

MORAL VALORIZATION IN *THE AWAKENING* BY KATE CHOPIN

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Abstract

The women of middle class were forbidden, in Chopin's times in arena of industrializing economy so they diverted their energies to household and childcare. Some of them positioned themselves as moral guardian of families in particular and societies in general. They seemed as such an embodiment of an unusual kind of Christian piousness and piety that they registered themselves as harbinger of revolutionary changes in women's lives that dumbstruck the entire society. They constructed the framework of an appropriate or inappropriate behaviour of females who are appropriated, definitely by a system that allows women only to give, only to contribute with least concern how they confront and conduct themselves in hostile social and apathetic personal milieu. Chopin, a widow and mother of six experimented with genre of novel very successfully but her novel, 'The Awakening' awakened the entire society so much against her that the rage and criticism snatched from her further writing of novels. The progression of paper will discuss how Chopin generated a liberal spirit for women and invited the attention of the readers to the fact that women do react as humans and sometimes very terribly.

Keywords : Valorization, moral guardian, sexuality, moral digression, exquisite, iridescent.

Introduction :

The paper will highlight how Kate Chopin rakes up moral issues and redefines morality. Her heroine, Edna in her most controversial novel, 'The Awakening' is unconventional and has liberal attitude towards love and companionship. She upholds the view that marriage is not a sacred but a shared bond where a woman is free to choose her sweet will, she can have extra marital affairs like a man and can maintain her marriage. Chopin raises the unforeseen and unprecedented issues of equality and individuality in marriage. The heroine, Edna gains independence and control over her not only in erotic pleasures but also in financial and emotional terms. She earns for herself in race-course, earns a small house of her own making gives upon luxury & lavish leisure of her husband, gets intimate, not clearly sexually, with her friends and creates a personal space for her other than her husband and children. Chopin

becomes moral mentor of women of her times and of all times by showcasing moral digression of Edna. On one hand, she corrects the women by suicide of Edna and checks their wayward romantic impulses; on the other hand, she gives them the idea of self-mentorship, autonomy and above all, to choose for themselves because choice once executed and employed can be expanded energetically with passage of time. Today's woman has realized what Edna died for.

Reflections:

'The Awakening's' initial reception occurred in a milieu in "which Victorian notion of literature as a vehicle for sentimental, spiritual redemption and the support of a culture of the feelings still dominated" (Corse & Westervelt 147).

'The Awakening' is a modern and unconventional novel by Kate Chopin who irresistibly and impatiently felt the need for unheard emotions and sentiments of aware, extraordinary and exceptional women who craved for recognition, self respect, self-identity in addition to leisure & luxury and in order to protect their selves, they had no idea that they might lose life and they chose to lose life which was stripped of their personal choice and autonomy.

Chopin with her heroine, Edna raises the issue for relevance of a woman other than management of household affairs, & child care. She summarily, denies the concept of submissive womanhood and vigorously defies that women are "above all ... unselfish ... and seem to have alighted here for the world's comfort and blessing ... all the ways of selfishness are specially at variance with their beautiful errands ..." (Bushress 44). The cult of pious motherhood also wants that a good woman "will in an alert abandon of illogical, irrational but instinctive, impulsive self sacrifice almost kills herself in her efforts to avoid, obviate a sick, silly child's least, tolerable pang of slight discomfort .

Chopin here disagrees with pious womanhood and motherhood as she feels and find that a woman is complimented by her child and husband but not completed by them. The interpretive strategy of such kinds don't find Edna's behaviour praiseworthy or brave or over interesting as she is not a submission but a silent woman who feels no shyness to try extra marital affair with two different men in absence of husband and has no iota of shame to surrender to the sea naked and in full days light. She is criticized for her neglect of her children, disobedience, infidelity and defiance for her husband, lack of accountability as a woman or at least as a human. Chopin finds that Edna was fond of her children in an uneven impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them (*The Awakening* 47).

Edna is not a visual, timid and yielding woman, she finds her own place and space like a regal, royal woman who looks on, around to decide her position not in society but in entire cosmos. Her friend, Adele Ratignolle cautions Robert, about this association of Creole women that Edna may take his flirtation seriously as in this way she will lose her settled life with husband and Robert will be diminished in his stature for his betrayal with Creole women and men who blindly trust him for their women folk.

