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Forced Life vs Chosen Death in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

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Abstract:

The paper aims at revelation of the human instinct of women, in general and in Edna in particular. Edna, the heroine of *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, is an Elite woman rolling in luxury and leisure. The autocratic, assertive and indifferent nature of her husband makes her regret the time when she accepted the humble proposal of her husband. Edna lives a life of constraint and speechlessness. She speaks an incomprehensible language as expression has never been taught to her. She refuses to compromise her human status and self- respect in exchange of borrowed life style at expense of her husband. She makes her own money, her own love, her own friends, her own role model and her own home. Later on, she learns that her identity is because of her husband and a subservient role is her fate which she, primarily, refuses to admit.

Her wayward impulse makes her indulge in unsocial activities e.g. extramarital affairs and hobby of painting while neglecting household cares; society offers her no opportunity to reform herself and even if she is given such chance, she is not willing to avail herself of it as she believe in self- care not in self- abnegation. The progression of paper will highlight the issue of her chosen death.

Keywords: Ambiguity, Subservient, Self-abnegation, Affirmation, Pervasive.

Introduction:

Chosen death or suicide is practised by humans only. Animals live a forced life which also depends on choice of humans. Choice is cardinal feature of humans. Humans choose as they have a well developed brain and can pretty well exercise their choice; animals have no

brain to feel humility, disgrace and harbour no idea of self-respect. Humans enjoy this distinction to choose, to exercise, to change and to reform their lot.

The character of Edna is very much complex in *The Awakening*; she is very much sensitive and sensible to achieve purpose of her life but in her failure, she does not want to retreat but embraces death to get relief. Edna's disturbed state of mind erupts out of her unhinged mental faculties as she strives strenuously to carve out a niche for her and by her own efforts but has no roadmap to follow her pursuits. Edna does not commit suicide she only retires to forbidden arena after getting tired of tedious tasks and trials.

Edna finds "Suicide ... a symbolic gesture which women who inscribe on their own bodies by cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation" (Higonnet 103).

When a woman takes her life, she forces others to read her death. Voluntary death of women are difficult to be studied as their autonomy even in claiming their lives are questioned as their intentions are dark, elusive and opaque. Suicide in women is a self-barred signature and showcases destructive narcissism where a person fragments her own life to generate a new energy by fission or elision. Easy escape from the world liberates women from passive suffering, passion and pathos. The suicidal solution is very much linked to dissolution of a woman's self, some fragmentation to flow. Suicide in sheer sense is interpretation. The problem of a woman's identity crystallizes the methods of bourgeois individualism. Suicide prevails only when breakdown of a woman's sense of autonomous identity comes into existence. Edna commits suicide because women, by their social training tend to comprehend themselves by their ties with family rather than as an independent, isolated individuals.

Female suicide is generally governed by two reasons-- one is defeated love and other is loss of chastity. Edna also commits suicide as she is defeated in her true love with Robert and loses her repute with Alcee Arobin. Suicide is an escape for her from abandonment. Insidiously, Edna's suicide serves her in purging her defiled body; in an acute sense, displacing beautifully the responsibility of the violation of her honour. Her suicide proves the chastity of her soul. Edna chooses death not to conform to conventions also not to confirm her commodity status but to affirm and reaffirm her autonomous choice; pervasive familial and social political structures, still evident in modern culture in form of domestic tyrannies, force women to suicidal tendencies as women find the burden of conventional constraints too heavy to carry on their tender shoulders.

Masculine domestication of some essentially revolutionary spirit, heroic stance results in female suicide. The death of heroine is deficiency of social institution: “she attacks her own body, having introjected society’s hostility to her deviance. Her gesture is symptomatic of social illness ... her death is danger of individualism itself ... a restless craving for escape from ennui and insatiate desires” (Higonnet 111).

Nobody can answer whether the suicide of Edna is her transcendental quest or her sensuous need. She loved Robert but also had erotic relation with Alcee Arobin who “awakened all her sensuousness ... animalism that stirred patiently within her ... with the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin *The Awakening* 199, 204, 218).

