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## STIFLING OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN THE NOVEL "THE AWAKENING"

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**Abstract:** Women from the olden days have been perceived as an oppressed class and their lives have been circumscribed by male domination. The relationship between a man and a woman has been one of the dominance and subordination and the "birthright priority" of men ruling women has become institutionalized in our social order (Millett 33). The masculine birthright of superordination has pervaded into culture, literature, arts, humanities, education, law, folklore, anthropology and all other realms of life. Kate Chopin was one of the first American women writers to think of sexual liberation for women. She daringly gave an unabashed treatment of feminine sexuality, which was hitherto dealt with apparently and that too superficially.

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Patriarchy rules the female race with its male oriented principles that subjugate women socially, economically and politically. This oppressive power-structured system-patriarchy-has become the most pervasive ideology of our culture and it dictates the fate of women. Adrienne Rich describes patriarchy as follows: Patriarchy is the power of fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or thought ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (57) Women too are made to accept the patriarchal vision of the feminine as their own. "Women" says the Beauvoir, "still dream through the dreams of men" (74). Culture is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values. Women look through the society through the logocentric, male-oriented version of man, that has been accepted as the cosmopolitan and democratic view of mankind. According to arguments laid by patriarchy, the subjection of women has stemmed from the supposed biological inferiority of women which is conveniently termed as biological essentialism. Simone de Beauvoir challenges this with her bold statement "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). What makes a woman to be inferior to man is not her biological make up, but the socializing process of culture which influences a woman or rather forces a woman to become subordinate to man. "It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account..." (Beauvoir 42). Women are not inferior by nature, but are interiorized by culture. They are acculturated into any inferiority. A woman hence becomes a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a socially feminized "site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires get enacted" (Ruthven 45). Culture only marks the difference in beginning a man or woman

Catherine all is of the same view: What it means to be a man or a woman is not given at birth, but is constructed in culture, constructed through difference. (13) Beauvoir points out that societies are organized on the assumption that man is self and woman Other, and that its consequences are always deleterious to women. The reason is that the self treats the Other as either a supplement or a threat. K. K. Ruthven describes how a woman is victimized by male supremacy: The "supplementary" woman may find herself set on a pedestal as the object of chivalric attention; 'worshiped', in return for which she is expected to surrender her autonomy and see it as her distending to serve the man's interest (as mistress, muse, wife power-behind-the throne). If however, the Other cannot be cajoled into supplementary she is credited with the same status...and becomes the victims of Self. (42) Another reason for the secondary position of a woman in the family is her economic dependence. In the family, the husband owns both the person and the service of the wife. The husband becomes the "legal keeper" and the wife becomes "the legal property" of the husband. The wife expected to be "the angel in the house", as Virginia Woolf terms her. She describes in her essay "professions for Women" thus: She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat on it-in short she was so continued that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all she was pure. Her purity was supported to be her chief beauty-her bushes, her great grace. (3) In a male oriented culture, marriage purely a business contract-a man living security for a woman and a woman being a mate to man. In the social set up constructed by patriarchy, man - woman relationship turns to be of dominance- subservience, as that of a master and servant, where the master is undoubtedly the man Engels in *The Origin of the Family* he Private