Edna entered into matrimony because Mr. Pontellier could admire her, proposed her and accorded her respect, regard and importance which she, a motherless girl, could never avail of herself from her authoritative father, vixen like young sister and elder sister. Her strongest desire in her life was to accepted as an individual in first place without appendix of her gender. Her first expectation from her husband was to consider her as a breathing, alive, pulsating, sensitive human being who unlike animal was not satisfied with bodily needs of food, sex and comfort but

also desperately tried to satiate her mind, her soul with autonomy and self acceptance if not assertion. Inheriting her fathers genepool, she had been assertive in her purpose and firm in her resolve to live her life on her conditions & terms or at least some of her stipulation and her own limits.

Chopin finds that Edna is “not a mother woman, like Creole women, who idolized their children, worship their husband and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (*The Awakening* 19). Edna is lured by her husband who is no match to her in body and mind but accorded her all luxury and lust leisure which gave Edna a fertile soil to think, reflect and practice her mind to strengthen her soul in her control over herself. Her husband’s commanding nature, he revealed before her after facade of romance and childbirth. She was reminded of her autocratic father whom she loved but never approved of, never recommended but emulated in willfulness. Edna found herself trapped and found her husband home an alien place and her matrimony – a journey from one prison to other. In her embarrassed state and disappointment.

She found solace and considerate mentorship in Robert who boosted her morale and confidence in her lessons of swimming reminding her that self assertion and autonomy were not distant dreams for her despite her entrapment in matrimony & household. Robert emboldened her in her stance to defy conventions and to make her choice however terrible it was and exorbitant it was. She loved Robert as a friend with the emotions vested in one individual to other but Robert moulded all her sentiments into conventional mould and forced all her either to accept him in matrimony divorcing her husband or leave him all together. Edna, on the other hand wanted to give her wherever she chose to offer herself. She claimed herself not to be a property of Mr. Pontellier and believed in self ownership; she felt that her relations with men would be her choice and not a binding on her, nor a prohibition on her by her husband. Consequently, Edna, in her defiance to indifference of husband, disregard of her natal family where father recommended coercion and authority to tame a wife and conventional love of paramour, Robert, willfully embraced burgeoning sexuality with Alcee Arobin crossing over the conventional line of matrimony and fundamentally transgressed the sacred role of a woman as a moral guardian.

Chopin gave full liberty to Edna in her swimming enterprise, in her money making in race course, her solitude, loneliness required for her erotic attachment with Alcee Arobin, in her silencing of friends and doctors saying that she would have ‘her way’. In her culmination of a platonic relationship with Robert and her breakup not only with Robert but with all enticement & entitlements of worldly pleasures, she executed her choice but all her rides on roller coaster ended at conventional platform where even Chopin could not save her from disaster death and demnation. Chopin had to persuade her to surrender to the sea as she had crossed over to such forbidden realm to women from where no retreat is possible, she could exercise her choice to leave a conventional civilization either like Desiree (Desiree’s baby, Chopin) and embrace wilderness or die peacefully but Edna exercised her unconventional choice of disrobing her self in her conventional imposition of death in the sea.

‘The Awakening’ by critics is treated as a story imbued with “current of erotic morbidity and exotic in setting, morbid in theme, erotic in motivation” (Rankin 174). *The Awakening*, with passage of time, received critical applaud by feminist who appreciated Chopin who “established gender as a fundamental category of literary analyses” (Showalter 3).

The novel evolves to establish Edna as a woman who is searching for autonomous rights and self-identity; Edna by modern critics ceases to be or adulterous, foolish and selfish woman and Chopin--- a writer of all times. Edna's congruence to her persona and her digression from conventional roles reveal that a woman is an individual with individual capabilities and deserves a place equal in status & spirit with men.

Edna, shunning the conventional role awakens to her place and space in design of cosmos; her awakening is the eruption of a new of self and soul a new life and realization of her selfhood, autonomy and her individuality. Edna discovers her sexuality and the "emergence of a passionate self" and "a realization of her sensuous self" (Chametzky 71).

Chopin who terribly failed in her experiment with unbridled liberty to woman's sexuality regained her modern status. Fletcher praises her for her "modern honesty" (132).