Edna’s disintegration is not only physical but also spiritual. Her self-sought contamination of her body and soul by infidelity to her husband compromises her whole existence. Edna is alone, abandoned by all men in her life, she finds herself in an abyss; her hope for individual self- fulfillment is curtailed by her craving of romantic love from Robert and bourgeoisie is consumption forced on her by society. She loves Robert but he leaves her with a note : “I love you, goodbye – because I love you ... Edna answers : I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possession 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 194, 282).

Here Edna declares her autonomy and individual right over herself. She makes it more clear when she announces that she can sacrifice her life for her children but something, she retains for herself. She says: "I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I would not give myself” (Chopin 122).

The life for her is ‘unessential’ but ‘myself’ is above everything and this brings a turning point in her life. Commenting on the disturbed state and suicide of Edna critics believe that Edna is negotiating a dangerous position contending between her conventional mother-woman role and also the masculine mode of a headstrong artist. Chopin here manages to make the obscure unsayable manifest by selecting alternative strategies. Chopin is also charged with narrative failure, her novel *The Awakening* is counted to be an artistic failure at characterization of heroine because Chopin has failed to resolve or neutralize her narrative tension. *The Awakening* portrays neither the feminist’s heroine nor an impulsive, somewhat shallow self-deceiver; it portrays both in unresolved tension.

Elain Showalter contradicts this argument and opines that Chopin chooses to depart from “conventional technique of realism to an impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood” (72). Patrick Shaw also assumes that Chopin’s Edna is not a sane and sagacious woman to ponder over her state and stature, like a lunatic “Edna is incapable of bringing lessons from her past to bear on her present and future” (220). Maria also opines that Chopin’s heroine fails to get acme of art as she is “unable to make the passage from the world of domesticity into the world of adulthood, responsibility and creativity” (Anastasopoulou 28).

Here, it is very clear that Edna chooses exit from the world, and seek refuge in the element of nature as she fails to overcome her domestic compulsion and also is incompetent to develop a required creativity to earn her name and position as an artist. Throughout the novel, the heroine is torn between her decision and indecision and in sheer oblivion surrenders to the sea. Chopin discursively registers and encodes the procedure of Edna’s awakening via her self-dialogue. Emily observes that “Chopin would be her own priest, her own conscience and her own judge and so her protagonists” (Toth 251).

Chopin allows her heroines, Edna here, experiment, energy, enigmatic enterprise and an eerie silence, may be forever; the only noticeable and appreciable feature is the choice, its courageous execution and a fearlessness to face the consequences of the wayward, weird action plan.

Chopin uses double-voiced discourse to expose the psyche of Edna layer by layer, here Chopin’s possible intention is not referred to a woman or person but “an idea, an opinion which is a living thing embodied in a human voice” (Bakhtin 17). This “speech within speech, Utterance within utterance ... speech about speech, utterance about utterance” (Volosino 115) adds complexity to the narrative and intensifies the attention of readers.

Chopin’s vocabulary in the novel conveys the intentionational narratorial stance, the use of words ‘too well’ ‘assured’ ‘consuming’ by Leonce “leave no room for ambiguity or argument which reflects his implicit power and authority as a husband ...” (Muirhead 44).

The choice of double voice narrative by Chopin highlights Edna’s tumultuous self, her psychological disturbance and a discursive awakening churned up by the parallel and opposite forces of creativity and conventions. The double narrative strategies of Chopin disrupts masculine discourse manifested by Robert and Leonce:

These disruptive under currents suggest an alternative system of representation to the logical, masculine tongue and threaten to destabilize it by bursting its partisans and codes ... (Buckman 58)

Edna expresses her emotional and artistic disturbance and awakening too in her alienated and unusual voice.