property and the state (1884) observes: The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife... Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat. (Quoted in Greer; *The Female Eunuch*, 233). Throughout history, women have been confined to the level of an animal life, in providing a sexual outlet for man and in exercising the animal function of reproduction and caring for the young. A woman is not expected to please herself through her womanliness in any other sphere other than marriage and motherhood. She is not permitted her sexual needs or desires and is not allowed to cater to her carnal instincts. Woman is destined only to dedicate her sexuality for satisfying man and so she is not encouraged to appease her bodily appetites. Through this, the sexuality of a woman is made more as a punishment for her, than as a pleasure. For a woman, apart from, maternity, patriarchy does not encourage her to derive pleasure in sex and limits her to an existence of menial labour and domestic service. A woman should only be toy in the hands of a man, following his instructions and expectations in all her activities. The patriarchal system robs woman of her will. She is made to obey man and comply with his sexual needs irrespective of her own wishes. Under the demands of patriarchy and the exploitative sexuality that it had institute, sexual activity implies submitting to male will. Woman has been defined primarily as sexual object –either one of lust or one of chastity. Qualities like purity and chastity are extolled only to harness woman to the commands of man and make her live in abject obedience to his authority. Subjected to patriarchal pressure into being an object, the self of the woman gets oppressed by the norms and the taboos of the society. Passivity is a trait always attributed to woman in all their activities, including sexual expression. A woman is expected to be timid and passive in her approach and her dealings with men. Any hint of a woman being agile is considered “unfeminine” and any hint of a woman being interested in sexual activities is condemned as “immoral”. Any average woman preoccupied al her life with the sole interest of pleasing a man soon gets exhausted. The sensitive self of a woman often clamours for her rights politically, socially and culturally, evaluating how much her has been trapped and victimized by patriarchy. Jacqueline Rose expresses the agitation that takes place in the self of account of the secondary position dictated to it by patriarchy. That the woman should be inscribed in an order of exchange, of which she is the object, is what makes for the fundamentally conflictual, and... insoluble character of her position. The symbolic order literally submits her, it transcends her... There is for her submitting insurmountable, something

unacceptable, in the fact of being placed as an object in a symbolic order to which at the same time, she is subjected just under man. (67). The self of a woman gets rebellious when paternalistic ethics imperatively demand her to use her sexuality only for serving man. Defiance leads a woman to indulge in erotic through which she can be her self. Beauvoir explains: Woman is an existent who is called upon to make herself object, as object she has an aggressive element in her sexuality which is not satisfied by the male body; hence the conflicts that her eroticism must somehow overcome... (453). Kate Chopin was one of the first American women writers to think of sexual liberation for women. She daringly gave an unabashed treatment of feminine sexuality, which was hitherto dealt with apparently and that too superficially. Per Seyersted in introduction to his collection of the works of Kate Chopin remarks: She was the first women writer in America to accept sex with its profound repercussions as a legitimate subject for serious fiction. (32) In Kate Chopin’s times, women writers were expected to adhere in their writing to the same standards of feminine propriety that they were required to observe in their personal conduct. In 1854, when Fanny Fern published her autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall*, she was condemned for portraying her father and brother disrespectfully and satirically. Similarly, Kate Chopin met with hostile reaction when *The Awakening* was published for decades later. The charge was on her protagonist Edna Pontellier, who over looked her domestic duties and enjoyed sensual fulfillment outside marriage. A woman writer turning to art for financial assistance was normal, but to work on “unchaste themes” was totally unacceptable. Despite the caution of editors and critics to tone down her subjects, she created protagonists who were distinctly strong willed and committed to self realization. Women have always been oppressed some way or another, and never seem to be understood. In the novel *The Awakening*, the males, such as Robert, Edna’s father, Edna’s husband, and Alcee Arobin, all try to control Edna, but do not realize that Edna wants to be a strong, independent woman. Arobin tries to manipulate Edna into thinking that she needs him. Robert wants Edna to be his wife, but he does not understand her. Edna’s father and husband think that she should be a proper lady, and try forcing her to be someone that she is not. All Edna wants is freedom, but she cannot get it with all these men in her life trying to control her. In *The Awakening*, Edna wants freedom, but due to the oppression from all of the male characters in her life, she is unable to find it. *The Awakening* has been celebrated as a great subversive novel- “a novel belonging to the tradition of transgressive narratives” (Yaeger 271). In the easy

