

## THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION OF PROTAGONIST IN KATE CHOPIN'S THE AWAKENING

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**Abstract:** Once the woman was described as a valuable piece of property of her husband, as mother-woman and acquiesced to the social laws which were imposed on her as a subordinate to her family and society. But now, she is an independent and fully empowered in all fields respectively domestic, social, political, and economical in fiction as well as in reality. Finally she achieved whatever she wants through the continuous struggle against the constructed society and values. She was greatly influenced by the writings of famous authors as well as the characters which were sketched by them. Even though, they were the fictional characters, they paved the way for the real lives. Here, I would like to discuss a 19th century popular woman writer Kate Chopin, who had portrayed a path-breaking female character in her trendy novel *The Awakening*. Kate Chopin did not discuss the modern terms of empowerment but she represented the base for all empowerments, that is, quest for self-identity and representation which were the burning issues of that period. So, this paper is going to discuss Kate Chopin's heroine Edna Pontellier, her quest for identity and self representation to gain individuality in the oppressive society of late 19th century America.

**Keywords:** mother-woman, empowerment, social laws, struggle, identity, self-representation, individuality

**Introduction:** Kate Chopin is a remarkable author of nineteenth century American Literature. She broke a new ground with her popular work *The Awakening* and it has become a touchstone for her literary reputation. Kate Chopin challenged the beliefs of the patriarchal society and approached the topic of women's issues from different experiences and backgrounds. She created characters such as Edna Pontellier who fight against the restricted and established roles of the male patriarchy refuse to submit to restraining traditional roles, and search for their own freedom. *The Awakening* is the story of Edna Pontellier, a conventional wife and mother who experiences a spiritual epiphany and an awakened sense of independence that changes her life.

**Literature Review:** one month before Chopin's novel was published, Lucy Monroe reviewed *The Awakening* for the March 1899, issue of *Book News*, Monroe's review praises Chopin's work as a "remarkable novel" and applauds it as "subtle and a brilliant kind of art" (1990:329). Monroe further depicts the novel as "so keen in its analysis of character, so subtle in its presentation of emotional effects that it seems to reveal life as well as represent it" (1990:328). Despite Monroe's pre-publishing promotion and the mounting momentum of the women's movement, both Chopin and *The Awakening* were attacked with an onslaught of unfavorable reviews. The novel was bitterly criticized and banished from the shelves of libraries including Chopin's home town St. Louis. *The Awakening* had a turbulent history. It was rejected when it appeared in 1899, forgotten for thirty years, rejected again in the 1930's and forgotten for another generation, rediscovered in the 1950's and 1960's by

scholars in Europe and the USA, embraced in the 1970's by feminist in the USA and UK – then accepted critically by teachers, students and readers of all kinds. Today, it is printed in dozens of editions and text books, as well as in several translations, and is one of America's most widely read, most widely loved classic books. (Bernard Koloski: 161)

**Plot Analysis:** The heroine of *The Awakening* is twenty-eight-year old Edna Pontellier, a Kentuckian married to a New Orleans business man, Leonce Pontellier. Vacationing at Grand Isle, a genteel nineteenth-century resort on the Gulf Coast, Edna becomes romantically attached to Robert Lebrun, a young Creole bachelor. Though Robert abruptly departs for Mexico when he senses that his dalliance has become too serious, the sensuous atmosphere of the Gulf has already stirred vague longings in Edna that will not be again suppressed. Unsettled by the summer's events, she returns to her French Quarter home, where she soon ceases the social routine of visiting days, neglects the supervision of her servants, and increasingly abandons her to moods and whims. Her incredulous husband on a friendly doctor's advice, tries to placate her capriciousness, and then leaves on a business trip without her when she refuses to accompany him. Still missing Robert and alone, her two young sons visiting in the country, Edna begins a half-hearted affair with the importunate rake Alcee Arobin. She makes plans to move away from Esplanade Avenue to a small "Pigeon house" and gives a final birthday party to celebrate the event. Then Robert, whose affairs Edna has followed through their mutual friend, the eccentric Mlle. Reisz, unexpectedly returns. Edna's pleasure is

truncated, however, by his pusillanimous farewell note. He leaves the very evening he visits her, while she is attending her friend Adele Ratignolle in child birth. Depressed by the recognitions these events precipitate, Edna returns alone to Grande Isle. On the same beach where the summer before she had learned to swim, she mechanically casts off her clothes, and, reflecting on the people and events that have overcome her, Edna swims far out into the Gulf, to her death.

**Edna's search for Identity and Self-representation:** Throughout the novel, Edna searches to define herself and is determined never again to surrender her individuality to others. She attempts to adapt to the archetypal roles of mother-woman and independent artist, but she does not fit into either role and must find her own identity and path to freedom. Edna also struggles within herself as she tries to find a compromise between the archetypal roles of Adèle Ratignolle, the mother-woman, and Mademoiselle Reisz, the independent, aggressive artist. Although Edna was not completely successful in breaking the societal and feminine conventions, Kate Chopin believes that women are able to maintain their individuality by having moderation between the alternative roles put forth by the society.