Edna's strives to get articulation but she can not recuperate from self articulation, her speech remains an incoherent babble in her entire journey and her itinerary of self articulation is :

Finally diminished and divided, reduced in the romantic stories that she is told and the romantic stories she comes to tell herself, to a simplistic narrative that falsifies the diversity of her awakening consciousness. (Yaeger 439)

It's true that the romantic plot has reduced and constricted Edna's powerful and multi-layered awakening to extra -marital and fleeting romance but Chopin's intention uses romance as a narrative decoy to invite and capture the amused attention of readers to show that whatever a woman learns or unlearns, she schools herself with man's guidelines. Robert boost her confidence and ability to counter check world's challenges on her own steam, he gives her the chance and choice to strike her view on society. Alcee Arobin offers her a chance of self-dependence in financial terms with an independent house with money from race course. The trial of three men Leonce, Robert and Alcee make Edna, a social entity of influence; her affairs with Robert and Alcee give her personal and financial independence but also digress her from her focal point and make her a vulnerable and dependent social entity. In her quest of independence, she is apparently dependent on males in such a way that they not only decide her course of action but also lead her in absentia. Her father's strictness has led her to Leonce; Leonce's indifference to Robert; Robert's sensuousness to sensuality of Alcee Arobin; Alcee's promiscuity to the exit point.

Chopin does not register Edna's failure, in her failures she rather finds endorsement for Edna's courage to test out a female's quest for an individual's spaces—spiritual, mental and physical in a highly reactionary society. Chopin preserves and protects Edna's narrative to assert and affirm and also to celebrate the survival and sustaining power of a female's artistic imagination and ambition in a world ridden with myopic perspectives, fake heroism and narrative closures. Edna's dilemma is to frame a story for her own individual life.

Edna's progress lies in her beginning to think for herself, to speak with her own unique voice and to write her own story without reviewing, revising or editing it. The astounding achievement of Edna lies not in her final fate but in her soaring ambition, her disapproval of life of dependence like animals and her fatal, fanciful assertion of self in an uncompromising way.

Madame Reisz is a symbol of art and music, her utterance, regard and respect for autonomy and artistic bravery and also her metaphoric talk to Edna about artistic courage alongwith her reference to the birds bruised exhausted fluttering down to earth epitomize a woman's self – maimed and weary in her quest of individual space. An artist rejects, like Madame Reisz, mother-woman role to realize her artistic purpose.

Chopin does not completely endorse this choice yet she stylizes Reisz's words and both agree and disagree with the pianist. Chopin respects the dare and originality of an artist but she disregards the idea of radical nature of females to attain meaningful originality. Multiple narratives help Chopin to register her opinion alongwith protagonist, Edna and artist Reisz. Chopin's art lies in intertwining of statements of various characters to give a holistic approach about commitment of art alongside Edna's reaction to the question about propagation of art and its genuineness.

Instead of providing separate space to Edna, Chopin cryptically shepherds Edna so that she can understand artistic courage and creation which she presently 'only half-comprehends'. Robert terminates his romance with Edna as she is so unconventional in her affair that her settlement with him in any social relationship is impossible. Even after exit of Robert from life of Edna, her awakening continues and she finds her purpose of life defeated in failure of her artistic endeavours. Edna's climax of long awaiting flirtation proves that Edna harbours her affair as a part of her life, she remains focused on her artistic innovation throughout the novel.

Chopin is afraid to lose her purpose of presenting idea to trigger an innovative idea of autonomy and self- realization of women so she abstains from making her masterpiece as a romance. Robert's exit showcases how Edna exhibits her ungovernable passion for realization of her own purpose, own way. Chopin keeps the novel open- ended as multiple narrative closures open up a new beginning for Edna with her choice and with her own efforts. Edna's gradual awakening to her own consciousness, Chopin exhibits her growing mastery of the presenting a unique idea ahead of time.

Chopin somehow wants her readers to contemplate possibilities rather than make final judgements. Chopin's exquisite employment of free indirect discourse unravels her artistic maturity. Chopin's showcases Edna's cultural and aesthetic journey to strengthen the believe that female can be an artist even if she ceases to exist.