“A Language Which Nobody Understood - Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*”, Patricia S. Yaeger discusses, “Chopin’s representation of a language Edna seeks but does not possess, in her representation of a language which nobody understood” (271). *The Awakening* as viewed by Yaeger “forces to discover a universe that is anomalous, a synchronic, are confusing”, a world “outrageously unthinkable” (272). In the novel, the Parrot’s language is idiomatic and highly charged. At the same time, it seems to be an “empty speech” – “a language which nobody understood” (271). The Parrot’s language represents an alternative language for women that are often unrecognized and neglected by the patriarchal society. Bird image is a common image that refers to pathos. The bird is a victim figure and Ellen Moers in “Literary Women” (Eagleton 210) points out that the caged bird metaphor is a recurrent image indicating the helplessness of women. Edna too lives a restricted life initially and she clamours to become a bird that soars high. Mademoiselle Reisz feels her shoulders to see if she is strong enough to break the inhibitions and fly high. Edna through her death frees herself from the cage of social conventions and acquires the identity that she is in quest of. The bird in the novel is also closely associated with solitude and remoteness. When Edna listen to the music which she names “solitude,” and image of a bird flying away from the naked, resigned man on the beach is evoked in her. In the novel, the mother women are said to flutter about with extended angel wings to protect to their brood. When Edna moves to a “pigeon house”, Chopin’s suggest that this is to be a place of cooing love. While the image of a bird brings the atmosphere of melancholy and helplessness. It is the company of the sea that is intoxicating and exhilarating to her. The sea is a dominant symbol that can be variously interpreted to mean a world of adventure, of opportunity, of sexual pleasure, of danger, loneliness and death. In the novel, Chopin describes The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (32) Edana’s awakening to her intellectual and spiritual possibilities becomes synonymous with her ability to swim. She becomes darling and reckless and wants to swim far into the sea “ where no woman has swum before” (46). The swimming scene gives substances to metaphocal suggestions. I is the turning point which offers a sudden access to Edna’s potentialities and an expanded vision of her situation. Edna’s experience of the water is passionately sensuous: “ A feeling of

exultation overtook her , as if some power o significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul”(46). As the sight of the sea awakens the sensuous self of Edna, the vast stretch of the water subtly rekindles the yearning in her for sensuous fulfillment and liberation. The sea revives her from the deadening life she has been leading. It is the sea is not the ideal over that promises her the joy of swimming. It is the ultimate end. Edna swims to where no one has ventured so far, feels her desire for Robert and senses her hatred for all traditional responsibilities of a wife and mother. As Chopin says, “ she was seeking herself and finding herself”(58). Edna becomes more assertive after the awakening of her sexuality and rebels against the instinct or possessiveness in Leonce over her. Edna Pontellier makes no attempt to suppress her sexual desires nor does she hesitate to throw off her traditional duties towards her family. She realizes that she cannot lead a lifeless existence buy being an inessential adjunct to a man, as an object over which he rules. She craves to be an independent subject to dictate her own destiny. She asserts: I would give up the inessential. I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself. (67).

From her very early days, Edna has apprehended a dual life- the outward existence which conforms and the inward life which questions. Edna Pontellier is a power woman with an emancipated self Fulfillment of her sexuality becomes her persistent claim and she does not conform to the vegetable existence advocated by the man- made society. She sets out of the “dual life” to which she has been tied to earlier “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (49). With “a courageous soul”, she battles the outward life and activities also after her awakening and emerges into a non-conformist life, where she is able to be her own self. She is compelled to “realize her positions in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and an about her” Edna prefers “the taste of life’s delirium” to “domestic harmony” ‘which she terms as the “region of blind contentment” (51). The traditional center of authority- husband and family lose their binding power on her. Even the traditional ceremony, prayer in the church, creates an oppressing and nauseating effect on her. She prefers the soothing voice of the unbound sea to the stifling atmosphere to the church. Edna refuses to accept anything that stands in the way of exerting her free will. Moving to the pigeon house, using the phrase of Virginia Woolf, Edna kills “the angel in the house” and enters into “a room of her own”, the symbol of her freedom.

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