriarchal concept that is developed to establish the male as superior while the female is second to men.

The given two theories of Raina's "Feminism: An Overview" and Rook's "Reconceiving the Terrible Mother: Female Sexuality and Maternal Archetypes" will be the significant theoretical basis for the feminist approach of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. From which the entire novel will be critically evaluated with the support of textual evidence.

## 3. Discussion

The significance of Edna's awakening and her view of freedom has been the subject of much debate by critics, and it is divided into two groups. First, a group of critics, argues that "Edna's dream of being away from her husband is not a dream of real ownership but a dream of satisfying the repressed desire in her unconsciousness" (Wu, 284). The second group of critics presents "Edna's growing sense of power and control as signs of progress toward a new self-definition" (Stone, 24). The point of the second group of critics seems more reliable than the first, as it is the choice of a woman with whom she wants to be and with whom she does not; it is her right of freedom. Whatever society constructs as "right" and "wrong" is not a universal fact but rather the rules created by patriarchal society.

Edna states, "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin, 115), which shows the initial stage of her awakening. She intends to do something that has never been done by any woman before. It shows that Edna wants to break free from her role as a woman. This is the beginning of Edna's awareness of "being caged by patriarchal restraints, going through the various stages of self-reinvention, and finally escapes from a society that sought to confine her" (Clark, 335).

Edna's statement, "I wonder if any night on earth will again be like this one. It is like a night in a dream. The people around me are like some uncanny, half-human beings" (Chopin, 121). The statement by Edna about her date with Robert illustrates her realization of self. Edna finds freedom in her romantic partner, Robert Lebrun. Edna sees Robert as an image of freedom, which causes her to rebel against her role in society. The pleasure and beautiful scene in front of her eyes are like dreams, and she soon realizes that as a married woman, she is not her entire being but rather the better half of her husband. This presents "The struggle is for the woman to free herself from being an object or possession defined in her functions, or owned by others" (Wolff, 449).

With Edna's realization of self and to be free from an object leads her to "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" (Chopin, 204). The ring symbolized her relationship with her husband and family, from which she freed herself by untying her knot with Leonce, her husband. Removing the ring given to her in marriage to Leonce was like pulling off the label put on an object claiming ownership. She no longer intends to have a man and wants her freedom as an individual being.

Edna feels "The streets, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic" (Chopin, 207) after awakening to self-realization. It shows her indifference towards the things around her. Those things remind her of patriarchal norms and values. It is imposed on women who restrict the freedom from which she wants to break free. All appears to her as a villain on her journey to discover her "self."

Edna feels sophisticated in her husband's house, which gives her a sense of inferiority as Leonce holds the aristocratic perception. The reform, "Edna hastened her preparation for quitting her home on Es-planned street and moving around the little house on the block" (Chopin, 319). Edna leaves her husband's house and moves to her own house. "Pigeon House" is one of Edna's most inspiring ways to demonstrate her independence; she manages to buy a house for herself. Sway, Chopin puts Edna in the self-dependency world where she takes charge and does not depend on any man.

Further, two birds in Chopin's novel: the parrot and the mocking bird, are the metaphor for society's restrictions on women and their caging under patriarchal norms. Elizabeth's journal mentioned the "use of birds to represent women's entrapment in marriage and society" (Elz, 20). Like birds are caged; even women are restricted by an invisible wall placed by society on women.

Edna's recognition of self and rejection of true womanhood is further elaborated when she rejects going to her sister's wedding and states, "a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth" (Chopin, 253). Marriage has always been taken as one of the crucial things in life, but Edna states that marriage is the most painful thing in the world. It shows that for women, marriage is just a shifting of roles, from daughter to wife, but still having men in a superior position. Marriage jeopardizes a woman's identity as it is taken as a completion of her life which she has to live and endure throughout her life.

Around the novel's end, Edna states, "She had said over and over to herself: Today it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be someone else. It makes no difference," (Chopin, 424). The phrase shows that all men are the same with the same thoughts and wants female to fulfil their needs. For instance, Edna was a social possession for her husband, and to Arobin, she was just a sexual object. It shows that females are all objects in male hands, so it makes no difference to females. Edna realizes that, in the end, all men are the same, and she cannot change the whole society by herself.

Edna stated, "She would give up the unessential, but she will never sacrifice herself for her children. It is a feeling of self that Edna has aroused" (Chopin, 424). Edna feels restricted in her mother's role and pursuit of freedom. Edna combats the stereotype of being a "mother-woman". Edna breaks the social norms that demand a woman in this society to take care of children and be submissive to her husband. By the novel's end, Edna realizes her awakening and denial of her gender role is not well received by society, leaving her in a dilemma, "to be, or not to be" like Hamlet, to which she responds by committing suicide. His suicide is also a denial of being a part of a society that always expects a woman to be more concerned with "other" than "self."

#### 4. Conclusion

Edna struggled tirelessly throughout the story to get her freedom without thinking of the consequences. At first, Edna struggles against her role as a "mother" and "wife." She attempts to search for her identity as an individual being. In which she finds success as an individual, as we can see from her transformation. The is, at the beginning of the novel, she is a "mother" and "wife", but after her awakening and realization of "self", she starts to earn for herself, buys her own house named "Pigeon House," roams around the street like a free bird, and she also reclaims her, "sexual freedom" presented by her extramarital affair with Alcee Arobin. He is a famous womanizer in the town. However, she fails to reclaim her identity as "self successfully", and this realization leads her to commit suicide in the end. Edna's suicide is a victorious act. By committing suicide, Edna is finally freeing herself from social restraints and control. His suicide is an act of freedom. Therefore, Edna is the ultimate feminist, and this text presents the struggle of a woman to create her own identity, her attempt, and ultimately leading to socioeconomic freedom.

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