Peter Ramos finds that women, here Edna, fail to be artist and the journey remains unfulfilled due to patriarchal pressures posing severe obstacles in the pursuit of autonomy by women through employment of art. Peter Ramos questions:

Is Edna's suicide, a triumph – the best possible achievement of independence and agency under the circumstances or are her final actions a defeat – the fatal, inescapable result for any woman who tries to assert autonomy in the face of such debilitating insurmountable patriarchy? (145)

Some people view Edna's surrender to the sea as suicide and also as cosmic justice delivered on her for moral deviation. Chopin may hold her opinion that patriarchal social pressures heaped on a woman are inescapably deterministic and can be avoided completely only through a mythical rebirth through suicide.

Marta also suggests that "*The Awakening* ... depicts female protagonist who retreats from a world of insurmountable obstacles into madness and suicide ... the retreat is highly ambiguous" (Caminero Santangelo 181).

Chopin shows how Edna either invites the sympathy of readers as an innocent victim crushed brutally and ruthlessly by patriarchy or enjoys her last laugh by escaping, ducking out of unfair and impossible obstacles of life. Edna finally awakens herself to an awakening where in her willingness to shun conventional and domestic, gender-specific roles, she leads herself to an enticing but elusive freedom gained in idyllic, tantalizing childhood.

The Awakening in its subtle style is a warning, intentionally crafted wherein Edna moves out in quest of undefined, unrestricted and ultimate, ulterior motive and for freedom from a conventional identity she deprives herself of her blossoming life. Edna's refusal or disapproval of social identities and her striving for creativity prove to be a practical failure as she starts too late, half- heartedly and in an average way to learn art not to speak of accomplishment in it. Unlike Edna, Mrs. Ratignolle and Reisz are settled in their respective roles of mother -woman and artist respectively. Edna fails as she wants to enjoy perks and privilege of both the roles but pain and pains of both, she evades and avoids. Edna fails to

inhabit explicit social entities but she is also unable to exercise and suitably sustain what she chooses for herself as she is not fully equipped to execute her preference.

Madame Reisz unlike spinsters of her times is regarded and respected highly as she has established herself as an artist with serious and severe discipline of mind and body. Mrs. Ratignolle has effaced her individual identity in service of her family and she is placidly and contentedly settled as a mother -woman. Edna commits suicide as she is unable to recuperate from the dilemma erupting out of her contradictory choices—one, as an elite woman hosting society on her choice and other, as an artist commanding herself.

Edna surrenders to the sea as her choice is not to be an artist or a mother – woman but a commander of herself, following only her commands, her choice no matter what consequences follow her in her attempt.

Madame Reisz is free from patriarchal pressure as she ceases to be a conventional woman. Her talent, her art have neutralized her gender, she is viewed only in light of her art not in view of her gender; absolute art and absolute absorption of Reisz in her art have absolutely showcased how Edna is banished from society for her rejection of conventionality without ripe and ready preparation of her talent for art.

Conclusion:

Edna exercises her choice between forced life and chosen death. She regains her self, her human status and instinct to be free if not in life than in death. Her choice reveals denial of choice to women; her claim is realistic but disturbing. Her loud interior and mute exterior show ambiguities purposely generated in women for the benefit of men.

Women are supposed to be a stunted form of humans for their inferiority to men in sensitivity, strength and imitation. Suicide of women, here Edna can be perceived as virtually involuntary but induced from of surrender to conventionality but also with a termination of further humiliation; suicide is the hing on which Edna finds her autonomous affirmation of her identity and also break down of her identity by social determinism. The heroine here, drifting into dire destruction, embraces the fluid because of the fluidity of her persona as she has no social identity except the shadow or sheen of her husband. Edna leaves the world, making her choice as “The immature, romantic conception of sexuality as painless and passive ecstasy marks Edna’s adolescent hopes and her final thoughts as she surrenders to the sea” (Higonnet 112).

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