In the beginning of the novel, Edna is presented as a happy member of the traditional society, who is living a happy life in accordance with the models and standards that the society suggests; but unlike other Creole woman, Edna has a dynamic character. In the beginning of the novel she is like a child, but as the course of the novel moves on, she develops into a strong, independent, non-conformist, and even selfish woman. The novel indicates that she had this potentiality for development from the very beginning. Since childhood, she has been aware of a "dual life—the outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions." As a result of this potentiality, she undergoes a form of rebirth as she discovers the world from a fresh, childlike, perspective.

Edna's development into a self-centred individual starts from the night that she learns to swim. Her first swim constitutes one of the most important steps in her process of transformation. It symbolizes her rebirth, sexual awakening, and self-discovery. Edna has not been able to venture into the water because she is afraid of abandoning herself to the sea's vast and isolating expanse. After the swim, Edna has gained a new confidence in her own individuality. When Edna descends into the water on the night of the party, she appears like a "little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who . . . walks for the first time alone" (1976:29). As she gains confidence she announces to herself, "Think of the time I have lost

splashing about like a baby!"(1976:29) Using a metaphor of rebirth and childhood growth to describe Edna's metamorphosis, Chopin's language in this passage presents Edna as a child who has just outgrown infancy and is finally a full-fledged toddler. Edna's journey did not complete; all actions of the novel can be understood under the light of this quest for individuality. She stays in Grand Isle, learns swimming, stops attending the traditional Tuesdays, and rejects to go to her sister's wedding. She took solitary walks to motivate herself. Moreover, to substantiate her independence and individuality she pursued the art of painting in order to gain economic independence and later moved to a small pigeon house from Esplanade Avenue. Leaving husband and staying alone was not an easy task in that oppressive society because the settings of the novel blended with the laws of nineteenth century America. Even her love to Robert is an act of rebellion against social values: She tells Robert, "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" (1976:116). The personal traits Edna Pontellier shocked her entire society for decades.

Art is another source of individualization for Edna. As she listens to the playing of Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna sees no pictures of these emotions. Rather, she *feels* them, and is reduced to trembling, choking tears. As Mademoiselle Reisz finishes and leaves the room, she pats Edna's shoulder and tells her that she is the only worthy listener in the entire crowd. She rejects Adel's *soirée musicale* as an example of the usage of music as a social tool and instead turns to Mademoiselle Reisz as model for self-expression through the medium of art. Mademoiselle Reisz warns her that the bird that attempts to fly above tradition and prejudice must have strong wings, or it will "fall back to earth, battered and bruised." According to her "an artist must be brave, possessing "a courageous soul . . . that dares and defies."(1976:68) But she is determined in her way. "Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life."(1976:120) She is persistent and as she moves along her way of becoming an individual she suddenly feels that she at last understands the world around her, "as if a mist had been lifted from her eyes, enabling her to look upon and comprehend the significance of life. . . ." (1976:90). This understanding is the epitome of the novel. It is the sign of her achievement in becoming an individual.

Robert, on the other hand, is closely connected to societal values. Despite his great love for Edna, he cannot imagine being with her outside the regulations of the Creole society. Robert admits that

he had fantasized about Edna becoming his wife, had harboured wild ideas of Léonce setting her free. He thus regards the central issue of his relationship with Edna to be the problem of ownership and the transfer of ownership—not the notion of love, or of simply being together. While Edna thought she could use her relationship with Robert to liberate herself from convention, and saw a life with him as one of the goals of her liberation, she now finds that to run to Robert is to run straight into the arms of the old male-female power dynamic.

Although her eventual suicide can be seen as her failure or her reaction to Robert's adherence to societal values, but can also be seen as Edna's rebellious assertion of her own will: because Edna refuses to be tied down and to sacrifice "herself," she bravely sacrifices her life for the sake of maintaining her integrity and independence.

**Findings:** Kate Chopin was considered as a woman ahead of her times and a pioneer of feminist writings. We can see the popular traits of modern empowered women in her works especially with Edna's character in *The Awakening*. A recently published article in

*Inspirational News*, Naia Leigh stated some traits of a fully empowered woman which are perfectly applicable to Edna Pontellier's. for example, a fully empowered woman takes responsibility of her life, makes her own rules, honours herself, values her passions, chooses empowering relationships and she takes a stand for what she believes etc. in her entire journey of quest for self-identity and individuality Edna gradually met all these traits.

**Conclusion:** Here, Edna Pontellier as a wife and mother-woman possess everything including wealth and respect in the society. Apart from them she needs something more, definitely they are not the mundane riches but they are related to her sensual pleasure. So she fought against the constructed values and system. By making Edna's experiences critically central to the novel, Chopin is able to sound a cautionary note about society's capacity to support women's liberation. As shown through Edna's depressing emotional journey, isolation, and eventual suicide, Chopin claims that the social norms and traditional gender roles of the 19th century could not tolerate an independent woman.

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