Justus calls her novel a substantial aesthetic achievement (107) and Cantwell finds "The Awakening" as the finest novel of its sort written by an American (490) The spectrum of endorsement of critical applause indicates the dilution of critical rigidity in the interpretive frame of perception employed to evaluation of Chopin's novel.

Edna & Chopin both pay a huge price for transgression of normative, conventional doctrinaire of gender roles; Edna by suicide and Chopin by literary suicide. Self discovery and sexuality are forbidden concept for women as in both the spheres men enjoy their hegemony and sovereignty. Chopin believes in individual power and ability of a woman not only to successfully enter into such spheres but also to brighten them with their innovation and energy. Willa Cather derides Chopin's *The Awakening* as a "trite and sordid theme" ... feminine type ... forever clamouring in our ears that demand more romance out of life than God put into it" (6). Though she finds the novel exquisite, iridescent but she also discovers lack of ability to continue struggle for 'self', unlike her characters Thea, in Edna who succumbs to her uncharted flight from conventions to unknown destinations.

Chopin penetrates, here, into secret motives to trace the itinerary of Edna. The truth is bitter but wholesome and the readers are led to infer that the established order of things cannot be broken into without heavy payment (St Louis post dispatch 4).

Chopin showcases disfiguring of uncontrolled sexuality with a trait of distinguished grace and individual strength of Edna if not to sustain her breakaway from conventions at least to initiate it somehow, anyhow. Chopin is not interested in fate of Edna as she leaves her alone to fend for herself but she is more and very much interested in Edna's defiance, her confusion, Chaos, tumult, her unhinged mental faculties, her breakaway – untimely and unripe and her choice to have her way. Edna evolves and devolves, learns and unlearns but survives in her choice no matter it consumes her life.

'The Awakening' construct a narrative which is objectionable on its best and on worst virtually unintelligible. It seems to be a compelling and also socially resonant story of a self aware woman challenging patriarchal imposition of gender which resonates powerfully with prevalent social concerns inducing need for pedagogical and critical concerns. Chopin approximates the articulation of Edna to show combined consciousness and conceptual features of her stance for herself. Edna is conscious of her ideology, her rights but unmindful of the road map and also of the repercussion of her choice. Chopin in a clever, clear way of conducting of difficult subject shows Edna conscious of her human from and individual status but also shows her one "who falls with a merely animal instinct into the arms of the first man she meets and also

one who has drifted from all right moorings and has not the grace to repent ... she is a derelict in a moral ocean ... a selfish, capricious woman ... who did not want anything but her own way drowned herself ..." (Corse & Westervett 45).

Chopin moral valorization is very mysterious and Edna's caprice undergoes critical spectrum and shapes, reshapes itself and reviewers later condemned moral disapproval of *'The Awakening'*. Modern reviewers subsumed, clear, explicit moral and ethical evaluation of Edna's stance in their interpretive reviews.

Unfortunately, *'The Awakening'* is never valued for its moral instruction as absolute female freedom is a distant dream even today as women face sexual abuse, child rape, female foeticide and domestic violence so in Chopin's times moral digression and erotic pleasure or liberty for a woman at par with man was an impossible phenomenon.

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Conclusion :

Chopin as a moral guardian indulges in moral valorization through Edna in *'The Awakening'*. Chopin is neither in favour of Edna's affairs and her moral digression nor she favours apathetic, authoritative and autocratic behaviour of her husband and father to treat her as a show piece, a possession for their pleasure. Chopin raises the issue of commodification of females. Edna's husband is not tyrant, nowhere in the novel, he seemed to be Cruel but definitely callous for her. He reminds her duty towards care of children despite her vigilance and expected her listen to his stories of club at midnight. He snubs her for swimming in a hot day – "you are burnt beyond recognition" (Chopin 9) here Chopin intervenes to tell reader that his worries are like one who has noticed a damage to his valuable possession. he also cautions her about domestic care and leaves the dinning table when fish was little scorched. Neglect and indifference of Edna's husband force her to try love elsewhere. Chopin rejects Edna's sense of duty who for her romantic adventure and self-care neglect her family and succumbs to her destination with out direction.

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